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OCTOBER 25, 2013

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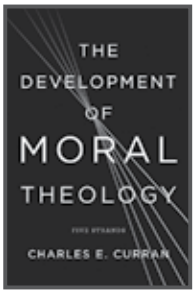

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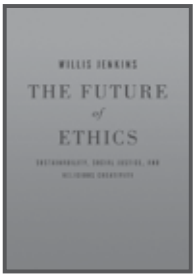

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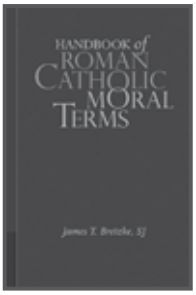

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LETTERS

History vs. tradition, the meaning of marriage

TERROR OF HISTORY

Nicholas Clifford's piece "Historical Amnesia" (September 27), taking its cue from John Noonan's *A Church That Can and Cannot Change* (1993) and Dennis O'Brien's bon mot—that the church has a strong sense of tradition but no sense of history—is very much to the point. I commend him for focusing attention on a crucial issue at the heart of our current Catholic discontent.

I would add three points: First, the tendency to overlook the reality of change extends not only to matters ethical (like slavery) or other basic issues (like religious freedom), but also to the neuralgic issue of the very nature and location of the church's teaching authority itself.

Second, the changes involved cannot simply be explained away as routine instances of doctrinal "development." Instead, some of them are changes that are radically discontinuous with the past. They are instances, in fact, of the sort of "rupture" that Benedict XVI clearly wished to exclude as simply inconceivable.

Third, the manifest inability or unwillingness of our church leaders to face up to such unwelcome facts is not simply (or wholly) to be explained by "memory loss," "historical forgetfulness," "ignorance of history" or "history badly taught" (as Clifford puts it). It is also (perhaps rather?) to be attributed to the veritable "terror of history" that appears to have gripped the clerical establishment in the wake of the French Revolution. And that, in turn, would appear to have been grounded in the long-established and idolatrous form of institution-worship that went hand in glove with the notion of a church (*semper eadem*) that could never change. But, of course, it has changed. To avoid conceding that totally obvious fact, our papal and clerical leadership, embracing implicitly the Orwellian conviction that he who controls the present controls the past, and he who controls the past controls the future, committed itself—wittingly or unwittingly—to a proactive politics of oblivion and to the posture of a collective King Canute impotently bidding the tide of history to stand still.

Were our Catholic theologians somehow able to adopt a clear, consistent, and coordinated position on this important point, it would surely be a consummation devoutly to be wished. Here, perhaps I may be forgiven if I refer the reader to the essays gathered by Michael J. Lacey and me in *The Crisis of Authority in Catholic Modernity* (Oxford University Press), reviewed in these pages ("Shipwrecked?" December 5, 2011).

FRANCIS OAKLEY
Williamstown, Mass.

OPENING MARRIAGE

Although my views tend to differ markedly from Joseph Bottum's, I read his article "The Things We Share" (September 13) with interest. If I have correctly understood him, I found myself appreciating several of his points:

First, his public regret for signing Chuck Colson's *Manhattan Declaration* and for whatever harm that signature caused (an act that went against his own insight that abortion and same-sex marriage are not morally equivalent and shouldn't be lumped together as if they are).

Second, his giving the benefit of the doubt to those who advocate same-sex marriage, that marriage is their intention, rather than some anti-Catholic plot to destroy the church. (My views are much

continued on page 45

The next issue of
Commonweal
will be dated
November 15, 2013

Saboteurs

"Obstructionist," "blackmail," "extortion," "hostage-taking," "unpatriotic," "incoherent," and "suicidal" are some of the words being used to describe the strategy of the Republican majority in the House of Representatives that has shut down the federal government. And many of those words of condemnation are coming from Republicans, not just Democrats.

Initially, the House Republicans' refusal to pass a continuing-funding resolution to keep the government open was tied to the unreasonable demand that the Affordable Care Act (ACA) be repealed, defunded, or delayed. This was the goal of the bombastic freshman senator from Texas, Ted Cruz, who quickly became the darling of the Tea Party for his faux "filibuster" in the Senate. (Cruz's opposition to the ACA seems to be more about the political consequences of its likely success than about its possible failure.) Since the ACA's insurance exchanges were going to open October 1 regardless of what Congress did about the budget, Cruz's day-long speech was just a stunt. His aim, evidently, was to stiffen the spines of the Tea Party caucus in the House, the group of radicals who want to close down the government, and perhaps even default on the national debt, in order to stop the ACA and shrink the size of government more generally.

So far, this small group of thirty to sixty Republicans has prevented John Boehner, the Speaker of the House, from allowing a vote on a "clean" budget bill that does not defund the ACA. Between House Democrats and moderate Republicans there are enough votes to pass a temporary budget and reopen the government. Recognizing that the ACA cannot be stopped, Boehner has shifted his position and now wants the president and the Democrats to negotiate a budget bill that includes significant spending cuts before he will allow a vote on the continuing resolution. But earlier this year the Democrats already agreed to cut $70 billion from the budget without increasing revenues, only to have the House reject the bill. Understandably, the president and the Democrats are now determined that the government be reopened before they negotiate a final budget. If he were to capitulate to the House's demands, the president argues, every future budget could be held hostage by a radical and unrepresentative minority in Congress, and the constitutional system would grind to a halt. If democracy is to work, a minority cannot nullify the legislative will of the majority.

Even worse, Tea Party Republicans are also refusing to extend the nation's debt ceiling unless the president and the Democrats comply with their demands. This is an invitation to anarchism. If Congress does not raise the debt ceiling by October 17, widespread economic damage is almost certain. Whether they are Democrats, Republicans, or Independents, the vast majority of Americans are shocked and outraged that some in Congress are endangering the economic well-being and security of the nation, if not the world, in pursuit of their narrow ideological agenda. Surely it is time for cooler heads in the GOP to put country before party and bring this crisis to an end before the nation as a whole stumbles into a constitutional and economic crisis that will make passing a federal budget look like child's play. Many conservative voices, including the *Wall Street Journal*, have called for common sense and prudent compromise. How little effect those calls have had reveals the danger and precariousness of the situation.

In this issue, David M. Kennedy reviews *Breach of Trust*, Andrew Bacevich's jeremiad about how the nation as a whole has turned away from the democratic ideal of the citizen-soldier, refusing to recognize that the burdens of the nation's defense must be shared in an equitable and responsible way (page 33). Bacevich, a frequent *Commonweal* contributor, offers a bleak assessment of the moral failings of our self-satisfied, consumer-driven culture. Americans, he writes, have "abandoned collective obligation in favor of personal choice." Kennedy summarizes Bacevich's argument thus: "Americans have mutated into passive spectators, not active citizens, across a wide spectrum of once-sacred civic responsibilities."

It is hard not to see this dynamic at work in the current political crisis. The Tea Party scoffs at the notion that "collective obligation" or "sacred civic responsibilities"—to provide health-care insurance to those who cannot afford it, for instance—might even exist. Rather, the movement upholds as sacred the right to be left alone. But we *do* have responsibilities for one another. Like it or not, as a self-governing people we are all very much in this together. Our economic and social lives are more deeply entangled than many Americans imagine or like to acknowledge. Just how entangled will quickly become apparent if the extremists in Congress force the country to default on its debts. ■

October 8, 2013

Cathleen Kaveny

The Big Chill

HUMANAE VITAE DISSENTERS NEED TO FIND A VOICE

Helen Alvaré

Over the past quarter-century, Catholics who support *Humanae Vitae* have done a superb job articulating the ways their adherence to church teaching against contraception fits into their view of family life. For example, Helen Alvaré, professor at George Mason Law and former spokeswoman for the U.S. Catholic bishops, recently edited a volume titled *Breaking Through: Catholic Women Speak for Themselves*. The book showcases ten accomplished women who fully accept church teaching on sexual morality, situating their lives and vocations within a larger context of religious belief.

Are we likely to see a similar volume from Catholic women who believe the responsible use of birth control is compatible with their faith and their vocations as wives any time soon? I doubt it. This large cohort of Catholic women is largely silent. And who could blame them?

The ecclesiastical climate has chilled considerably in the forty years since Pope Paul VI issued *Humanae Vitae*. At the time the encyclical was published, the use of contraception by married couples was still seen by most prelates as a matter on which people of good faith could disagree. That began to change under John Paul II, who treated contraception as the doorway to the "culture of death." Proponents of his "Theology of the Body" maintain that spouses who use contraception are lying to one another with their bodies and withholding themselves from one another in the sexual act. This hardly encourages respectful conversation with Catholic couples who find contraception morally acceptable.

The theological climate has shifted too. Many of today's emerging Catholic moralists were drawn to their field by the examples of Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI. They accept and defend the teaching against contraception. And those who don't accept it do well to maintain a prudent silence. The ecclesiastical actions taken against Charles Curran, Elizabeth Johnson, and Margaret Farley have had a chilling effect on academic discussion of sexual morality.

In short, over the past twenty years, Catholic bishops have largely squelched open debate among their people about the morality of contraception. Many have worked to thwart frank discussion about what Catholic parents owe their marriages, their children, and other vocational commitments they have apart from family. If the price of admission to this crucial conversation is adherence to *Humanae Vitae*, then nine out of ten Catholic couples aren't qualified to say a word.

Obviously, those who dissent from *Humanae Vitae* have cause to lament this state of affairs. But those who support church teaching also have reason to be worried, because it encourages a type of compartmentalization that is fundamentally foreign to the Catholic tradition. If people are not encouraged to reflect on their normative commitments in a holistic manner, they tend to segregate them from one another. They put the church in one box, marriage and family life in another. Catholics who compartmentalize their moral commitments risk isolating themselves from the considerable wisdom of the tradition on matters of sex, love, and embodiment. A church that encourages such compartmentalization is hardly catholic. How can that kind of church interpret the complexities of our world? How can it avoid being seen as one more commitment among many others, just something to do for an hour on Sundays?

So instead of ignoring ordinary Catholics who use contraception, it would be better for the church to encourage them to articulate how their views can be seen as consistent with the deepest insights of the tradition. Encourage them to read *Humanae Vitae*. But also encourage them to read the Majority Report of the Birth Control Commission—convened by Paul VI—which tried to show that church teaching on contraception could be authentically developed.

Most progressive Catholics hope the Majority Report position will eventually win the day, just as Vatican II's defense of religious liberty superseded the condemnation of that freedom in the Syllabus of Errors. But winning the day takes work. John Courtney Murray, SJ, worked to show how religious liberty was consistent with the Catholic tradition. John Noonan's magisterial volume *Contraception* (1968) did much the same thing for birth control. As that book approaches its fiftieth anniversary, it's time to reread it.

Progressive Catholics need to make sure that the next generation can situate their argument within the Catholic moral tradition, rather than presenting it in a purely secular manner. Does that mean a lot of conservatives—including "John Paul II" bishops—are going to welcome such arguments with open arms? Of course not. They'll still call those Catholics dissenters. But at least they will be dissenters engaged in the tradition, not cordoned off from it. ■

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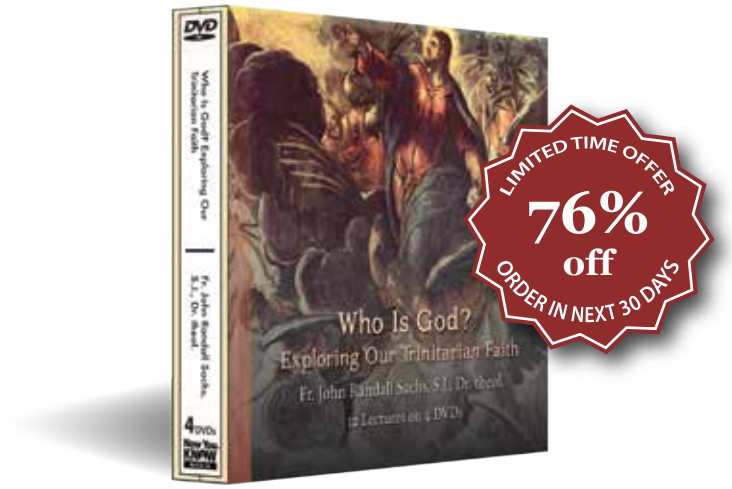

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Source: Kaiser Family Foundation

The acid test for the central provisions of the Obama administration's Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (ACA)—or "Obamacare," as it is not so fondly known—officially started October 1, the day that state and federal health-care exchanges begin accepting applications both for individual coverage and for employer-based coverage at small businesses. Full operations must commence on January 1.

There is no reason to expect it to go smoothly. It took a year to sort through the mass confusion surrounding George W. Bush's Medicare Part D program, which was a far simpler challenge, since all the eligible patients were already known to Medicare. The ACA, working through an array of exchanges run by the sates and the federal government, must create new databases of individuals and businesses, apply new eligibility rules, qualify hundreds of benefit plans, and match eligible recipients and plans. Plans and rates will differ substantially from state to state. Sixteen states and the District of Columbia will operate exchanges for both individuals and small businesses; Utah will offer one just for small businesses. The federal government will operate the exchanges in all the others, although fifteen of those other states will play some supportive role, like sponsoring recruitment drives or sharing state databases. The variety of arrangements, while politically advisable, imposes yet more layers of complexity.

An inherently difficult task has been made much harder by Tea Party–dominated state legislatures and congressional blocs that have vowed to sabotage the rollout. Because of the bill's whisker-thin majorities and the virulence of the opposition, the veto-proof Senate version of the ACA had to be passed by the House without significant changes. So there was no conference to clean up technical drafting issues, nor has it been possible to craft the full range of technical amendments that every complex law requires. The sequester has also sharply limited the financial resources available to the federal exchanges, and the Tea Party faithful can block any additional funding. Oklahoma has already seized on some ambiguities in the law to file a suit to prevent patients in federally run exchanges from receiving ACA tax credits.

That's the bad news. But the overall prognosis for the law's success is still bright. The states that have embraced the law seem determined to make a good show of it. Their exchanges will be ready to open on the first of the year, and though there will certainly be glitches, most of them should be operating fairly smoothly by the summer. Even better, the first exchange insurance prices are lower than even friendly analysts expected. (But restrain the cheering until next year's filings to be sure that cost estimates are on the mark.)

For low- to moderate-income families, the law will be a real boon. The rates in the above chart are from three state-exchange rate filings for 2014 by ACA participating health insurers, pre- and post-subsidy. Rates vary by geography; those shown are for the cities of Los Angeles, New York City, and Portland, Oregon. Plans are offered in five classes—one covering catastrophic care only, and four others, ranked by the amount of co-pay required. The rates shown above are for the two lowest-ranked of the four full-coverage plans, "Bronze" and "Silver." Bronze plans cover all basic services, but have the highest co-pays.

The performance of the federal exchanges may well lag that of the participating states, since hardly anyone imagined that almost two-thirds of states would opt out. But the feds will catch up—among other things they will mostly be able to apply the same basic data systems in every state. Over time, Republicans may rue the boost that the opt-out red states gave to the creation of a national health-care system.

The longtime health-care guru Henry J. Aaron of the Brookings Institute has listed the many way the ACA will gradually impose order on the chaotic American health-care system—by breaking the link between insurance and employment, by increasing standardization and price transparency, by extending the exchanges to more and more employers, by winnowing options to the top performers, by requiring adherence to evidentially supported treatments, and much more.

In short, we are embarked on an epochal, decades-long voyage toward a reasonable national, universal health-care system. The treacherous shoals and cannon shots from the shore will mostly come in the first year. After that, we should be well on the way toward eliminating the most shameful blight on American social policy. ■

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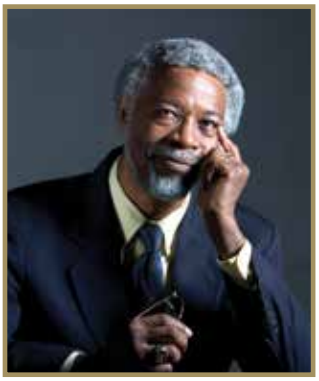

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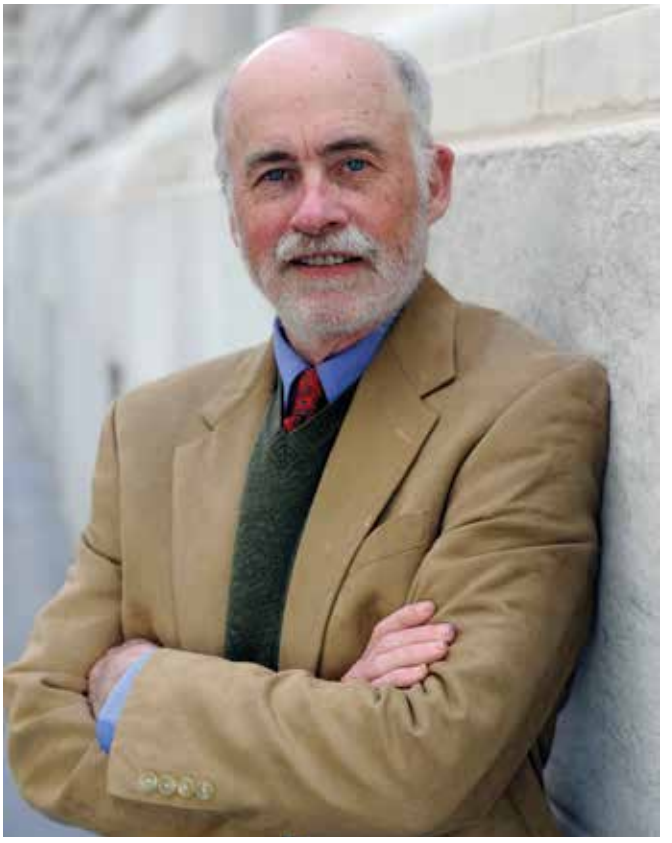
'The Biggest Part of Writing Is Showing Up'

A CONVERSATION WITH PETER QUINN

Peter Quinn's newest novel is Dry Bones, *the third book in a trilogy that also includes* Hour of the Cat *and* The Man Who Never Returned. *His previous works include the novel* Banished Children of Eve, *which won a 1994 American Book Award and is now entering its twentieth year in print, and* Looking for Jimmy: In Search of Irish America, *a collection of nonfiction essays. Quinn, a historian and a former political and corporate speechwriter, has published numerous articles and reviews in the* New York Times, *the* Los Angeles Times, America, *and* Commonweal. *He recently spoke with* Commonweal*'s digital editor, Dominic Preziosi.*



DOMINIC PREZIOSI: Your new novel, *Dry Bones*, completes the trilogy that began with *Hour of the Cat*. Did you start out with the intention of writing a series?

PETER QUINN: No. I had written *Banished Children of Eve*, and it took ten years, so I wanted to write a quick book. And because I love Raymond Chandler, I wanted to write a noir detective novel. So then I had an idea that instead of stumbling on a single murder, what if a detective stumbled on the biggest murder plot in history—eugenics and the Holocaust. So my quick book turned into an eight-year book, because of all the research. But I then found that I wasn't finished with this detective and I had another idea. I've always been fascinated with the Judge Crater case, and my publisher said, "We'll put your detective Fintan Dunne on the case and we'll do a trilogy." But I didn't want to be locked into a time schedule—I wanted to be able to skip around. So *Hour of the Cat* is set in 1938, *The Man Who Never Returned* is set in 1955 but goes back to a case from 1930, and the third book is in postwar Slovakia in 1945 and then jumps to Havana in 1958.

DP: Dunne doesn't seem just a throwback to noir detective characters. He's also recognizable as a New York type, like people you might meet from neighborhoods in the Bronx and Brooklyn. Did you know who he would be at the outset, or is he a character who has taken shape the more you've gotten to know him?

PQ: He's taken shape. I think I knew a lot of people like him growing up in the Bronx, working as a court officer, being around cops. The cops I knew weren't interested in seeking out trouble. They worked in New York, they knew it was around every corner. So Dunne—he's wary. William Kennedy has this phrase, to me it's kind of urban Irish-American: "cynical humanist." Dunne knows what human nature is and knows how easy it is to get in trouble.

You know, I love mysteries—I think part of that is my Catholic background. I loved the word "mystery" as a kid. Everything was a mystery. The joyful mysteries, the glorious mysteries. The mystery of the Trinity. The idea that there's a mystery, like in *The Man Who Never Returned*, that Dunne solves but it never becomes public, because there are things people don't have to know. It's a sin, the desire to know everything. *The Man Who Never Returned* is actually based on *The Divine Comedy*. Dante puts Ulysses in the Eighth Circle of Hell because he took these people in the search for things that didn't have to be known. Fintan Dunne is always coming back home, to the hearth; he doesn't go out looking for these things, he doesn't search for them.

DP: Right—but these things have a way of finding him. Which makes me want to ask about the recurring image of Joan Crawford in *Dry Bones*. Versions of Crawford keep appearing to Dunne: women who look like her, a cross-dresser who appears as her, and then Crawford herself. What is that all about?

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PQ: It's my fascination with noir fiction, with what Crawford represented. I think she represented a certain aspect of this glossy, postwar world. She's a symbol of a certain era in American history. But one of the ideas I'm always interested in is the surface of things. She's this glamorous person, and underneath there's this hard-edged person. Dunne always sees the surface of things, as well as what's beneath, so he sees her on both levels. It happens in every one of my books when you first encounter people: Charles Bedford in *Banished Children* is one person when you first meet him, then you realize he's this kid from Long Island and not the great businessman.

DP: I love the fast thinking Charles Bedford exhibits when he has to change the story of his family background, fabricating the tale that his family is Mormon.

PQ: Well, that's a great New York thing. You don't come to stay who you were.

DP: Charles Bedford actually speaks of this, of people coming to New York to establish identities. He says: "The greatest privilege a city could offer is a man's right to decide who he would be. The city gave what no village would. The ability to disappear, to die, and to be born again." Does this reflect your own thinking about cities? Do you think such an opportunity is still possible in cities that are becoming so expensive that it would seem difficult for someone looking to reinvent himself or herself?

PQ: I think it might be more difficult. But maybe we don't realize how difficult it's always been for rural and poor people to come to cities and reinvent themselves. It's the only place to do that. If you want to stay who you are you stay where you were raised. People knew in Ireland you could stay there, but then you would be who your father was or who your grandfather was. "The city will make you free" was the medieval thing. I still think people feel that. The process of urbanization that went on with New York in the nineteenth century is now a worldwide thing. What took place in the world of *Banished Children* is now a worldwide phenomenon. It's rural people without skills coming into cities. It's reached a critical mass—in China people are pouring into cities, in Africa they're pouring into cities. The one opportunity people really have to change is in the city.

DP: There's another recurring image in *Dry Bones*: the cyanide pill, which the characters refer to as "Victor." It takes on the weight of a sanctified gift. Was this intentional?

PQ: Yes, it's the communion of death. The characters think they're going into a rescue mission in Slovakia but what they're really facing is exposure to the death factories, and that's still a hard thing to wrap the mind around. It's like a descent into the pit of hell. I believe we're a mixture of good and evil but there is really such a thing as evil. It's not just misconduct.

DP: The word "evil" was very much in circulation in the years following the 2001 terrorist attacks, used somewhat casually and without much apparent concern for its meaning or the concept.

PQ: It's a sloppy use of the word, and that's the danger of it. This is part of Fintan Dunne's problem too, because there is evil but it's not always as pure as we like to think—there's always something mixed into it. We like to isolate it by saying if you destroy this one thing, then you destroy evil: you destroy terrorists, you destroy evil. That's not the way it works. Evil is a pervasive part of being human. We have to confront it and to recognize it in ourselves.

DP: You seem to comment in your books on what you take to be the folly of what governments do in the name of expediency—the casual forging of alliances or secretive relationships with bad actors and the unintended consequences. You're commenting on history, it seems, but also on what we see now.

PQ: Absolutely. There's the old line about those who don't learn the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them, but I think we're doomed to repeat them anyway. We learn the lessons but our nature doesn't change.

DP: The way some of the characters in *Dry Bones* manipulate events makes me wonder if in your research you consulted books like Tim Weiner's on the CIA and FBI: *Legacy of Ashes* and *Enemies*.

PQ: Yes, they're right there, in that pile beside you. One of the things I got from *Legacy of Ashes*, from following the footnotes, were these other books about the adoption of German military intelligence techniques, and the freedom they had felt to use torture. It wasn't made up—the American government was bringing these people in. Communism was now the great evil, so that excused this other evil. I was writing *Dry Bones* when the torture of prisoners [at Abu Ghraib] was going on, and I thought, "We're crossing a line here." When you enable people to commit evil, it's harder to stop it than it was to start it.

DP: In an interview I read you recall growing up in the Bronx and thinking, "People don't write about people like us." Was that something you used to motivate yourself? Did that ever come into play with you?

PQ: It did. My family came in 1847, and over a century later when I left New York to be a teacher in the Midwest, I realized I really didn't have a clue about what happened.

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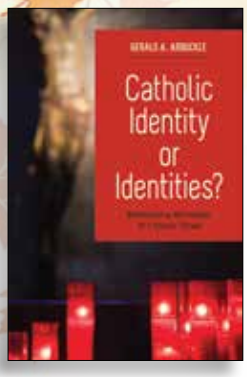

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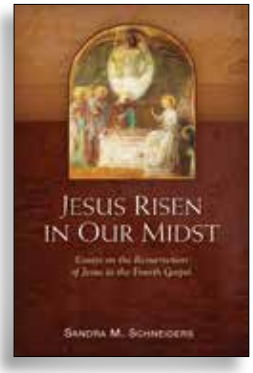

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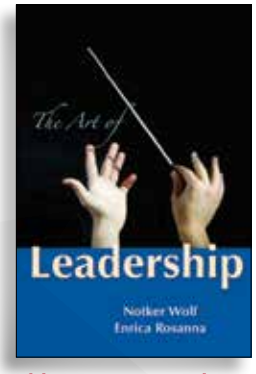

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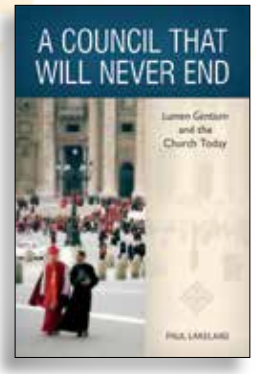

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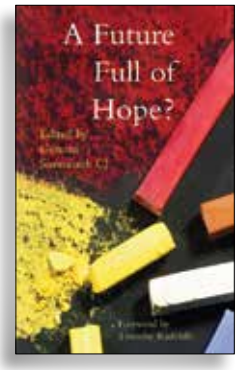

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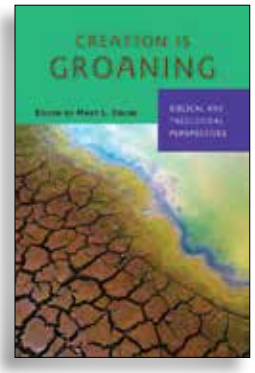

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I didn't see these people reflected in anything, in books or in films. There was this one book written, when I was a kid in St. Raymond's, *House of Gold* by Elizabeth Cullinan. I didn't read it until years later, but I remember my parents being horrified because she had written about her family; she had uncles who were Jesuits. And this was hush-hush, it was "How could she do this?"

DP: There's the notion of "people don't write about people like us," but also this idea that "people like us don't write"—generally among some folks there's a clannish sort of undermining: "Who are you to think you can write?" Did you encounter this as well?

PQ: Yes, absolutely. "Who do you think you are?" The thing about our education was the practicality of what was expected. I took a civil-service test at one point because my father insisted on it: "Become a court officer." You provide for your family, no big dreams.

DP: You've conducted your writing life even while holding demanding and high-visibility professional and corporate positions. How did you maintain this balance, and did you ever feel it was something that couldn't hold together?

PQ: First of all, when I was a speechwriter, one of the things I learned was I had to have the copy in on time. It was a great realization about writing. You don't wait until you're inspired; it's just work, you sit down and sweat. Somebody once said when they walked by my office, "You don't look very busy." I said, "You know what? Right now I'm in the Garden of Gethsemane sweating blood because I have to have this speech crafted and I don't know where to begin." I also learned as a speechwriter that the people making the speech get the product. So I had to have something of my own. That's when I decided to write *Banished Children*, because I thought if I did speechwriting for the rest of my life no one would know I existed. I just wanted something with my own name on it. I started to get up at five-thirty and get to the office at seven and work for two hours until people came in. I researched *Banished Children* for six-and-a-half years and wrote for three-and-a-half, so that was ten. *Hour of the Cat* took seven or eight. But every day, five days a week, for seventeen years I'd be at that desk. It didn't matter if it was snowing or raining or my back was out. The biggest part of writing is showing up, even when you don't feel like it.

DP: Ten years ago in *Commonweal* you wrote on the Catholic novel. You said at the time: "In my view, truly Catholic novels are immersed in the always untidy, often sordid world. They don't squint at reality." Do you still stand by that characterization?

PQ: Absolutely. I remember there was this big upsurge of so-called Christian novels, and they were all apocalyptic. Catholic novels are never about the end of the world. If there's such a thing as the Catholic novel, it's usually immersed in the idea of fallen human nature and finding some meaning in that. There's no perfection among us, everyone is flawed. Everyone has the capacity of the Judas. It's human nature. A big part of Fintan Dunne is his need to be forgiven.

DP: Is there a place today for the Catholic novel? Is there anyone producing it?

PQ: I think there are people who write out of Catholic backgrounds. But the Catholic novel is not this didactic idea. Writers I really admire, like William Kennedy or Alice McDermott, don't necessarily classify themselves as Catholic writers. But their background and training and ethos come through in the novels. When Alice McDermott wrote *After This* her editor said no one would understand that title, and she said, "Well, Peter Quinn will." Because it's from the Salve Regina, along with "banished children of Eve." She has that prayer in her head, William Kennedy has it, I have it—it's a prayer I've said every day of my life. It's a mind-frame that's shaped by Catholicism. I'm not a Catholic writer, I don't write from there specifically, but I write out of sixteen years of Catholic education. I believe in original sin, free will, grace. As a novelist I believe these are operative forces in the world. But I don't want to be an advocate for any official church stance, that's for sure.

DP: Were you ever a journalist?

PQ: No. I thought I'd do speechwriting and go back to history. After *Banished Children*, I did a book of essays, *Looking for Jimmy*—history and family reflections. I never thought of my family as part of some great epic. There were very few facts I could get about my family. A hundred years before, we were part of this catastrophe in rural Europe. And there were all these people whose names I found out later on who didn't make it. Uncles who went to prison or who were killed or were drunks. My mother was a great Stalinist when it came to family history, a real cleaner of records. When my father died he had a drawer filled with family stuff and I went to look for it. I asked my mother where it was and she said she threw it out—it was baggage.

The idea of romantic Ireland obsessed with the past was not my experience. They couldn't get away from it fast enough. From a thousand generations or whatever of tenant farmers, and no one ever said a nice word about the land. Fintan Dunne is a reflection of that: he's totally comfortable in the city. Loves it, it's his natural habitat. When I read Chandler I thought Philip Marlowe didn't belong in Los Angeles, he belonged in New York. And he should have been an Irish Catholic. Now—at least for my own purposes—in the person of Fintan Dunne, he is. ■

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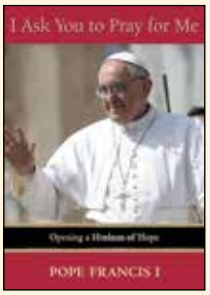

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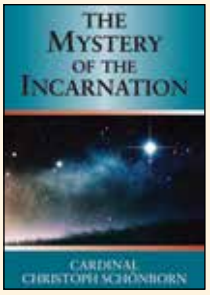

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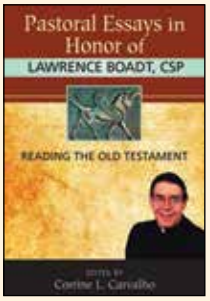

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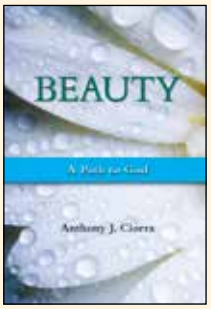

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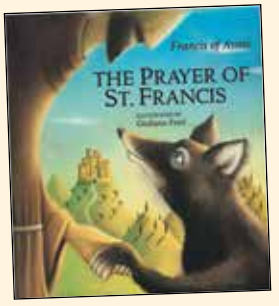

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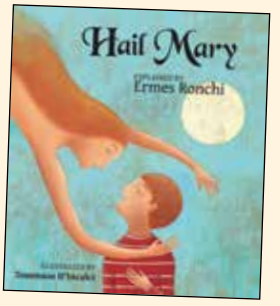

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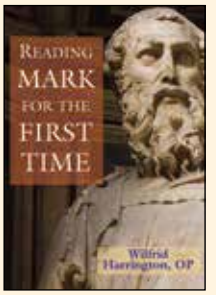

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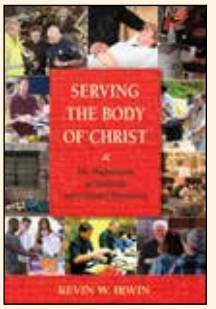

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Kaya Oakes

Faithless Generation?

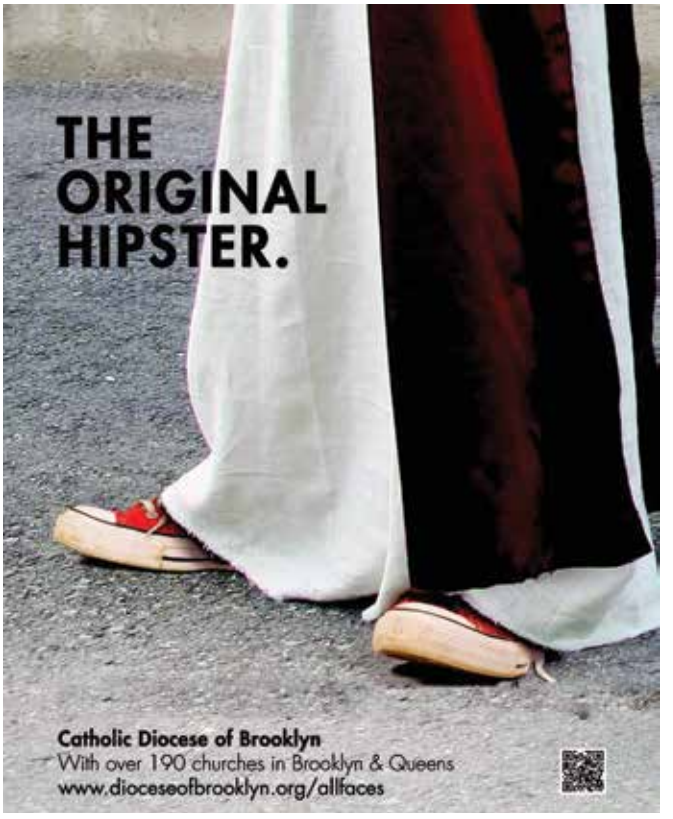
IN SEARCH OF OTHER GEN-X CATHOLICS

For several years now, I've suspected that my entire generation had vanished from Catholicism. On retreats, I was surrounded by seniors, Baby Boomers, and college students. At Mass I was joined by gray-haired people and (fewer) college students. In the women's group I helped found at my parish, at vigils to support American sisters, in the pages of Catholic magazines, on the internet: more seniors, more Boomers, a sprinkling of college students, and forty-two-year-old me. Apparently, I am the last Gen-X Catholic on earth.

When I began finding my way back to Catholicism, only my husband and a couple of trusted peers were aware that I was spending my Sunday mornings at Mass, my Wednesday evenings in catechism classes, my Saturday mornings cooking at a shelter for homeless women. When I vanished for a week on a silent retreat, most friends my age assumed I was at one of Northern California's many Buddhist centers or maybe a spa. When I was no longer available for Sunday brunch, friends guessed that my gym schedule had shifted. And then I outed myself with a book about Catholicism and how I do and don't fit into it. I was pleased when friends in their thirties and forties turned up to hear me read from it. But not a single one was a practicing Catholic.

Last year, the PEW Forum on Religion and Public Life released the results of its multiyear study of faith, which revealed that up to a third of Generation X (born in the 1960s and '70s) and Generation Y (born in the '80s and '90s) describe themselves not as atheists but as "Nones," people with no religious affiliation. Anyone who's noticed the shrinking number of young people at Mass should not have been surprised. When I didn't tell my friends I was back in the church, it was primarily because they're all Nones.

Growing up in the Bay Area in the 1970s, faith seemed exotic and rare. Our parents had abandoned organized religion as the '60s swept over them, or they'd reinvented the faith of their parents, or grabbed on to traditions not their own. Jewish ashrams, Catholic house-churches, Zen Trappists, Native-American animists, African-American Muslims: those were the religions I grew up around. My own family's Catholicism was pretty shaggy; only my father regularly attended Mass, and he went to the kind of progressive church where women preached on occasion and every major holiday featured that very '70s phenomenon: liturgical dance. Some Catholics of my generation grew up believing that twirling scarves around the altar was a sanctioned part of the liturgy. Bay Area Boomers were not interested in orthodoxy, and they raised a generation of kids who, eventually, were not even interested in faith.



Sandals are so bougie.

Attending a Catholic college, I expected to see some evidence that my generation was still hanging on to religion. But even if my classmates were rooted in Catholicism, they didn't seem like the socially engaged Boomer Catholics I knew in Berkeley and Oakland. They didn't volunteer, they didn't pray, they slept around and partied as though the members of the religious order who ran the school weren't living in the dorms with them. Their connection to religion was tenuous and thin. For most of them, once they graduated, the connection broke.

My own connection had broken well before college. I didn't like what the institutional church had to say about women, and I liked even less what it had to say about the LGBTQ community that had surrounded and loved me since childhood. But I'd expected my classmates, at least, to act like good Catholic kids: to be compassionate and devout, to have some sort of relationship with God, to be respectful of the clergy who ran the school. Instead, they acted like self-centered, nihilistic jerks. And as the media portrait of our generation became clearer, we *all* seemed to be self-centered, nihilistic jerks. It wasn't so much that religion wasn't good enough for us; we weren't good enough for religion.

That perception was the first stumbling block I had to get past when a stubborn belief in God pulled me back to the church in my thirties. I was the only person my age in RCIA; surrounded by Boomers and college students, I felt the generation gap yawning on either side. But I also felt, for lack of a less clichéd word, welcomed. Here was a place where no one shared my pop-culture vocabulary, but it was also a place where the central message of compassion for the marginalized, and of community that

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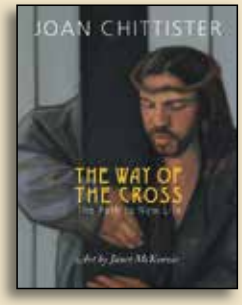

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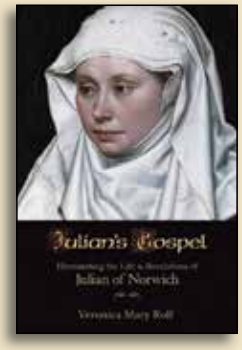

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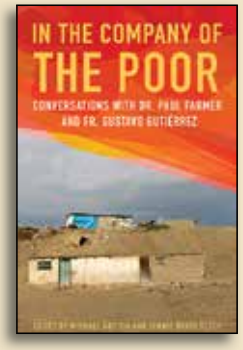

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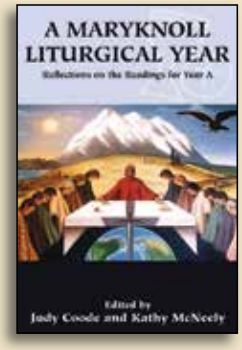

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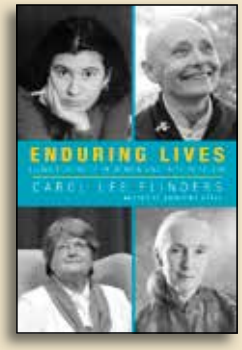

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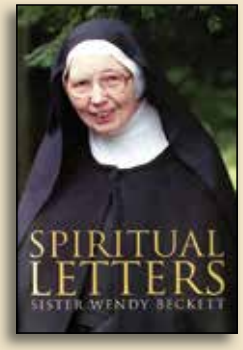

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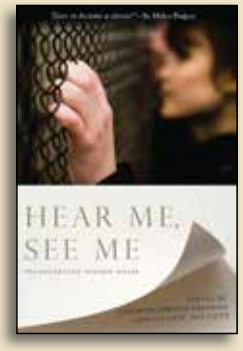

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transcended gender, race, and class, trumped the question of age. My church friends could easily have been my mothers, aunts, uncles, fathers, nieces, and nephews. Yes, sometimes my jokes didn't make sense to them. My taste in music was confounding. But there was no snark. There was no knee-jerk cynicism when I talked about my struggles as a person of faith. The elderly priest leading our group said it over and over again: Maybe you've been a sinner, but so has the church. You are still good enough for religion.

So I became a practicing Catholic, and in time I told my friends what I was up to. I braced for a negative response. In our social circle, discovering someone was gay was usually greeted by a shrug. Finding out someone was religious, however, was cause for alarm. Religion for Generation X was Jerry Falwell and the Crystal Cathedral and Tammy Faye Bakker's mascara. As the Religious Right and Evangelicals stormed into politics, more and more Gen-X kids threw up their hands.

I didn't need to worry. When I finally began to admit to friends that I was attending Mass again, they reacted like most Gen-Xers do when someone comes out. They shrugged. And when I wrote about it, and they read what I wrote, they tentatively began to ask questions. What did it mean to have faith? How could I deal with the sexism and homophobia? Is the pope really infallible? What was up with those nuns on TV riding around on a bus? But those conversations never seemed to last very long, which for me was both a relief and a disappointment. I'm relieved not to have to spend time explaining and defending two-thousand-odd years of Catholicism. But I'm also disappointed that my friends' interest in this facet of my life, and in religion itself, is so superficial. As curious as people my age are about the exotic phenomena I take for granted—the Eucharist, the Body of Christ, Jesus himself—they are still suspicious of anything remotely resembling groupthink.

Yet no matter how cynical the world turned us, some Gen-Xers had religion all along. We had it in our bones, and like every generation, we grew up. When Gen-X friends of mine—Episcopalians, Jews, Unitarians, and the one Catholic friend I now have—started to rediscover religion, we did it in the DIY manner we do everything else, and for the most part that means we do it independently, without much concern for centralized authority.

But if I rediscovered faith on my own, I stay involved thanks to the community I found in RCIA and continue to find at my parish—a community that transcends difference to reveal a core that binds us together. As I've grown closer to my Catholic Boomer friends, I have learned, too, that the feeling of social isolation is not just a Gen-X phenomenon. Catholics of all ages have to work harder today to find and build the community our faith depends on. It can be a lonely time for all of us. And constantly moving back and forth between a secular culture where conversations about religion are often perfunctory and a life of faith can strain even the most ardent believer.

Gen-X Catholics occupy a particularly precarious position, or so it seems to me as I look in vain for fellow members of my generation each Sunday. Without companions in the faith journey who share our experiences, our inside jokes, our generational mixture of stubborn independence and progressive thinking, I'm afraid our connection to the church may not hold. And if we disappear, the bridge we provide between older and younger generations of Catholics will vanish, too. It would be a loss I'm afraid many parishes wouldn't notice until it's too late. ■

Kaya Oakes *is the author of* Radical Reinvention: An Unlikely Return to the Catholic Church. *She teaches writing at the University of California, Berkeley.*

HAMDEN, CT, OCTOBER

Remarkable, a wave so sharp and sheer—
It is metal—hear it rattle, like a logger's gear.

See how it shines on leaves as dull as ash,
And rusted wires of roots like buried trash.

It stops me, takes my elbow in its hand,
And sniffs my hair, and eyes my wedding band.

It asks, "Where do you live? Why don't you show me?
You can't have been here long, or else you'd know me."

I cannot speak or move: I recognize
My soft and warm and cool house in its eyes,

And now I pray that God, when roof and walls
Are gone, spares me from everything that falls,

Lets sheets and blankets lie in mold down there,
While I sleep cleanly, naked in midair.

But I'm a fool. His Judgment is no part
Of the imagination of my heart,

But part of Grace—to which I come the way
Of those most richly in this demon's pay.

—Sarah Ruden

Sarah Ruden's most recent book is Paul Among the People *(Image Books). She has translated four books 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 University and lives with her husband in Middletown, Connecticut.*

Undomesticated

The Life & Times of J. F. Powers

Patricia Hampl

"When a writer is born into a family," Czeslaw Milosz balefully warned, "the family is finished." But who's at risk from a writing relative—ancestors or descendants? Ancestors, of course, don't stand a chance of getting their own back. But books by the children of major American writers of the twentieth century now constitute a subset of contemporary autobiography. Such memoirs give Milosz's harrowing prediction an ironic twist. Who, after all, really finishes off a literary family, if by "finish" is meant getting the last (published) word?

Susan Cheever, Janna Malamud Smith, Alexandra Styron—daughters of three iconic American writers—have each written striking memoirs about their variously distant or impossible but deeply beloved fathers. The candor and generosity of these books, as James Wood notes in a recent *New Yorker* essay (July 22), give us "tender, scouring portraits" in which the daughters "intelligently analyze the asymmetries of growing up in a household dominated by the needs of a male creator, and the costs to the women who enabled that creativity."

Suitable Accommodations
An Autobiographical Story of Family Life: The Letters of J. F. Powers, 1942–1963
Edited by Katherine A. Powers
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $35, 450 pp.

Katherine A. Powers, the editor (a term too pedestrian for the organizing angel at work here) of her father's letters, grew up in such a household. But "household" is precisely what the restless Powers tribe lacked, perpetually on the move from rented houses—usually near St John's Abbey in central Minnesota, the setting of Powers's two novels and most of his stories (also the locale, somewhat later, of Garrison Keillor's Lake Wobegon)—or in mad dashes to peat-fireplace leases in Ireland. Above all, this was a family ever uprooted, trailing the flight patterns of the "male creator" whose art—or its quixotic requirements—was held sacred by both parents. In all, there were five children, Katherine the firstborn, named for Katherine Anne Porter, a keen promoter of J. F. Powers's stories.

Patricia Hampl's *books include the memoirs* The Florist's Daughter, A Romantic Education, *and* Virgin Time. *She teaches at the University of Minnesota.*

The letters and occasional journal excerpts that form the book, including several from Powers's wife, cover the years from his prison time as a conscientious objector during World War II to his receiving the National Book Award in 1963 for *Morte d'Urban*, his great comic novel. This might, for a different writer, be a rags-to-riches story. But the trademark Powers irony is at work even in his daughter's narrative arc, for sweet as the award must have been, it was hardly a launch to smooth sailing.

This narrative trajectory, which leaves out the second half of Powers's life, does something better than chart a success—it reveals a dynamic midcentury Catholic world buoyed by lyrical dreams of artistic endeavor and shared ideals composed of a lost blend of conservative passions (the Latin Mass) and a progressive social agenda. This swath of cultural time usually is too easily lost in the louder drumrolls of "the '60s" that lie just beyond the frame of this book. Even Vatican II is barely a blip on the soundtrack of the story.

And it is a *story*, not just a dump of lively letters, that Katherine Powers arrays here. The world of the letters, viewed in retrospect, is fun-loving and also fierce in its postwar aspirations, still vibrantly attuned to calls for social justice rising out of the upheavals of the Depression from such figures as Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker movement. Yet it can all look, now, heartbreakingly deluded in the face of America's ballooning imperial presence and the rise of a consumer culture dependent on a robust line of credit.

Jim Powers met Betty Wahl when her English teacher at the College of St. Benedict, Sr. Mariella Gable, sent him the manuscript of a novel her student had written. She asked Powers, whose stories were just appearing to some note in *Accent* magazine, to remark on it. Powers took the train northwest from St. Paul where he was working at a hospital (part of his parole arrangement) to discuss the novel (which he admired) with the young author. Two days after they met, he proposed to Betty Wahl. She accepted. They married in April 1946, having met only five times in the intervening six months,

Evelyn Waugh & J. F. Powers, 1949

perhaps because his parole guidelines required permission to travel outside St. Paul.

The daily love letters Jim wrote Betty during their engagement are eloquent not only of his ardor, but of his determination not to be tied down in the manner of gainful husbands. She should know this husband would refuse to "go along [that is, look for a job] just because you were my wife and asked it, or because we had twelve children who needed milk and bread." He tendered these admonitions, apparently, as his side of an honest contract. "I am not saying I'd poison the children," he offers concilatorily, "but you'd better take another reading if you think I can be domesticated and made to like it."

He wants her to know what she's getting into—if that is ever possible for marrying people. "I am like Daniel Boone cutting my way through that bourgeois wilderness," he writes heroically a month before the wedding, "the first one who ever didn't lose himself in a corporation or go into business for himself. I hope—I sincerely pray—you are not making a mistake about me."

Powers was not proposing some louche hipster existence. No beatnik, he. Both he and Betty were eager proponents of the spirited Catholic movements of the era including "rural lifers" (emphasis on lots of kids), liturgical reform, and contemporary religious art. By settling near St. John's in Collegeville, they were attaching themselves to what they half-jokingly called "the Movement," a sparkling group of friends, artists, priests, and monks but also young married couples, including Eugene and Abigail McCarthy for example, people for whom family life was a vocation—and an adventure. Jim's don't-fence-me-in admonitions may have struck Betty not as warnings but assurances of that adventure, a union marrying them not only to each other but to their pursuit of art among like-minded idealists.

Powers was true to his word. Though later in life he accepted a position as writer in residence at St. John's, during the period of this book when all five of his children were born, he turns down teaching and lecturing offers with baffling insouciance while despairing a page later of the family's near destitution. One of his most frequent correspondents is Harvey Egan, a priest who was not only a fan of his fiction but a patron, source of loans at key moments.

Jim's determination to marry Betty is never in question in his passionate premarital communiqués. Nor do the letters, over time, suggest that their bond was broken, no matter how frayed their life, how untenable their solutions (mostly flights to supposedly cheaper Ireland). Still, he can sound bitter. Several years and one child into his marriage, in a letter to Robert Lowell (a friendship made at Yaddo and kept for life), he advises, "Stay single. That way you can afford to be yourself."

His idea of the artist's vocation is never more Catholic than in this sense of the aloof requirements of the calling, the need to be separate, singular, married—but not to a person. "I just want to go away," he writes in 1954 from Minnesota to Jack Conroy, the proletarian novelist. "I must say you would've enjoyed the sight of me in Ireland," he goes on, rouging up his life there, "having my morning coffee before the fire, unfolding my *Irish Times*, listening to music from the BBC and from my stomach, full of good bacon and toast and marmalade; or at the Leopardstown Racecourse; or walking along the sea."

For her part, Betty wrote "on a strict schedule," her daughter notes in the book's tantalizingly brief afterword ("Growing Up in This Story"). Betty eventually published a novel, and she sold stories to magazines, including the *New Yorker*. And she "cooked every meal from scratch and sewed most of our clothes; she went to her parents for aid; she scrimped, rationed, and cobbled together the wherewithal for our survival."

All this while Jim did—or did not—write, moving subject-verb-object around at his glacial pace. He was a great fritterer of time, filling his days by reading the daily papers, following baseball and horse racing (a passion), trolling the auction houses (especially in Ireland) for useless but lovely bits and pieces. And he wrote these often "festive" letters, as Katherine Powers remarks, while assiduously refusing offers of teaching positions that would have resolved the family's uncertainty and—not to finesse the situation—poverty. In his spare time (in a sense, all he had was spare time), he developed geographical claustrophobia in Stearns County, Minnesota, and plotted escapes to Ireland. Once in Ireland he reversed the process of frustration, and fled back to Minnesota, progeny in tow.

There is, naturally, a feminist reading of this narrative in which wife-and-mother sacrifices her gifts to keep the vigil light flickering before the tabernacle of male creativity and, not incidentally, keeps the wolf from the rental door through her heroics. It's the old feminine religion, not much professed anymore.

Such a reading, while not unjust, misses the more expansive significance of this "autobiographical story of family life" (as the directive subtitle puts it). Considering the assembled letters, the daughter-editor comes to believe that the precarious life of the Powers family "could be described as a folie à deux," both parents united in unflinching service

MINNEAPOLIS STAR TRIBUNE

to the "exceptional being" and "true artist" Betty believed her husband to be. Though he wasn't a gambling man and his indulgences ran to small pleasures, he had a taste for playing the horses, and his relationship with the *New Yorker* was a series of risky bets, providing serious money, but on breathtakingly uncertain terms for a family of seven.

Still, Betty's bet on his talent was well placed. Powers was and remains an original, indispensible because without parallel. He was recognized immediately by his contemporaries, including Katherine Anne Porter, Robert Lowell, Sean O'Faolain, and Frank O'Connor—and by the editors of the *New Yorker,* where his stories regularly appeared over two decades. His remorseless style has been compared even to Chekhov, and his hardscrabble Minnesota settings seem harbingers of Alice Munro's miserable Ontario.

But it is his dialogue that proves Powers an enduring master. He is not so much "our Chekhov" as our Jane Austen, ear cocked to the inadvertent revelations of avidity, embedded prides, and delusions, as his characters stumble on the trip-wires of a resolutely smooth social surface.

As with Austen, Powers's real subject is society (church, town, community). Social fabric constitutes the character through which his figures move. They are mostly priests and those around them, hatchet-hearted housekeepers, creeping laity. These chess pieces glide over a strictly patterned board of ingeniously vapid encounters in rectories, church basements, the used-car lots and balding golf courses of proud little nowhere towns.

Powers is sometimes faulted for not giving his priests, in particular, a spiritual life, either uplifting or vexed. No crises of faith for these churchmen, no visionary transports. They skim along, as Austen's matrimonially minded young women do, on the exterior of an exacting world, threading the needle of tedium, feinting and lunging among hypocrisies and hopes.

Almost no character (except, briefly, Fr. Joe, in Powers's second and final novel *Wheat That Springeth Green*) has a sex life either in mind or body. This absence is not so much an evasion as an inevitability implicit in his fundamental choice to expose the cunning nature of social setting—which is to say a world fully imagined and therefore real. It is shared space, not interior life, which Powers, like Austen, lays bare. It may also explain why—given that the words "Catholic priest" now conjure to a percentage of the reading public a predatory figure in the pedophile scandal—Powers's work does not feel dated though it is entirely of its time. It lives in the eternal verity of satire.

Powers was not simply a "writer's writer," though that term of art is still ascribed to him, perhaps to account for his relatively modest output. Delicious Powers vignettes still get passed around among writers—the time he was asked how his work was going, for instance, and reported he'd spent the day trying to decide whether to call his character's friend "pal" or "chum." A day's hard labor. Any writer has to love that.

Powers delivered: his sharply incised stories appeared regularly in the *New Yorker*. And thanks to the New York Review of Books Classics series, both novels and an edition of the collected stories are in print today in beautiful editions with thoughtful introductions.

Powers is remembered as a writer whose characters were often parish priests (though his most famous creation, Fr. Urban, is a member of the Clementines, an order founded entirely by J. F. Powers). But he harbored the lifelong intention and preoccupation to write a novel of "family life." Not just any family, but the life of an artist/husband/father (guess who?), a man "with bright prospects," as Katherine Powers says in her introduction, a writer with "a taste for the good things in life, and an expectation of camaraderie." But—not and—"the man falls in love, gets married, has numerous children." There is "neither money nor home." A novel of frustrated dreams. A novel never written.

This unwritten novel prompts Katherine Powers to construct, from his droll and caustic correspondence, an "autobiographical story of family life" on behalf of her father. A collection of letters, of course, can hardly act the part of a novel, given that we see only Powers's letters, never his correspondents'. Sometimes these people (Fr. Egan, for example, faithful source of loans and ever attentive ear) are elusive figures moving behind a scrim; they cry out for the deeper shading that a novel—or memoir—could offer. Katherine Powers provides biographical notes and fills in geographic and historical lacunae. This helps—and sometimes isn't even necessary: letters to Robert Lowell and Katherine Anne Porter (quite a few), to Evelyn Waugh and Sean O'Faolain and Gordon Zahn are themselves markers of an era. They also remind us how vital a figure J. F. Powers cut in the literary life of his times.

A true stylist can perhaps best be revealed in the free form of letters, the self displayed in fleet descriptions of the day, a captured instant, worry and wonder of the moment. Powers does not disappoint. He reveals himself—crabby and contentious, but ever relishing the vignettes presented by the passing world—the fierce coast of Ireland, its mossy stone walls, Irish whisky before a peat fire. Even on a train to Chicago his heart lifts into description: "[T]he river on the [Empire] Builder was beautiful in a way I've seldom seen in the Middle West: raining slightly, with fog hanging over the river and in notches in the little mountainous hills, with grey herons set out like lawn furniture."

He becomes bewildered by the cultural shift glimpsed on the horizon in the early '60s: after a Robert Lowell reading at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, Powers writes a

fond and praising letter to his old friend, but ends muttering, "I can't get used to seeing people wearing blue jeans, and in shirtsleeves." What would he make today of the much-pierced and profoundly tattooed shagging into concert halls in their flip-flops?

Though Powers is routinely called a "Catholic writer," he was often savaged in the Catholic press and by readers not amused by his irreverence. After he was "slugged" in the *Minneapolis Tribune*'s review of *Morte d'Urban*, he wrote to Jack Conroy, "People see me on the street…and look away as if I'd been taken in adultery with a chicken."

It was perhaps a lonely existence, paradoxically crowded with people, mostly children, beset by guilt (those children) and determination (that art). His best social life may have been conducted in these letters where he was free of the constraints of family responsibilities and also of the severe demands he put on his fiction.

Two eloquent ironies launch this haunting collection: both its title and subtitle invite double readings. "Suitable accommodations" is Powers's term for his restless pursuit of a place—and way—to exist vibrantly with all the moving parts of his ardent life. But what accommodation—what bargain, what *deal*—is suitable for those who live within the ambit of such an artist? How do they accommodate such a being?

And whose "autobiographical story" does the subtitle intend? The father-writer's or the daughter-editor's? "Growing up in this family is not something I would care to do again," Katherine Powers says frankly in her remarkably evenhanded afterword. Hers is a voice and editorial presence rinsed of bitterness, though not of common sense. This book—his and surely also hers—is part homage, a trust fulfilled, and part generational retort. Powers would surely approve the candor and the discretion, the amused regard of this poised editorial hand. But then, the Commandment is not to love one's mother and father, but to honor them.

How "suitable" Betty's "accommodations" were probably must remain a mystery—or an argument. The daughter-editor is determined to honor them both, though she gives the final scene of her introduction to her mother in a comic heart-piercing deathbed vignette. (Betty died first, tenderly cared for by Jim, who lived on another eleven years.)

Betty Wahl Powers gets the last word here as well, from a dismayed journal notation she jotted shortly after the birth of her fifth and final child: "Five, five, five. How did it come about?" the newly delivered mother cries out to the page. "I keep repeating Fr. Egan—they are, in the end, the only thing that will have mattered. I believe it: I feel it."

But like her art-besotted husband, her ear is cocked to another call: "And yet they defy peace and order and what of art—of Jim's if not mine? Are we to make him into just another man who will die, his body rot, his possessions be dispersed, and his immortality all in heaven? God does intend there to be man-made beauty on earth. We are to make order of it all. Order and art." ■

True West

Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House Books

Mollie Wilson O'Reilly

Laura Ingalls Wilder was "past sixty," as she put it, when she began writing her "Little House books," which chronicle the adventures of the Ingalls family, her family, as late-nineteenth-century American pioneers. Those sixty years had seen such dramatic changes in American life and in the country's landscape that the stories of young Laura Ingalls seemed like dispatches from another world. In a letter distributed by her publisher, Wilder assured readers, "I lived everything that happened in my books."

Wilder's eight books, published in the 1930s and '40s, made her a literary celebrity in her old age. She spent her final years attending dedication ceremonies for libraries named in her honor. Generations of children have been brought up on her stories. Now, a new two-volume edition of the Little House books from the Library of America stakes a claim for Wilder's work as an enduring part of the country's literary heritage—not just a journal of a frontier girlhood meant to amuse children, but skillfully crafted literature. The Little House books are a valuable eye-witness account of a fascinating and fleeting time in America's history. They are also first-rate fiction, with gripping drama and finely drawn characters—particularly the author's alter ego, Laura Ingalls, who thrives on the edge of civilization and is ambivalent about settling down into adulthood. Wilder's straightforward, plainspoken style, with its occasional bursts of lyricism, has aged well—though she is speaking about the past, she seldom seems to be speaking *from* the past. If her novels "capture the best of the American pioneer spirit," as the jackets of my 1970s Harper Trophy paperbacks declare, they also capture the best qualities of American writing in the twentieth century.

The first book in the series, *Little House in the Big Woods*, was published in 1932, and its success led Wilder (who was born in 1867) to undertake what she described as "a seven-volume historical novel for children concerning every aspect of the American frontier." (There were ultimately eight installments, including *Farmer Boy*, which recounts the childhood of Wilder's husband, Almanzo, in New York state.) The result was a beguiling combination of memoir, fiction, and history lesson. The story of the settlement of America's frontier was also the story of its disappearance, and by the time she started writing, Wilder found that the ordinary details of her childhood had become "stories of long ago" that attracted young people's imaginations just as her own father's stories had once delighted her. Her unique achievement in the Little House books is portraying a particular historical context in minute detail—*Big Woods* alone could double as a wilderness survival manual, with its thorough descriptions of bullet-making and venison-smoking—while also painting a warm and convincing portrait of family life that, eighty years on, still feels authentic. Announcing that she had "lived everything" she wrote was Wilder's canny way of telling readers what they wanted to hear—*You can trust me; it was real*—without actually saying *It's all true.*

The Little House Books
Laura Ingalls Wilder
Edited by Caroline Fraser
Library of America, $75, 1,512 pp.

Readers revisiting the series as adults—especially those whose memories were muddied by the melodramatic 1970s and '80s television series *Little House on the Prairie*—may be surprised by Wilder's sure hand as a writer, and by the emotional impact of her heroine's coming of age. And anyone who has wondered just how much of what Wilder wrote is "true"—and what happened to her characters in "real life" after the Little House books came to a close—will find the new Library of America edition a welcome resource. The novels are printed in full across two volumes (without the illustrations found in children's editions), along with some other documents—like the letter to readers mentioned above—and a chronology of Wilder's life, as well as explanatory notes on the text. Editor Caroline Fraser's endnotes call out harmless anachronisms (like Pa playing a popular song on his fiddle that hadn't yet been composed) as well as more significant departures from the historical record (like Wilder revising her husband's age down to narrow the real-life ten-year gap between them). They are particularly helpful when it comes to sorting out the historical background to the Ingallses' adventures—for example, the confusion about treaty terms that causes the family to settle briefly in "Indian Territory" and then reluc-

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tantly move on in *Little House on the Prairie*. For a parent or teacher seeking more historical context to flesh out Laura's limited perspective on Native Americans and their conflicts with white settlers, Fraser's notes are an excellent guide.

Wilder's books are now historical documents twice over; today we are further removed from the time in which she wrote them than she was from the era she wrote about. The series' focus on self-reliance and hard work must have seemed a natural theme during the Great Depression. (Losses from the 1929 crash motivated Wilder to try her hand at writing fiction in the first place.) The books written during World War II are self-consciously patriotic—a Fourth of July celebration in *Little Town on the Prairie*, published in 1941, drags uncharacteristically thanks to a too-long quotation from the Declaration of Independence. But none of that interferes with the series' accessibility or appeal today. The character of Laura, who celebrates her fifth birthday during *Big Woods* and marries, at eighteen, at the end of *These Happy Golden Years*, is vividly drawn, especially in her early years. Wilder has the rare gift of inhabiting a child's perspective with no irony or condescension, making little Laura's thoughts and experiences relatable and compelling even for adult readers. Rereading *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, my cheeks still burned with indignation when a heedless neighbor child mistreated Laura's beloved rag doll, Charlotte, and when the Ingalls sisters were taunted as "country girls" by snobby Nellie Oleson (surely one of American fiction's most indelible villains). Laura's fraught relationship with her older, annoyingly "good" sister Mary—for years her only playmate, as well as her most intense rival—is as compelling an account of the sibling bond as I have read. Wilder makes the frustration of always being a step behind so palpable I felt I ought to send flowers to my own slightly-younger sister by the time I finished rereading *Big Woods*. And it is impossible not to sympathize with Laura's struggles to master the high degree of self-control expected of children in her day.

"Running through all the stories, like a golden thread," Wilder remarked, "is the same thought of the values of life. They were courage, self-reliance, independence, integrity, and helpfulness. Cheerfulness and humor were handmaids to courage." The Little House books would have far less appeal if that "golden thread" appeared as outright preaching. But Wilder never slips into a scolding "in my day…" tone. Nostalgia for its own sake is scorned—"Other folks can stick to old-fashioned ways if they want to," Pa announces in *Big Woods*, "but I'm all for progress"—and sentimentality is very seldom indulged. When an emotion needs expressing, Wilder turns to Pa and his fiddle. The books are thus a scrapbook of nineteenth-century American popular song, and many a chapter fades out to a perfectly chosen hymn or ballad. (Others, like the song about "old Uncle Ned" who is "gone where the good darkeys go," are less edifying.)

To reread the Little House books as an adult is to ap-

SAINT PAUL LIVES HERE (IN MINNESOTA)

Neither death, nor life, nor angels,
nor principalities, nor powers,
nor things present, nor things to come...

On he goes.
Outside, the ice on the street
stiffens,
bracing for the day's human contact,
and the prodigal snow,
everywhere and unromantic,
blots out grass, earth, animals.

Can I believe
That this barren, featureless land that raised
me
receives the seed like any other?
The parable did not speak of snowy ground.
If it had, the meaning may have been
to wait.
So I gather.

I imagine Paul,
shivering out a wretched winter,
making tents so warm we marvel at his skill,
and are protected from this cold.
(We love his letters when he goes.)
Don't laugh.
It's not so preposterous.
Are we not as good
as any Roman
or Corinthian?

—Zach Czaia

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proach them with a double consciousness, persuaded by Laura's perspective but also sensitive to the adult concerns at the edge of her awareness. The details she drops in about her parents—Ma, who "hated Indians" and "had been very fashionable, before she married Pa," and Pa, who loves the wilderness and only reluctantly submits to his wife's desire for a stable and "civilized" home—hint at complex interior lives. I am touched, as Wilder must have been in retrospect, by Ma's small vanities, her attempts to bring a bit of elegance to her rustic surroundings—most memorably the cherished china shepherdess, displayed on a specially carved shelf, that makes each new house feel like a home.

The family's circumstances are nearly always precarious, yet little Laura's sense of security is unwavering. While her parents struggle, in some cases literally, to keep the wolf from the door, she is untroubled: "She was glad that the cozy house, and Pa and Ma and the firelight and the music, were now," Wilder writes in the elegiac final passage of *Big Woods*. "They could not be forgotten, she thought, because now is now. It can never be a long time ago." Laura's confidence that life will go on the way it always has brings a sweetly poignant note to a series built on the awareness—and eventually, the experience—of rapid, unavoidable change. The next book (after *Farmer Boy*), *Little House on the Prairie*, finds the Ingallses leaving that cozy home for good and setting out for new territory. Laura begins to develop a sense of the world around her as something less than dependable. Later books offer sustained encounters with danger and deprivation: flash prairie fires, a horrifying locust infestation, a punishing series of blizzards in *The Long Winter*. Each time, the family's resilience is tested more directly. And throughout the series, the adults respond to even major setbacks with a stoicism so deadpan it's comical: "All's well that ends well," Ma will say when someone narrowly escapes death, or "Least said, soonest mended." When a swarm of blackbirds destroys the family's crops, Ma serves blackbird pie for dinner, noting, "There's no great loss without some small gain."

Notes left behind by the author and her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, who edited the manuscripts, reveal a struggle over this aspect of Wilder's style. Lane wanted more emotionalism, but Wilder defended her restraint—"this feeling that you call apathy and I call stoicism"—as an accurate reflection of the characters and the time. "It seems to me we were rather inclined to be fatalistic—to just take things as they came," she wrote. "I know we all hated a fuss, as I still do." (Viewers of the TV series know that Michael Landon came down on Rose's side.) Concerned about making the books "too sad" for children, Wilder wrote sparingly but honestly of the emotional burdens of hard weather, illness, and loss. Lane did convince her mother to begin *By the Shores of Silver Lake* with an account of the family's recent troubles, including the scarlet fever epidemic that had left Mary Ingalls blind: "Her blue eyes were still beautiful, but they did not know what was before them, and Mary herself could never look through them again to tell Laura what she was thinking without saying a word."

I remembered the books as a collection of entertaining stories, but reading them again I marveled at Wilder's careful handling of suspense and foreshadowing, and the way she shapes nearly every book in the series around a warm Christmas gathering. Her subtle command of pattern and variation holds the series together. The books also build on each other, with occasional references to inci-

dents and characters from earlier in the series. (The scene involving Laura's ruined doll has deeper resonance for the reader who already knows that "Charlotte had been Laura's own since Christmas morning long ago in the Big Woods of Wisconsin.") Over the long arc of the series, Wilder's skill as a fiction writer becomes clear—it is a stroke of genius, for example, to bring the hissable Nellie Oleson (a composite of real-life classmates of Wilder's) back into Laura's life as a teen in *Little Town on the Prairie*, where social conflicts replace the existential crises of earlier books.

After years of moving from one home to another, the Ingallses settle in the "little town" in South Dakota where Laura grows to adulthood. The family's self-sufficient isolation gives way to membership in a growing community, with schools and church socials and adolescent flirtations. But stability turns out to be frightening for Laura. Aware of having inherited her father's restlessness, she finds she prefers the wilderness to human company. "Everything is simple when you are alone, or at home," Wilder observes during an awkward teenage moment, "but as soon as you meet other people you are in difficulties." Laura dreads the constrained world of womanhood—"Her corsets were a sad affliction to her"—and is unhappy with the prospect of becoming a schoolteacher. She pursues that career to help pay Mary's tuition at a college for the blind, and in *Little Town*, she also accepts a difficult job as a seamstress. Taking on that responsibility brings new insight: watching her mother make Mary's school clothes, Laura suddenly realizes that "Ma hated sewing. Her gentle face did not show it now, and her voice was never exasperated. But her patience was so tight around her mouth that Laura knew she hated sewing as much as Laura did."

Laura Ingalls Wilder in the 1870s

While Ma's unflappability had always been comforting when danger lurked, the young Laura saved her deepest affection for her impetuous and joyful Pa. Now, entering adulthood herself, Laura begins to understand Ma's ladylike reserve as a conscious choice, something like wearing a corset to preserve one's figure. Patient sacrifice is part of the model of womanhood she too must embrace. "This earthly life is a battle," Ma declares matter-of-factly in the same book. "The sooner you make up your mind to that, the better off you are, and the more thankful for your pleasures." Her frankness seems a mark of Laura's maturity.

Having learned that "a grown-up person must never let feelings be shown by voice or manner," Laura seems to recede as the series progresses, granting the reader less and less access to her emotions and thoughts. It is tantalizing to read about Almanzo's pursuit of teenage Laura—knowing that they will eventually marry, and waiting for her to finally figure out what this solicitous bachelor with the handsome horses is driving at—but the expected romantic release never comes. Their courtship, as described in the books, is never more than lightly affectionate, and that they end up married seems more a product of his persistence than of her desires. "We just seem to belong together," Laura tells Mary when she accepts Almanzo's engagement ring. The reader must take her word for it—no more overt declaration of love is forthcoming.

It may have been Wilder's sense of propriety that prevented her from being more open (she was ever conscious, as she explains in a talk included in this edition, of the sensibilities of the young children who were her readers), or she may have been consciously using Laura to illustrate how the mores of the time tamed the wildness of youth. Whatever the reason, by the time the final book comes to a close, with Laura and Almanzo crossing the threshold of their new home on their wedding day, Laura's true thoughts and feelings are as mysterious as Ma's. The child in the Big Woods who was certain "it could never be a long time ago" is already a distant memory—but we know, too, that the "real" Laura Ingalls will be able to conjure her again, long after her own child has grown.

In real life, Laura and Almanzo were married for sixty-four years, until his death at age ninety-two (she died eight years later, at ninety). A novel-in-progress for adult readers about the early years of their marriage, *The First Four Years*, was published posthumously in 1971, but in its unpolished, draft-like state, it has few of the charms of the other books, and it only reinforces the notion that Wilder was disinclined to give readers of any age an intimate account of her adult life. Still, devoted fans will find it hard to resist—and each generation brings more of them, of us, wanting to hear more about what happened to little Laura Ingalls.

In a note on her manuscript for *The First Four Years*, Wilder wrote that an anecdote about going out into a snowstorm to protect her sheep from prowling wolves was "all true except that I heard the last howl just before I went out and did not go but why spoil a good story for truth's sake." Wilder's knack for storytelling served her readers well. So too did her way with truth: not just historical facts, though her books are a valuable witness to history, but the truths about being human, about growth and maturity, self-reliance and self-doubt, memory, sorrow, and joy, that make any work of literature endure. ■

Richard Alleva

Overstuffed

'PRISONERS'

Prisoners is a thriller about the infectiousness of sin. Its very first shot evokes the end of innocence: Pennsylvania woods under new-fallen snow, a young deer caught in a rifle's crosshairs, a man's voice murmuring the Lord's Prayer (and dwelling a bit on "forgive us our trespasses"), the sound of the shot, the deer's collapse, and a father congratulating his teenage son on his first kill.

Of course, it's not a sin, or even illegal, to kill a deer in season, and the father wasn't praying for forgiveness while instructing his son. That voice-over is a preview of anguish to come. In fact, Keller Dover (Hugh Jackman) regards hunting as part of a survivalist's curriculum. In his household, the most important thing is to "be ready" for whatever catastrophes await. And, like many of his ilk, Dover insists on meeting tragedy *his* way, which is not necessarily the law's way. When catastrophe does strike—the kidnapping of his little daughter and the daughter of his best friend—this devout patriot and truly loving father and husband tries to recover the children with methods that must outrage any person's sense of decency, including his own. In his fury and frustration he abducts the chief suspect (Paul Dano), a mentally retarded young man whom the police don't have enough evidence to hold. Dover takes him to an isolated abandoned house and subjects him to a torture that would result in death if taken an inch further. Dover prays for forgiveness even as he tortures, but the suspect only retreats within himself, admitting nothing. Infuriated by this silence, Dover keeps at it. A victim has become a victimizer. Infection.

When the other parents, Grace and Franklin Birch (played by Viola Davis and Terence Howard), are invited to be partners in the interrogation, they are repelled. Fully aware of how wrong this is but desperately clinging to any hope, they shamefacedly give Dover their tacit consent.

Sin of commission leads to sin of omission: while off chasing clues or inflicting pain, Dover is neglecting his wife (Maria Bello), who is prostrate with grief. The father leaves it to his son to keep the family together, but the teenager is unable to cope. Keller Dover, the great family man, is allowing his family to disintegrate while he pursues his self-righteous quest.

Aaron Guzikowski's script presents the chief investigator, a young detective called Loki (Jake Gyllenhaal), as the antithesis of Dover. Despite bearing the name of the Norse god of fire and mischief, Loki is neither inflammatory nor pernicious but a cop determined to crack the case by the book, with a little help from his own powers of imagination and empathy. Throughout the first half of the film, it's Loki's braininess and pertinacity that make at least modest progress on the case, not Dover's brutal methods. Aside from nabbing the initial suspect, the detective uncovers various facts that might lead to a solution if only he could discover a pattern in them: the testimony of a mother in a cold-case kidnapping, an alcoholic priest with a decaying body in his cellar, a second suspect who is burgling the homes of the victims and making strange drawings of labyrinths. But though Loki knows nothing about the torture, he does suspect that Dover is conducting a rival investigation, and this pushes him into employing a bit of Dover's vigilantism, with disastrous consequences. By now the original infection has produced a plague.

This story is so packed with incident that any ordinary director would probably stage Guzikowski's script at a hurtling pace. But director Denis Villeneuve—a young Canadian whose

Paul Dano & Jake Gyllenhaal in Prisoners

WARNER BROS. PICTURES

2011 *Indies* won an Oscar nomination—dared to make an adagio thriller that brings out the full moral weight of the screenplay without reducing suspense. Villeneuve includes details and sidelights that any director with a nervous eye on the box office would leave out. Soon after the kidnapping, we see Dover staring at his daughter's toothbrush placed among the rest of the family's, a banal object that suddenly suggests the shattering of domestic tranquility. Certainly, the director also has a handle on conventional cinematic tricks, but he takes them a step further. This is hardly the first movie to show panicked people dashing about in the rain in search of loved ones, but here the director depicts with exactitude how rain increases panic and fear by obscuring vision and impeding movement. Cinematographer Roger Deakins, working with subdued shades of blue and gray, infuses *Prisoners* with a sort of weighty dinginess that supports both its gravity and its suspense, while the incisive editing of Joel Cox and Gary D. Roach keeps viewers hooked for the whole ride despite the film's daringly slow rhythm.

Hugh Jackman roots Dover's rage in the intense love he feels for his family, so that even as we deplore the man's deeds we can't dismiss him. The role of detective Loki requires an actor who can use his face to communicate unspoken trains of thought—not an easy task even for good actors. (How often Jack Nicholson has lapsed into sheer mugging whenever a mental light bulb clicks on.) Jake Gyllenhaal succeeds admirably, and this enables the director to turn the movie's final shot—a close-up of Gyllenhaal having a revelation—into the snappiest visual punch line since Walter Matthau heard Martin Balsam's sneeze at the end of *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three*.

Maria Bello may be tired by now of playing hard-pressed mothers, but her work here betrays no jadedness. Viola Davis and Terrence Howard, as the Birches, make us understand how far desperation can drive decent people. And in the pivotal role of a suspect's guardian, Melissa Leo delivers her lines with a flinty evenness and a fixed gaze, risking monotony as daringly as she risked hamming it up in *The Fighter*. In both films the risks pay off.

Two flaws keep this very good movie from being the minor masterpiece it should have been. First: There's a reason the classic British mysteries of the '30s gathered suspects into the library for the detective's magisterial summation. That final clarity was the payoff for the reader's patience. Such a device would have been out of place in *Prisoners*, but the last twenty minutes of the film, which unload too many outré plot twists and bizarre (even demonic) explanations, make you long for lucid exposition.

Second, and more crucially: *Prisoners* kept reminding me of cable shows, such as *The Bridge*, *The Killing*, and *Broadchurch*, that press the detective-story format toward conclusions graver than anything Agatha Christie or even Raymond Chandler ever dreamt of. Like those cable shows, *Prisoners* portrays victims and detectives as though they are almost as morally blighted as the criminals. But multi-episode TV shows can afford to put the mere clue-hunting on hold for minutes, even hours, at a time in order to explore character. *Prisoners*, though two-and-a-half hours long, is too plotty to allow for such exploration, but one senses that its makers were yearning for it. If the film had been a cable series, certain questions probably would have been answered. Why is the relationship between Loki and his chief so poisonous? Why does the wife sob that she married Dover to feel protected? Protected from what? Why does Loki look so furtive when he's praised for an unbroken record of solved cases? I suspect that a lot of Guzikowski's cherished moments were left on the cutting room floor. Perhaps the DVD version will restore them. The big-screen version left me with the impression of a much too tightly wrapped package that kept spilling its often fascinating contents. ■

Leo J. O'Donovan

Old Masters, New Digs

THE MET REVAMPS ITS EUROPEAN PAINTINGS GALLERIES

For most visitors over the decades, the central allure of the Metropolitan Museum of Art has been its fabled collection of European paintings. Enthusiasts come repeatedly to see the Old Masters bequeathed to the museum by an array of collectors, including such mighty Manhattan names as Altman and Morgan, Wrightsman and Havemeyer (this last family donated nearly two thousand works to the Met). They come for the magic of the museum's five Vermeers and nineteen Rembrandts, for the finest collection of El Grecos outside Spain, the best French neoclassical painting outside France. And they come to admire such magnificent single purchases as Hendrick ter Brugghen's *Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John*; Velázquez's *Juan de Pareja*; Caravaggio's *Denial of Saint Peter*; and most recently, in 2004, Duccio's small but incomparable *Madonna and Child*.

As art critic Holland Cotter noted in the *New York Times*, the European galleries are the "raison d'être" of the Met—and yet it had been more than forty years since they were last redesigned, in 1972. After an extensive renovation and reinstallation, the galleries reopened in May. The collection now has fully one-third more space. Keith Christiansen, chair of the Department of European Painting, and his gifted team of curators have increased the number of paintings shown from four hundred fifty to more than seven hundred, spread throughout forty-five galleries. Many of those galleries have new floors and moldings; the walls are painted in elegantly subdued shades of gray, and lighting has been everywhere improved. The effect is to free these spectacular paintings from rooms we now remember as musty and drab.

Climb the Grand Staircase up from the Met's Great Hall, and wonders await you. As before, the high gallery with its towering Tiepolos—newly and stunningly lit—lures you on. But what follows possesses an entirely new grandeur and coherence. The long north-south gallery once filled with late-eighteenth-century French painting now has a bracing collection of Italian Baroque. Straight ahead unfolds a suite of galleries telling the story of Italian art from Duccio and Giotto through the full flowering of Renaissance Florence, culminating in a grand gallery of the sixteenth-century Venetians Titian, Tintoretto, and Veronese. If you turn to your left after the Tiepolo, an exquisitely orchestrated suite of seventeen galleries presents Dutch, Flemish, German, and English painting. Turn to your right, and a walk through seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Italian galleries leads you to the museum's masterpieces from France and Spain.

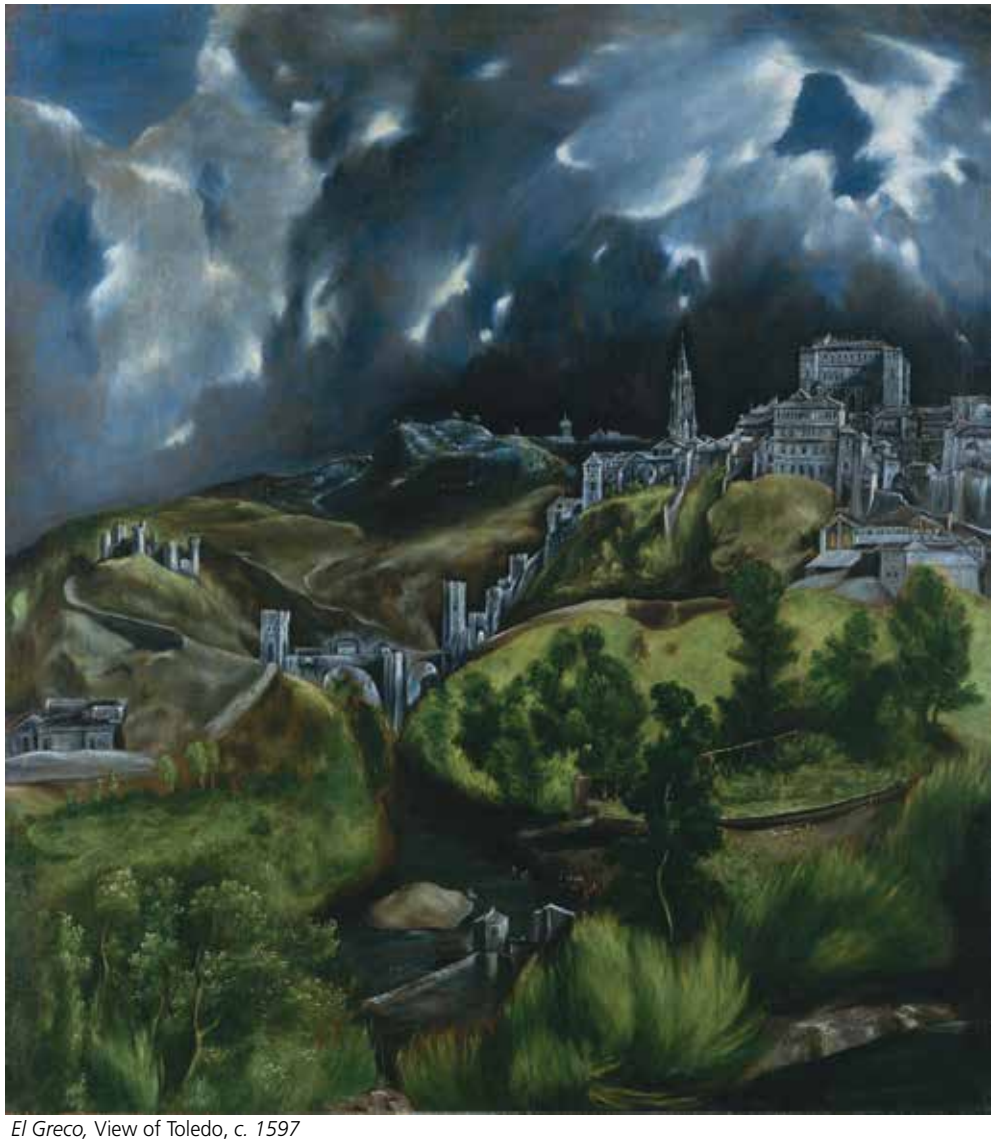
The effect of these works of art on a visitor is augmented by their ingenious presentation. Sculpture is adroitly introduced to enhance appreciation of a painting—like the two classicizing marble busts by Ippolito Buzio and Giuliano Finelli displayed in the Italian

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

Entrance to the Met's new European Paintings Galleries, 1250–1800

Baroque gallery. Several rooms bring a period alive through its domestic and decorative arts: a Florentine gallery with the ceremonial presentation tray created for Lorenzo de' Medici's birth, or a seventeenth-century Dutch gallery with embossed leather wall coverings and the celebrated Doomer cabinet.

The revelatory moments for the visitor are many. If you stand near the southern end of the Italian Baroque gallery, you can look to your right and see the Duccio (c. 1295–1300), encased in the center of the first gallery, and glimpse the Italian, Spanish, and Netherlandish altarpieces that follow. Straight ahead, at the beginning of the Northern Galleries, is Jan van Eyck's small diptych *The Crucifixion and the Last Judgment* (c. 1435–40), now taken from the wall and placed in a case in the center of the gallery. In the gallery just beyond is Memling's majestic *Annunciation* (1465–75), given space that newly reveals its splendor. Two galleries farther you find Joachim Patinir's *The Penitence of Saint Jerome* (c. 1518), catercorner to Pieter Bruegel the Elder's *The Harvesters* (1565). Where the Patinir is avowedly religious, with a fantastic landscape introduced behind its sacred scenes, the Bruegel is entirely secular, with peasants in place of saints and golden wheat as its sacrament. And so in one small gallery you witness the birth of landscape painting and then, just fifty years later, its emergence as the ground for a new humanism.



El Greco, View of Toledo, *c. 1597*

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, H. O. HAVEMEYER COLLECTION, BEQUEST OF MRS. H. O. HAVEMEYER, 1929

The next gallery continues this theme into the following century, with a splendid parade of landscapes by Jacob van Ruisdael, Meyndert Hobbema, Aelbert Cuyp, and others. The world shown here is charged with nature's meanings and moods, sublime in an entirely immanent sense. And what about the citizens of that world? In the jaw-dropping gallery that follows, we see how Rembrandt and Frans Hals portrayed them. The paintings fairly spring from the walls—Hals's *Portrait of a Man, Possibly Nicolaes Pietersz Duyst van Voorhout* (c. 1636–38), for example, in its elegantly simple new frame, or Rembrandt's *Man in Oriental Costume (The Noble Slav)* (1632) and *Aristotle with a Bust of Homer* (1653), which manages to infuse an academic convention with haunting mystery.

The opening of the new galleries is being celebrated with some exceptional loans, including Rubens's imposing *Commander Being Dressed for Battle* (1612–14) and Van Dyck's *Portrait of a Monk* (c. 1618). Just beyond Rubens and Van Dyck we enter the glories of sixteenth-century Venice, constituting the finale of the Italian Renaissance story. *Venus and Adonis* (c. 1545–46) and *Venus and the Lute Player* (c. 1565–70) by Titian are old favorites in the Met's collection, as is Veronese's *Mars and Venus United by Love* (1570s). But now Tintoretto's religious *Miracle of the Loaves and Fishes* (c. 1545–50) and secular *Portrait of a Man* (c. 1540) stand more proudly in that mythological company. And Jacopo Bassano's nocturnal *Baptism of Christ* (c. 1590), on loan and promised to the museum, adds a strikingly expressionistic note.

From here you can go back to where you started, at the Tiepolos, and follow the subtle sequence of galleries through Italian painting of the seventeenth and

Pieter Bruegel the Elder, The Harvesters, *1565*

eighteenth centuries, when Rome had become the Mecca for all artists. A gallery devoted to the Frenchman Claude Lorrain, the great seventeenth-century landscapist of Rome, leads you directly to his contemporary, the god of classical French painting, Nicolas Poussin, represented perhaps most typically by *The Abduction of the Sabine Women* (c. 1633–34), a tumult of opulent color and exquisitely orchestrated, counterposed forms. Poussin's eighteenth-century countrymen follow—Boucher, Fragonard, Watteau, Chardin—leading to a splendid gallery of neoclassical work and, further, to a striking presentation of French women artists.

You are now in the northwest corner of the galleries, with three rooms dedicated to Spanish painting and its many wonders. They come at you one after another. El Greco's *View of Toledo* (c. 1597), emblematic of the artist's mystical vision. Jusepe de Ribera's *Holy Family with Saints Anne and Catherine of Alexandra* (1648). The Shakespearean realism of Diego Velázquez's painting of his slave and servant, Juan de Pareja (c. 1650). Goya's beloved portrait of the little boy in red, *Manuel Osorio Manrique de Zuñiga* (1777–78).

How best to take in such all-but-inexhaustible grandeur? Christiansen, whose wit rivals his consummate scholarship, has suggested "beer tours" through the southern galleries, "Chianti and Frascati tours" through the Italians, and "Burgundy and Rioja tours" of the French and Spanish galleries. More seriously, he and his curatorial team have produced a lovely walking guide to all the museum's European paintings; it includes four tours of the new Old Master galleries and three for the nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century work.

You can follow any or all of these helpful tour suggestions. Or you may simply find yourself doing what most did on the opening night of the new galleries, when people wandered almost aimlessly, gasping at new sightlines, seeing favorite paintings now perfectly placed, getting a sense of what they would have to return many times to really see. The glory of the Met's new installation lies less in new acquisitions than in the way what is *not* new has been re-presented, so that you see it as if for the first time. You may come to feel, as many admiring visitors have, that you are discovering a whole new museum in New York. ■

Leo J. O'Donovan, SJ, *a frequent contributor, is president emeritus of Georgetown University.*

David M. Kennedy

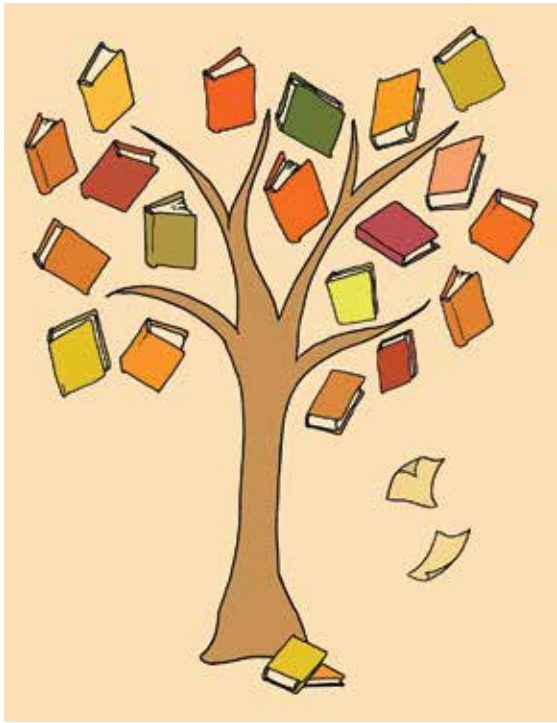
We Will Not Bleed

Breach of Trust
How Americans Failed Their Soldiers and Their Country
Andrew Bacevich
Metropolitan Books, $26, 256 pp.

A U.S. Army officer may or may not have said of the Vietnamese village of Ben Tre that "it became necessary to destroy the town to save it," but Andrew Bacevich clearly believes that a comparable atrocity was inflicted on the U.S. armed forces—and on the whole nation—in the post-Vietnam era. Specifically, in this brave and trenchant book he argues that the celebrated all-volunteer force (AVF) that came into being as the Vietnam War wound down in 1973 has turned out to be a disaster for service members and civil society alike. The AVF was hailed at its birth as a win-win blessing that would restore discipline in the demoralized and often openly mutinous ranks while simultaneously defanging antiwar protesters at home. But by extinguishing the venerable tradition of the citizen-soldier, says Bacevich, the AVF has dangerously decoupled the American people from wars fought in their name, breeding an enervating cycle of futile deployments in "needless, costly, and ill-managed wars."

A recent study by the Congressional Research Service finds that the forty years since 1973 have seen 144 military deployments, contrasted with just 19 deployments in the 27 post–World War II years of the Selective Service draft. That amounts to a fivefold increase in the rate of deployment since the advent of the AVF. Few if any of those post-1945 interventions—whether fought with draftees or volunteers— have produced unambiguous "victories." Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Somalia, and Afghanistan are but the most salient examples in a long series of armed undertakings that have whimpered to messy, unstable standoffs—or outright defeats—rather than decisive World War II–style triumphs.

The United States military has occupied a peculiar strategic situation since the end of World War II. It has prepared for, but not been obliged to wage, "grande guerre" against a comparably capable nation-state adversary on a scale requiring a Napoleonic "levée en masse." But neither has it been confined to the kind of frontier defense and constabulary duties that constituted the principal assignments for the nation's small pre-WWII regular force. Instead, and increasingly since the conclusion of the Cold War, it has relied on the technologically hyper-empowered AVF to pursue myriad "limited" missions that have often turned out to be open-ended and cruelly prolonged. Not conquest and victory, but occupation and nation-building have willy-nilly become the principal commitments that today's military is tasked to undertake. How did this happen?



SARAH BAUMANN

In a well-ordered world, a nation's military establishment would be sized, equipped, trained, and fielded to serve a coherent and deliberately crafted strategic doctrine. But the relation of strategy to force structure is a two-way street. In recent years the character and configuration of the American armed forces have themselves driven national security policy into what Bacevich calls "a sustained bout of strategic irrationality."

Today's force has several properties that have conduced to this troubling outcome. First, when measured against the scope of its responsibilities and the scale of American society, it is remarkably small. Its 1.4 million active duty members amount to less than .5 percent of the U.S. population (contrasted with more than 10 percent in WWII and 2 percent in Vietnam).

What's more, largely because it is composed of volunteers, the force is not representative of American society as a whole. African-Americans, for example, are significantly over-represented in the armed forces; they make up about 12 percent of the eighteen-to-forty-four-year-old civilian labor force, but 18.5 percent of the military. Hispanics, meanwhile, compose 17.1 per-

cent of the same labor force cohort, but are underrepresented at 12.8 percent of the military. Women account for just over half that civilian cohort, but only 14 percent of the military. And while 27 percent of civilians are registered Republicans, nearly 44 percent of the military are so registered, according to a 2012 *Military Times* poll. As Defense Secretary Robert Gates noted in 2010:

> [The] propensity to serve is most pronounced in the South and the Mountain West, and in rural areas and small towns nationwide—a propensity that well exceeds those communities' portion of the population as a whole. Concurrently, the percentage of the force from the Northeast, the West Coast, and major cities continues to decline. I am also struck by how many young troops I meet grew up in military families, and by the large number of our senior officers whose children are in uniform.

The force is not only small, unrepresentative, and worrisomely in-bred and self-perpetuating, as Gates noted; it is also surprisingly inexpensive. The Department of Defense budget of some $700 billion in 2012, while large in absolute terms, amounted to only 20 percent of federal expenditures and less than 5 percent of gross domestic product (GDP). For decades after World War II, military costs dominated federal spending and throughout much of the Cold War accounted for nearly 10 percent of GDP. The relatively lesser cost of the twenty-first-century force owes largely to the militarization of modern information and navigation technologies—culminating for the moment in drone weapons—that have hugely amplified the individual warrior's firepower, even while insulating fighting Americans from much of the mayhem of the battlefield.

Taken together, those developments have also increasingly insulated citizens—especially the most privileged and comfortable among them— from the military that ostensibly fights on their behalf. Here are the makings of a grievous moral hazard, tempting political leaders to treat military force as a first, not a last, resort because they can rest secure that the public to which they are ultimately accountable has little or no skin in the game.

The original architects of the AVF acknowledged the possibility that this sorry state of affairs might emerge, but peremptorily dismissed it. The President's Commission on an All-Volunteer Force, chaired by former Secretary of Defense Thomas S. Gates, said in its 1970 report:

> Critics argue that elimination of the draft will adversely affect our society or our armed forces. Their main objections are: (1) an all-volunteer force will become isolated from society and threaten civilian control; (2) isolation and alienation will erode civilian respect for the military and hence dilute its quality; (3) an all-volunteer force will be all-black or dominated by servicemen from low-income backgrounds; (4) an all-volunteer force will lead to a decline in patriotism or in popular concern about foreign policy; (5) an all-volunteer force will encourage military adventurism.

A sufficient safeguard against those prospects, the report contended, was to be found in Americans' "deeply rooted and widely held values" concerning civilian control of a well-regulated military. Piously citing Dwight Eisenhower's anodyne admonition in his famous Farewell Address that an "alert and knowledgeable citizenry" was all the defense needed to check the growth of a powerful military machine, the report summarily swept aside those objections to the all-volunteer force.

In fact, all the objections mentioned in the report have been borne out—save only the second, and there lies the deepest and most disturbing layer of Bacevich's argument.

At the heart of his critique are both an anomaly and a paradox. The anomaly is the military itself. It is virtually the only major American institution to have preserved—indeed, enhanced—its popularity and prestige in the eyes of the public since the great debunking of the 1960s led to the delegitimation of church, media, congress, courts, the presidency, professional athletes, popular entertainers, and almost all traditional sources of cultural authority. Guilt undoubtedly fuels much of the deference now commonly paid to military personnel, who shoulder burdens their fellow citizens assiduously shun. But whatever its sources, that deference invites unsettling comparison with other societies where all but the generals were shorn of respect.

The paradox is that just as the military ascends in public esteem and accommodates more and more civilian social norms (with respect to racial and

gender equality, sexual orientation, perhaps even the code of military justice), the less attention civil society pays to it and the more isolated it becomes.

As the subtitle of his book suggests, Bacevich attributes most of the blame for the civil-military divide not to the naïve or disingenuous designers of the AVF, nor even to the brass whose careers the AVF has so lavishly burnished. The chief culprit, in his view, is the American people, the delinquent guardians of those "deeply rooted and widely held values" that the Gates Commission invoked so cavalierly.

The reality, as Bacevich sees it, is that today's Americans have mutated into passive spectators, not active citizens, across a wide spectrum of once-sacred civic responsibilities. Though *Breach of Trust* is ostensibly a book about civil-military relations, beneath its surface smolders a scalding indictment of the entirety of contemporary American culture. At several points Bacevich's wrath erupts onto the page. His fellow citizens, he says, are "not victims but accessories." They have "abandoned collective obligation in favor of personal choice." Their "detachment, neglect, and inattention" is directly responsible for "the crisis in which the United States is mired." Marinated in consumerism and intoxicated by the distractions of mass entertainment, their once-robust civil religion has been reduced to three solipsistic precepts: "We will not change.... We will not pay.... We will not bleed."

In the fabled formulation of Pogo, we have met the enemy and they are us. It is we citizens who have most conspicuously failed our soldiers and our country. We have destroyed not only the tradition of the citizen-soldier, but perhaps the whole delicate fabric of civic membership, community responsibility, and social engagement. Who but we can save it? ■

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William A. Galston

The Limits of Candor

For Discrimination

Race, Affirmative Action, and the Law
Randall Kennedy
Pantheon, $25.95, 304 pp.

For Discrimination offers the bravest and most honest defense of affirmative action in a long time (maybe ever), and for that we are all in Randall Kennedy's debt. But his candor reveals how tough it will be to sell a forthright approach to the American people, to their representatives, and even to judges. This helps explain why so many defenders of affirmative action have resorted to euphemisms and evasion, a strategy Kennedy acknowledges but deplores.

It is best to start by allowing Kennedy to speak for himself. Here is what I take to be the heart of his argument:

> Surely one of the most influential defenders of affirmative action over the past decade has been Barack Obama. Acutely sensitive to charges that he supports racial favoritism that discriminates against whites, Obama defines affirmative action in a fashion meant to drain it of all controversiality. "Affirmative action programs," he writes, "when properly structured, can open up opportunities otherwise closed to minorities without diminishing opportunities for white students." But how can that be? If a campus or work site is at all constrained by scarcity, as all selective ones are, special efforts made on behalf of racial minorities will necessarily diminish opportunities for white, even if only minimally. Obama is simply obscuring the inescapable dilemmas that affirmative action poses.

What follows this critique of Obama is a passage that I suspect will be quoted often in the months and years to come:

> Racial affirmative action does distinguish between people on a racial basis. It does discriminate. It does redistribute resources. It does favor preferred racial categories of candidates, promoting some racial minorities over whites with superior records. It does generate stigma and resentment. These issues cannot usefully be hidden for long behind verbal tricks. To properly and decisively convince the public of the value of affirmative action, proponents will have to grapple candidly with its dilemmas.

Kennedy, a professor of law at Harvard, deplores today's reliance on diversity as the principal rationale for affirmative action. While he does not entirely reject this rationale, he quotes with evident approval a number of scholars who view it as a cloak for policies with less publicly acceptable purposes. From Kennedy's standpoint, the best and truest reasons for affirmative action are "remediation" for past wrongs and the attainment of "racial justice." Specific programs—including the use of race as a "plus" factor in higher education admission—should be judged as more or less effective means to those ends.

Kennedy endorses a view articulated earlier by W. E. B. Du Bois and Charles Hamilton Houston—it is the elite, the "talented tenth," that must serve as the "vanguard" for African-American advance. What matters most, then, is to maximize the entry of African Americans into elite institutions, starting with higher education. So unlike other defenders of affirmative action, he largely accepts law professor and affirmative-action critic Richard Sander's "mismatch" hypothesis—that many African Americans attending elite law schools would do better at lower-ranked institutions. Kennedy's retort is, So what? If the goal is racial uplift, better to have more African Americans at the best institutions, even if more of them end up in the bottom third of their class. The imprimatur from Yale or Harvard or Michigan, and the lifetime network that accompanies it, is worth more in the long run to the African-American community than a 3.8 GPA.

This claim invites a long and inevitably inconclusive argument as to the merits of competing strategies for fostering racial equality. But I want to set that aside and focus on another aspect of Kennedy's stance—namely, its real-world feasibility. Kennedy is hardly a political naïf. Following judge and former Yale Law School dean Guido Calabresi, he recognizes the limits of candor as a means to sound policy. Deliberate evasion can help root out "monstrous injustice." We should lament not the subterfuge but rather the circumstances that make it necessary.

So far, so good. But Kennedy goes on to blame the Supreme Court's "profoundly mistaken...jurisprudence" for pushing his preferred rationales for affirmative action outside the "pale of legitimacy." This has it backward, I believe: the Court adopted the diversity rationale for educational admissions because no other rationale would have succeeded. Time has validated Justice Lewis Powell's judgment, as his one-

W. E. B. Du Bois, circa 1911

ADDISON N. SCURLOCK

man opinion in *Bakke* (1978) became the basis for Sandra Day O'Connor's majority opinion in *Grutter* (2003) and (contrary to Kennedy's fears) survived its latest challenge in *Fisher v. University of Texas* (2013). We have been arguing about affirmative action for more than four decades. Though much has changed during this time, one thing has not: To the extent that affirmative action involves overt redistribution along racial lines, the American people have rejected it, and they continue to do so today.

The survey-based evidence for this generalization is substantial. In poll after poll, the people endorse the concept of affirmative action—as long as it expands opportunities for minorities at no or negligible cost to others. But once that line is crossed, support evaporates. Consider the programs at issue in *Grutter* and *Fisher*—the use of race as one factor among others in higher education admissions. A high-quality survey released in July 2013 asked respondents about this specific policy: "Do you think public universities should be allowed to use race as one of the factors in admissions to increase diversity in the student body, or not?" Only 21 percent answered yes, while 74 percent said no. And that negative sentiment included majorities of every subgroup—Democrats and Independents as well as Republicans; Catholics and Protestants; college graduates and high school dropouts; rich, poor, and middle class; men and women; and young adults as well as their parents and grandparents. Surprisingly, this result persisted even across racial and ethnic lines. Seventy-nine percent of whites rejected using race as a factor, but so did 62 percent of Latinos and 55 percent of African American.

We all can speculate about what is driving these results. My hypothesis focuses on two propositions long at the heart of our political culture: first, that policy should promote equality of opportunity, not equality of results; and second, that the appropriate metric is individual, not collective. Affirmative-action programs that overtly target race contradict both these propositions, and so does "racial justice" as Kennedy seems to understand it.

One might object, not unreasonably, that higher education is an opportunity, not a result. In the abstract, maybe so. But when the issue is admission to scarce slots in selective institutions, most people frame what's at stake as a result of talent and effort, not just as a gateway to something else. Elementary and secondary education, which every state constitution guarantees to all its children, is in a different category altogether.

If the Supreme Court had proceeded differently in 1978 (assuming it could have done so), would we be having a different conversation today? Kennedy seems sure that we would; I doubt it. Forty years ago, in a strongly worded decision, seven justices found that women in their first trimester have a constitutional right to choose abortion. We are still arguing about that holding, the battle lines hardened long ago, and public opinion has not shifted significantly since 1973. Yes, *Brown v. Board* effected a monumental change. But as Kennedy argues, it succeeded by abandoning candor in favor of a strategy of evasion aimed at "easing the way" to a historic ruling. Proponents of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, he shows, made a similar choice. For the most part, reformers prevail when they rest their case for policy change on premises the public already accepts.

The claims Kennedy prefers do not meet that test. I could make a moral, philosophical, even theological argument in their favor. But as a practical political strategy, adopting them would have ensured failure decades ago, and would do so today. Those who favor continuing affirmative action should be grateful that Congress and the Court followed a different course. ■

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James J. Sheehan

Buried Traumas

Franco's Crypt

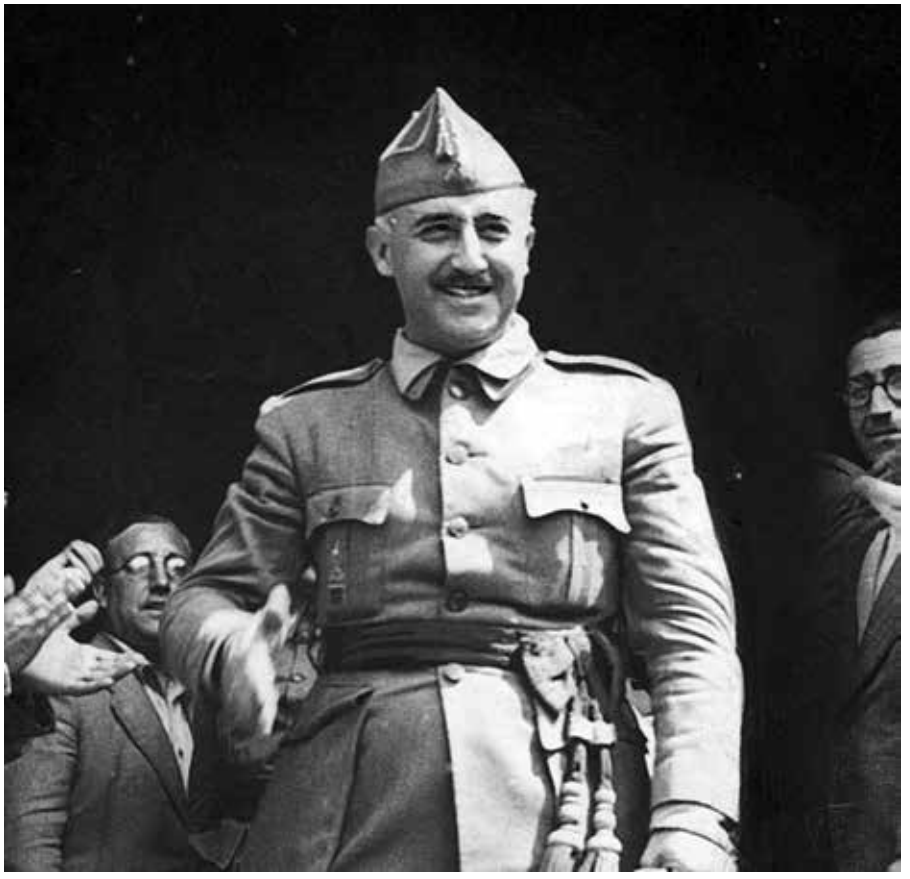
Spanish Culture and Memory since 1936

Jeremy Treglown

Farrar, Straus and Giroux, $27, 352 pp.

In February 1971, President Richard Nixon dispatched General Vernon Walters to pose a delicate question to Francisco Franco, who had ruled Spain since 1939. Walters, a gifted linguist and experienced soldier-diplomat, had accompanied Nixon on his official visit to Madrid the year before. This time he was supposed to ask Franco, seventy-eight years old and rumored to be ailing, what was going to happen after his death. Franco guessed Walters's purpose immediately and assured him that plans for a smooth transition were in place. Prince Juan Carlos, whom he had carefully groomed to be his successor, would become king and ensure that there would not be a return to the political violence that had plagued Spanish public life throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Franco would be gone, but the regime that he had so carefully constructed would remain. America's strategic interests in the western Mediterranean were secure.

Increasingly frail and out of touch, Franco lived another four years, finally succumbing to a combination of maladies in November 1975. As planned, Juan Carlos became king. However, contrary to what Franco had expected and desired, the young monarch presided over a relatively swift and remarkably peaceful transition to parliamentary democracy. Together with the similar and simultaneous establishment of democratic governments in Portugal and Greece, Spain's transformation from dictatorship to democracy was a historic accomplishment, which was perhaps insufficiently noticed by Americans, who were distracted by the Nixon presidency's dramatic disintegration and the Vietnam War's final agonies.



Francisco Franco in 1936

The key to the peaceful transition in Spain—in fact an essential element in every nonviolent transfer of power—was the willingness of the potential winners not to take revenge on the losers. In order for Franco's supporters to yield without a fight, they had to be confident that there would be nothing like the murderous bloodbath that had followed Franco's own victory in the civil war. Inspiring this confidence was Juan Carlos's major contribution: among his first acts were a series of decrees granting amnesty to the regime's opponents; at the same time, he insisted that the interests of the armed forces (always the keystone of Franco's power) would be protected. In October 1977, the first democratically elected parliament passed a comprehensive law granting amnesty to those who might have committed crimes for or against Franco's government, in other words to both the winners and the losers of the civil war.

Amnesty, while a necessary lubricant of peaceful change, did not make the painful memories of the civil war and its aftermath go away. The victims of the regime—or, more often, their children and grandchildren—now demanded, if not revenge, then at least recognition. Long silenced, they wanted the facts about their suffering to be heard and acknowledged. Not surprisingly, they regarded the symbolic residues of Francoism, especially the thousands of statues and monuments that had been erected during his long reign, as provocative reminders of what they and their compatriots had endured. Franco's victims found political support from those left-wing parties that saw themselves as the heirs of the country's Republican tradition. In 2007, the Social Democratic government of José Luis

Zapatero passed the "Law of Historical Memory," which required local authorities to assist people who want information about what they or their relatives suffered and called for the removal of monuments from the Franco era that did not have redeeming historical or aesthetic value. None of this turned out to be easy and straightforward. Zapatero himself personifies the complexity of Spanish memory: one of his grandfathers, whose career he often cites, was killed by Franco's supporters; the other, whom he rarely mentions, fought on Franco's side.

Franco's Crypt begins with the description of a literal attempt to uncover the past, the excavations in a cemetery near Málaga, where, between 1936 and 1955, more than four thousand people were summarily executed and buried in mass graves. Scattered throughout Spain are similar sites, where agents of the regime killed its opponents or, as often occurs in such violent times, those who just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Among them were the fifteen young women whose bodies were found in an oak forest near Ronda in 2008, killed for reasons nobody knows or cares to remember.

Franco's own final resting place is as far away from these unmarked graves as one can possibly imagine. His tomb is near the altar of the basilica in the Valley of the Fallen, the immense shrine to those who died on the winning side that Franco constructed between 1940 and 1959 on three thousand acres not far from Madrid. The Valley of the Fallen is the largest and most problematic of Franco's commemorative projects; it received a long section of its own in the 2007 "Law of Historical Memory." For a time, the Zapatero government closed it to the public, but it was reopened by his conservative successor and remains the subject of an ongoing debate about how—or whether—it can be made into a shrine commemorating all the war's victims. In addition to a long and sensitive description of this monumentally creepy site, Treglown provides accounts of several other memorials and monuments, including the great equestrian statue of Franco that once stood in the center of El Ferrol, his birthplace, before being moved to the relative obscurity of a nearby museum.

In his conclusion, Treglown suggests that now, almost four decades after Franco's death, what the Spanish call *musealización* is underway everywhere; more and more relics of the past find their way into museums, where they can be both preserved and politically neutralized. An up-to-date example of this process is the popular Spanish video game "Shadows of War," in which as many as fourteen players can refight the battles of the civil war. ("Remember," the competitors are told, "Spain's destiny is in your hands.") Perhaps the most remarkable example of *musealización* is the phenomenally successful television series significantly titled *Cuéntame cómo pasó* ("Tell me how it was"), which is now in its fourteenth season. *Cuéntame* follows the complex lives of a middle-class family in a Madrid suburb from 1968, when the story begins, as they navigate the decline and fall of Franco and the creation of a new Spain. For those with some Spanish (and a great deal of time), all 253 episodes are available online (www.rtve.es/television/cuentame).

Somewhat uneasily coexisting with Treglown's description of the changing role of historical memory is a more general survey of Spanish culture since 1936. As Treglown makes clear, the Franco regime was culturally richer and more productive than many people assume. Franco imposed limits on writers and filmmakers, but he did not completely stifle creativity. Films such as Luis Garcia Berlanga's wistful 1952 comedy *Bienvenido, Mister Marshall* (*Welcome, Mr. Marshall*) and the novels of Camilo José Cela, who won the Nobel Prize in 1989, managed to convey a complex picture of Spanish society without provoking the wrath of the regime.

Jeremy Treglown is an accomplished editor and literary critic, who has published three splendid biographies, including the definitive study of the great (and now, alas, neglected) English man

of letters V. S. Prichett. Treglown, following Prichett's example, spends part of each year in Spain. He approaches his subject with the affectionate enthusiasm of an outsider—curious, well-informed, but not deeply entangled in the political struggles he describes with admirable evenhandedness. There are times, especially in the last third of the book, when *Franco's Crypt* devolves into a series of plot summaries and rather routine capsule biographies. But at his best, Treglown raises some important questions about historical memory and introduces readers to a number of neglected writers and filmmakers. Those who want to know more about Spain's troubled past and challenging present will find a great deal of useful and interesting material in this book.

Between 1936 and '39, many contemporaries saw Spain as the place in which the century's first great battle between democracy and fascism was being fought. "On that arid square, that fragment nipped off from hot Africa," W. H. Auden wrote in his poem "Spain" in 1937, "Our fever's menacing shapes are precise and alive." In 2013, Spain, with its faltering economy, soaring unemployment (especially among young people), scandal-ridden government, and increasingly intense regional rivalries, once again seems like the place where the menacing shapes of Europe's fevers are vividly apparent. European economic and political institutions might survive the collapse of Greece or Ireland or Portugal; it is not clear that they could survive the collapse of Spain. If Spain's leaders and their European partners cannot find a way out of the current economic and political crisis, then the entire European project is at risk. The result will not be a return to the ideological struggles of the thirties, but it will be far different from the peaceful and prosperous Europe that Spaniards thought they would inhabit after the demise of Franco and his regime. ■

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William H. Pritchard

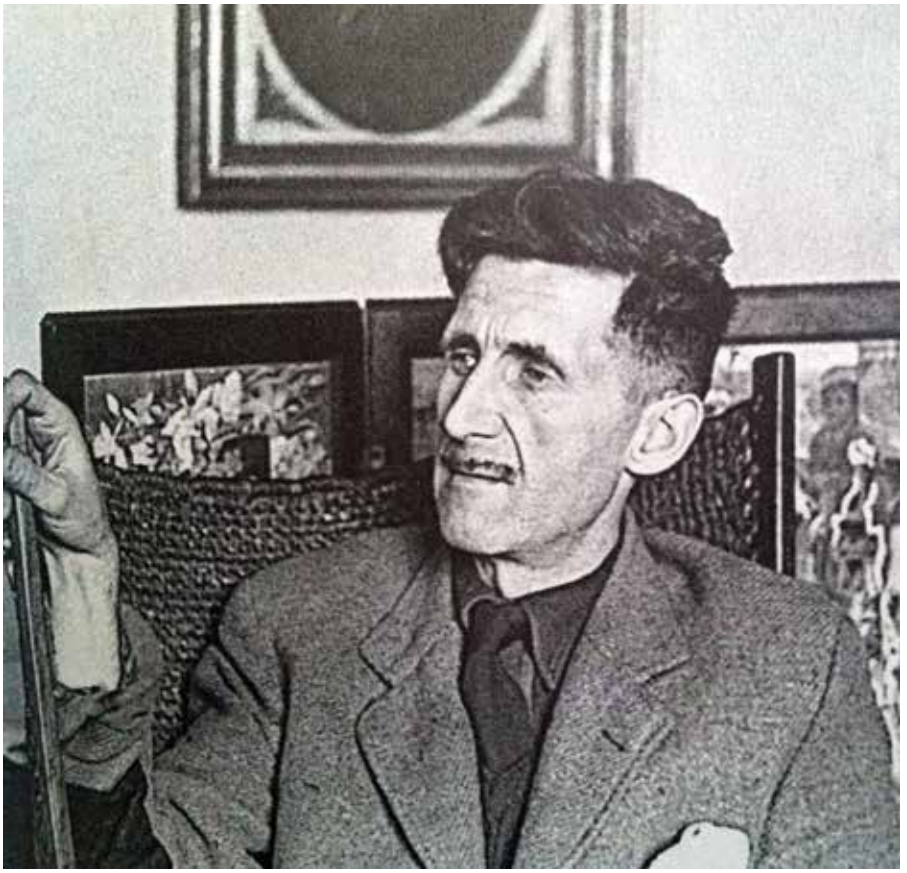
Fleeing from Triumph

George Orwell
A Life in Letters
Edited by Peter Davison
Norton/Liveright Publishing, $35, 560 pp.

Probably the most astonishing feat of editing a notable literary figure from the last century is Peter Davison's edition of George Orwell's works. Completed in 1998, its twenty volumes run to nine thousand pages; eight volumes contain his novels, with the remainder made up of essays, reviews, and letters. From the roughly seventeen hundred letters Orwell wrote, Davison has now made a generous selection, annotated with insight and without pedantry, presented in a volume that will go some way, he hopes, toward "offering the autobiography that Orwell did not write."

The tale told by these letters, especially in their latter stages, is a gripping one. Orwell died of tuberculosis in a London hospital in 1950 at age forty-six, just after the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the novel that would make him famous. "He fled from triumph," remarked one of his biographers, and the last triumph he managed to avoid was a book that would never thereafter be out of print. Short of cash for most of his life, at his death he possessed the equivalent, in today's currency, of 250,000 pounds.

One of the many virtues of this selection is its inclusion of a number of letters by Orwell's wife Eileen O'Shaughnessy, who, in a horrible mischance, died in 1945 at thirty-nine while under anesthesia for a hysterectomy. While Orwell



VERNON RICHARDS

Orwell in 1946

only occasionally fashions a good piece of wit in his letters—as when, apropos of a book about human knowledge by Bertrand Russell, he declares it "the sort of thing that makes me feel that philosophy should be forbidden by law"—Eileen's letters, whether to her husband or to her friends, are often delightful, with plenty of spirited energy and irony. She is good on the frequent absurdities of their married life, especially during the years they occupied a rustic cottage in a town called Wallington. Not long after they were married, she wrote to a friend that her husband "has just come in to say that the light is out (he had the Aladdin lamp because he was working) and is there any oil (such a question)...and he is hungry and wants some cocoa and some biscuits and it is after midnight and Marx [the dog] is eating a bone and has left pieces in each chair and which shall he sit on now." In another letter to the same friend Eileen notes quarreling bitterly with Orwell after he complained—when they'd been married one week—that "he'd done only two good days' work out of seven."

The selection of letters begins more or less in 1934, the year Orwell published his first novel, *Burmese Days*. After some years in the public service in Burma, he turned to reporting on drudgery in a Paris restaurant kitchen and the vicissitudes of picking hops in England: the result was his on-the-spot book of observations *Down and Out in Paris and London*. It would be followed by an account of the life of coal miners in England's North (*The Road to Wigan Pier*) and of serving in the Spanish Civil War in a volunteer brigade (*Homage to Catalonia*). His literary efforts from the mid-1930s, *A Clergyman's Daughter* and *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*, were not very successful (he would later disparage them), but he also wrote memorable essay-vignettes like "A Hanging" and "Shooting an Elephant." These items have been written about extensively in books about Orwell, and the letters provide little in the way of further revelations. What they do get across is the single-mindedness

of Orwell's commitment not only to being a writer, but one with a political purpose—"a desire," he confessed in a late essay titled "Why I Write," "to push the world in a certain direction, to alter other people's ideas of the kind of society they should strive after."

During World War II, his insistence on being such a writer led him to spend two years at the BBC, where he wrote 105 English-language newsletters for India (he later decided they were a waste of time). He came to believe that he wasn't really a novelist, and he would not find his true fictional voice until *Animal Farm* in 1945. His most human, nonwriterly self is shown in his love and concern for Richard, the child he and Eileen adopted in 1944, just about a year before she died. After her death he approached more than one woman, proposing marriage: "I have hundreds of friends but no woman who takes an interest in me and can encourage me," he wrote rather pathetically to one of them, asking whether she would like to be "the widow of a literary man." The recipient, Anne Popham, had no interest in such an arrangement, and not until he was close to death did he marry Sonia Brownell in his hospital room at University College Hospital in London.

The novelist Anthony Powell, who visited Orwell in the hospital, wrote some shrewd pages about him in his memoirs, *To Keep the Ball Rolling*. Powell, adducing Orwell's severe, ascetic attitude toward life, suggested that he could thrive only in "comparative adversity." Another friend from his later years, Julian Symons, recalls regular wartime lunches with Orwell, Powell, and Malcolm Muggeridge. Rationing had made the food choices rather limited and less than delectable, but Symons remembers Orwell ordering some synthetic concoction called the Victory Pie and declaring without irony upon finishing it, "You can't do better than this."

A number of these letters disclose Orwell's literary preferences and loyalties. One of his favorite English novelists was George Gissing, whose dark chronicles of adversity and poverty in London and elsewhere struck a chord; believing that Gissing had never had his due, Orwell wrote an essay on behalf of the novels. In the same letter where he announces his plans to write such an essay, he says that he has been having another try at Henry James, but simply doesn't care much for him. His great essay on Dickens is a classic; but less well known is a letter, written near the end of his life, containing a couple of astute paragraphs on Joseph Conrad (on whom he also hoped to write an essay) calling him "one of the best writers in the century." He picks out *The Secret Agent, Under Western Eyes, Nostromo*, and *Victory* as Conrad's best work; about *Lord Jim* he complains that no one "could possibly talk like this or at such length."

The Conrad essay, as well as one he wanted to write on Evelyn Waugh, was not to be, nor was a plan to go to Switzerland in hopes of improving his declining health. Orwell was a very sick man by the time he finished rewriting and typing *Nineteen Eighty-Four*—much of the work done in bed and, as Davison points out, with a mechanical typewriter and the accompanying carbon copies. Rereading *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, as I have just done, with the picture of a desperately ill man behind the words, has increased my admiration for that strong, imperfect, painful novel. He died, our editor notes, with "his beloved fishing rods standing in the corner of his hospital room." Malcolm Muggeridge arranged for a funeral, not a memorial "celebration of a life" as today's jargon has it. Rather than choosing to be cremated, which one might expect to have been his no-nonsense choice, he was buried, his headstone reading—with his given name, rather than his literary one—"Here lies Eric Blair," and the dates of his birth and death. To the end and after he remained nothing if not an individual, fleeing from triumph. ■

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Gabriel Brownstein

What Child Is This?

The Childhood of Jesus

J. M. Coetzee
Viking, $26.95, 277 pp.

Over the summer, my local bookseller was reading through the advance galleys that had shown up at her store. After going through several much-hyped novels scheduled for fall release, she came upon *The Childhood of Jesus*, the new novel by J. M. Coetzee, and she told me that she found herself immediately in a different order of art—of philosophical inquiry and linguistic power.

Around 2003 I had a similar experience, when a number of major authors came out with books about professors facing sexual harassment suits. Coetzee's *Disgrace* was so stark, brave, beautiful, and trenchant that the others seemed unserious by comparison. Is he the most stylistically rigorous and morally penetrating writer at work in the English language? To answer yes is to say nothing controversial. The only strike I've ever heard called against Coetzee is that he's not very amusing.

The Childhood of Jesus is a strange book, engaging but inscrutable, provocative but obscure. An old man and a young boy disembark in a new country, Novilla. In a refugee camp they have learned Spanish, the language of their new country, and they have been given new names, David for the boy and Simón for the old man. On the boat from the refugee camp to Novilla, the boy has lost a letter that states his identity, and the old man has taken the boy on, in a quest to find the boy's lost mother.

In the new country, David and Simón encounter at first goodwill but little passion. The food is bland, bean paste and bread. The people advise Simón and David to start life anew, "washed clean" of their old histories and memories. Conversation is abstract and distant. Simón "searches for the irony, but there is none, as there is no salt." Everything is stupidly well ordered. Even the brothels offer their patrons a mass of paperwork. Is this some kind of dystopian afterlife? The dialogue is full of teasing suggestions. "Once you are dead you are dead," Simón tells David. "The body doesn't come back to life. Only the soul lives on."

Action unfolds with a dreamlike, Kafkaesque absurdity. Despite his age, Simón finds work as a stevedore, unloading and carrying sacks of grain on his back, helping load them onto a horse-drawn cart, where they are brought to a warehouse filled with mold and rats. His coworkers philosophize about the nature of work, and the nature of history, and the substance of reality. "The spirit of the agora," says the foreman, Álvaro. Simón never finds David's mother, but one day, in a walk through the woods, he and David see Inés, a beautiful woman playing tennis with her two handsome brothers. Impulsively, Simón, who has theretofore been a fierce and loyal guardian of David, hands the boy off to her. Inés becomes David's mother, and there are disastrous results.

She has a fierce dog who scares Simón. Her brothers, too, are intimidating. She puts the six-year-old David in a stroller. He starts to suck his thumb. He fails in school. The state wants to take the child from her, but Simón and Inés join forces to protect the boy. There is an escape and chase into the countryside. But nothing in the book is what it seems—they aren't his real parents, they haven't taken good care of him, maybe the authorities mean the best for the boy.

Any reader paying attention will be awed by Coetzee's skill. His characters are sketched with quick strokes and embody wild contradictions, yet they come dramatically to life. All we know about

Inés, for instance, is that she is thirty-five, virginal, has beautiful breasts, those sneering brothers, and that scary dog. She is at first uninterested in David, then wildly over-protective, and then clear-eyed and fearsome. The boy is similarly enigmatic. He learns chess, but he cannot add. He writes nonsensically, but teaches himself to read from a child's version of *Don Quixote*. Is he an exceptional child or an ordinary six-year-old boy? David talks about raising the dead, but he also talks about becoming a knight and a magician. There is little if any physical description of his body, but there he is, the focal point around which the adventure so effectively revolves.

Dialogue regularly moves toward the epistemological. "What is human nature?" asks one character. Another wonders, "Can good will by itself satisfy our needs?" Back at the docks, one young stevedore takes a turn:

> "Consider now history. If history, like climate, were a higher reality, then history would have manifestations which we would be able to feel through our senses. But where are these manifestations?" He looks around. "Which of us has ever had his cap blown off by history?" There is silence. "No one. Because history has no manifestations. Because history is not real. Because history is just a made-up story."

These conversations seem depthless; they can be read as a commentary on the story, or on the nature of reality, or on the function of dialogue in fiction. Miraculously, Coetzee carries off this Socratic chitchat without any sign of artifice or strain.

The whole book is like an illusion, a bit of prestidigitation. What is real here? What is this about? The characters speak in fluent English, but we are told that they are struggling with their Spanish. When four German lines of Goethe appear, Simón says he doesn't know what they mean, because "I don't speak English." Novilla itself seems to change: in this land that at first seemed so dispassionate, violence erupts, and excitement. We meet a sinister villain named Daga with an earring, a knife, and a flask of firewater.

At one point, after some philosophizing, Simón asks a young stevedore whether he has worked out what the real nature of a chair is. "It is meant as a joke," goes the narration, "but the young men stare at him blankly." And I found myself in sympathy with the baffled young stevedores—is this how we're supposed to take *The Childhood of Jesus*, as an erudite joke, a wicked game of narrative and allegory? In his autobiographical novel *Youth*, Coetzee writes of reading Samuel Beckett's novels and rolling about in his bed, laughing. So is he funning us? Is this how the old man cuts loose?

His greatest works—*Disgrace, The Life and Times of Michael K.*, and *Waiting for the Barbarians*—have all partaken in allegory, and his characters have ever commented on their own construction. In *Michael K.*, one says of the novel's story, "It was an allegory—speaking at the highest level—of how scandalously, how outrageously a meaning can take up residence in a system without becoming a term in it." But allegory in those great works was knitted to history: the systems were tyrannical, the meanings humane, the novels alchemical mixtures of horror and beauty, the ideal and the real. Even the long essayistic arguments in *Elizabeth Costello* revolved around violence to the flesh—violence to animals and to humans. But if there is anything solid at the bottom of *The Childhood of Jesus*, I can't grasp it. The title itself is a tease. What has any of it to do with Jesus?

Here's a stab at it: Maybe the title is more play with allegory, naming, meanings, and terms. Toward the end of the book, there's a suggestion that David is going to take on a new name. I'm going to venture that the new name will be "Jesus," pronounced in Novilla's Spanish, more like the baseball player Jesus Alou than Jesus Christ, and (if my reading is correct) then, yes, what I read was the story of the childhood of Jesus, just not the Jesus I'd had in mind.

Ha ha ha? ■

Gabriel Brownstein *is an associate professor of English at St. John's in Queens. His short story collection,* The Curious Case of Benjamin Button, Apt. 3W *(Norton) won the PEN/Hemingway Award in 2002. His novel* The Man from Beyond *(Norton) was a* New York Times Book Review *Editor's Choice in 2005.*

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stronger. I find the nonstop preoccupation with "those out to get the Catholic Church" harmful to the church. Many read it as paranoia or as an un-Christian and unhealthy focus on the self, the opposite of what evangelizes and attracts others, such as the church's outreach to the poor and suffering.)

Third, his understanding of how the bishops' fight against same-sex marriage is ineffective and harms the church at this point in time. (Pope Francis's interview may help the bishops let go of this.)

Fourth, his openness to the possibility that something good, even if "small," might come of same-sex marriage. I especially like this point because it allows experience—what same-sex couples make of their marriages and family life as the public perceives them—into the church's and society's assessments of how "good" the practice is or isn't. (Bottum does not mention the thousands of same-sex couples and families in the United States and in other countries that should be factored into the moral discernment process.)

Fifth, his insistence on a need for theological coherence among Catholics regarding moral questions. I am no Aquinas scholar, but I appreciate the space Bottum finds in Aquinas's writings on marriage (he mentions an openness to polygamy) and his awareness that such a space possibly could be opened to include same-sex marriage.

Finally, his inclusion of Pope Francis's restatement of Catholic teaching on marriage, defined as between "a man and a woman." This definition is, in my view, what could and should be opened up to include others. I won't try to mount any argument for that here, but will express appreciation for the author's putting his finger on the most critical theological point. That isn't as obvious as it sounds. Many critics of same-sex marriage go straight to the physical inability of same-sex couples to procreate "naturally" without a donor sperm or womb. Proponents point out that the church marries couples who cannot conceive children—those over the age of fifty, for example—and that same-sex couples have already shown their ability to be loving, faith-filled parents. More theological reflection is needed on the generative character of marital love, in ways other than the conception of children.

Far from wishing to injure the Catholic Church, I look forward to the day when its theologians will make the case that God's love is reflected in same-sex marriages too. And that those whose first marriages fail can find a way to acknowledge that failure and try again to make an "indissoluble" bond.

KAREN SUE SMITH
New York, N.Y.

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High Notes

Joe Schultz

Few things concentrate the mind like the unexpected music of a celestial choir. It certainly brought me up short, midstride on the trail along the South Branch of the Au Sable River, fly rod in hand, listening over the murmur of the water and the sounds of the woods. It was the kind of glorious afternoon that can follow a cloudless, cold October night in northern Michigan, brilliant and clear. No doubt about it. There was the trout stream. These were the woods. And that was a hymn where no hymn should be.

But as soon as I remembered where I was, I knew exactly where that unseen choir stood. The South Branch runs for miles through a section of land given by one George Mason to the people of Michigan on condition that it remain undeveloped, and the Mason Tract is a place of solitude and understated beauty. The only man-made structure along that part of the river is a small chapel, which Mason had built on a high bank above a trouty stretch of water about halfway in. It is a spartan affair of wood and stone, open to the weather, a landmark for anglers and canoeists, and I was maybe seventy-five yards downwind of it, across the stream and on the other side of a thick screen of cedar and pine.

Over nearly forty years I've clambered up the bank to the chapel many times, and waded past it countless more, but only on a handful of occasions have I encountered anyone else there, and never anyone using it for its ostensible purpose. Until that afternoon. I listened as the hymn ended. There was a brief silence, broken by a man's voice saying something I couldn't make out, then laughter, then more silence, then they began again. A service, or maybe someone had had the inspiration to move practice out of doors on such a day.

I stayed on my side of the water and after another moment continued upstream; the trout were calling, and anyway some things are better not prolonged. Back at the car later with sandwiches and beer, I told my brother and sister about the choir and we laughed at the sheer perfection of it. Another good day on the river.

A Jesuit friend who has heard stories of trips to the Au Sable and other rivers for a long time sometimes observes that trout fishing has a prayerful aspect. It's an idea that might not seem obvious to anyone familiar with the attitude of an angler who's just missed a nice fish. What my friend has in mind is nothing pious, certainly nothing allegorical, but rather the discipline of paying attention—not in a formal manner, but deliberately nonetheless. Anyone who's waded very deep into it knows that simply paying attention is pretty much the entire art of trout fishing, and once you start down that path it is rash to predict where you will come out. For "the world is charged with the grandeur of God," as my friend's brother Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins wrote. "It will flame out, like shining from shook foil."

In the couple of years since, the fish I caught on that trip have been forgotten, as have most of the equally good moments between fish. But I do sometimes find myself thinking back on that choir, and then other lines from Hopkins come to mind. He is a poet I like for many reasons, not least because I suspect that anyone who gave thanks in verse "for rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim" must also have known and loved a stream somewhere.

As my Jesuit friend might say, what is true and even quite blindingly obvious on a glorious October afternoon below the chapel on the South Branch is true, period, if usually not so plain or so pleasant to recognize. And so I like to remember more of Hopkins's litany of praise that begins, "Glory be to God for dappled things." Among them: "Fresh-firecoal chestnut-falls; finches' wings; / Landscape plotted and pieced—fold, fallow, and plough / And áll trádes, their gear and tackle and trim. / All things counter, original, spare, strange…" It's good discipline.

What was the hymn I heard that day? "How Great Thou Art." What else? ■

Joe Schultz *lives in Maryland.*

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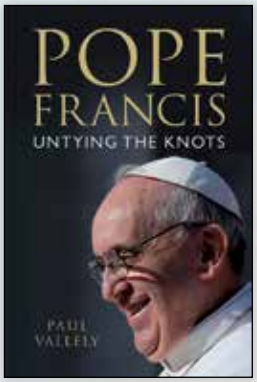

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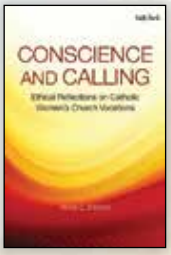

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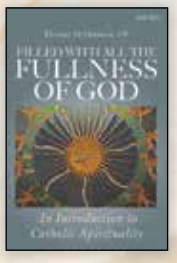

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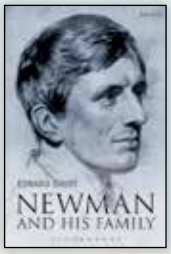

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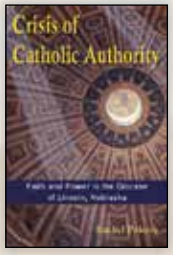

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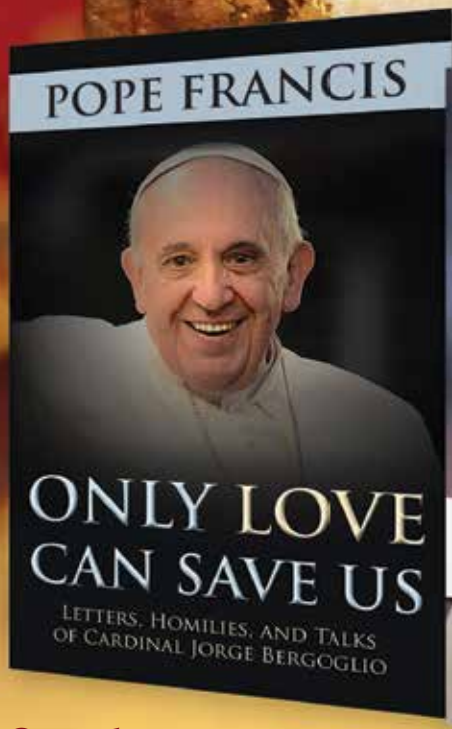

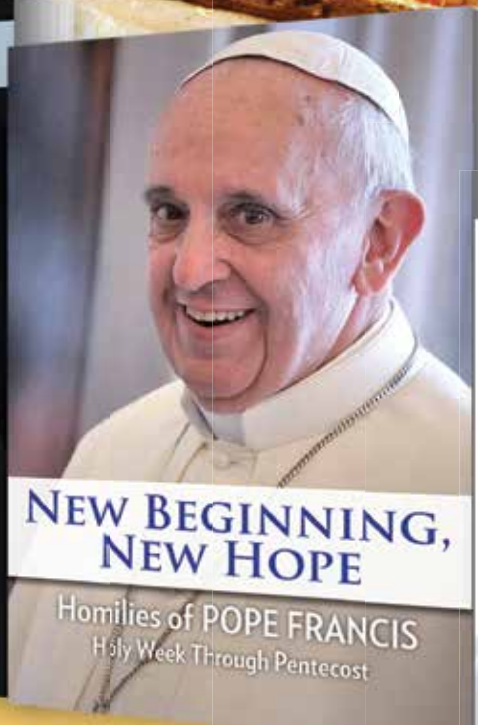

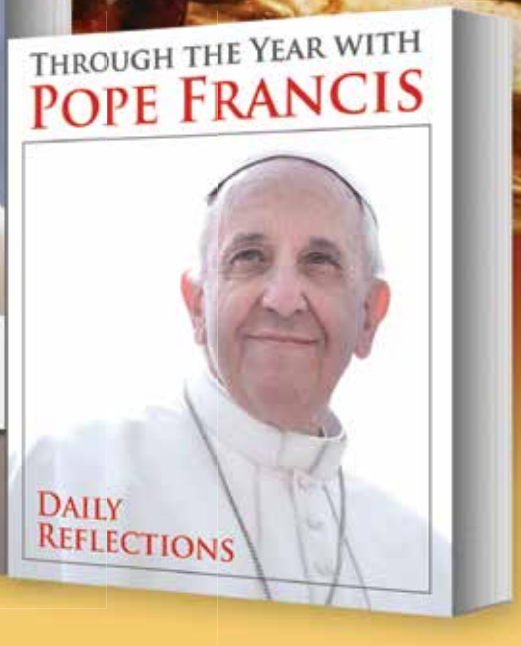

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