

A Wider Angle: American

Fiction at the Periphery

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Preface

During what I now think of as the “blog era” (say, 2004-2010), a relatively common defense of literary blogging was that this form of literary commentary fostered a more expansive kind of coverage of books and writing—expanded beyond the usual practices of literary journalism as then represented in the “mainstream media.” This meant that mostly unknown writers and obscure presses might get more attention than they were afforded in that media, giving us a wider angle on the actual practices of writers and publishers than did the narrow focus on the establishment “book business” offered by the then-dominant print publications.

Whether or not the “blogosphere,” or the more professionalized online publications it eventually fostered, actually made good on this implicit promise may be arguable (to say the least), but in the case of my own blog, *The Reading Experience*, I did in fact make an effort to look beyond the major publishers’ seasonal lists to out-of-the-way presses and lesser-known writers, a practice reflected in the selection of reviews included in this volume, reviews that appeared both at TRE and in various other online journals that similarly make room for the consideration of debut writers or unheralded presses. Although often enough these reviews do foreground their subjects’ origin outside the New York publishing world, otherwise they attempt to assess the book at hand according to common standards, the same standards I would apply to “name” writers. By this measure, while some of the books I considered displayed evident enough flaws and limitations, many of them, often from the tiniest of presses, seemed easily as good as the books receiving the most frequent notices from the mainstream literary press.

However, precisely because these books don’t actually require critical apologies on behalf of their very existence, I don’t in the discussions of them emphasize aesthetic judgment so much as simply describe the aesthetic moves being made and situate the work in what seems to be its proper context, whether in the longer perspective of literary history or the more immediate circumstances influencing current practices among other writers. The overlapping assumptions and observable tendencies of the latter are particularly highlighted in the organization of the reviews in this volume, which tries through the use of headings to group the selections according to shared focus, sometimes expressed through an illustrative conceit. Presenting the reviews chronologically, as a kind of record of my ongoing encounters with indy lit, was an option I

considered in collecting them, but instead I have used this clustering approach, partly because it creates the kind of echoing effect I have described, but also because it more directly facilitates an emphasis on the way these books illuminate the direction American fiction has taken over the past 15 years, regardless of the prestige of their publisher. .

Alternative Publishing

Brian Ames's stories are reminiscent of both Hemingway and Raymond Carver, but where Hemingway's characters are stoically going about the business of living up to their own self-images of masculinity, and Carver's characters struggle to live with their failures as men, Ames's male protagonists in *Eighty-Sixed* (Word Riot Press) are, if not exactly "hapless," as the book's subtitle has it, comically unable to recognize their failures even while they're enduring them.

"Ajax the God" concerns a former major league baseball player whose career bursts quickly into success—a no-hitter in his second season—only to then fizzle even faster. The story follows him on a post-career elk hunt (an activity that figures into several of the stories in *Eighty-Sixed*), during which he thinks back on the important stages of his life as a baseball player, but he seems mostly puzzled by it all, not anguished, or even regretful. The protagonist of "This Organization Must Keep Iowa's Roads Open" is the operator of a snow plow whose rig is hijacked by a truly hapless thief who has just robbed a convenience store in the middle of an Iowa blizzard. At the end of the story the protagonist vows to never again be away from his family on such a day, "Not until they have all grown very old." "The Law of Club and Fang" is narrated by a man whose own account shows him to have been a poor excuse for both husband and father, but this is about as far as he can get by way of self-reflection:

Look, I'm not unaware that there is some question whether I was a good husband to Aurora. I know all that. Believe me, there is no one in the world who has asked these questions more than I have. I wonder whether I should have tried just a little bit more. I wonder why it is that I came to a certain point with her, a threshold, and determined I could go no further.

The distance between these characters' self-conceptions and the objectively pathetic situations in which they find themselves—extending even to the middle-class characters, such as the protagonist of "The Small Things in Life," who obsesses over toast—creates a kind of sadsack comedy that makes the almost exclusive focus on male characters and their problems much easier to take than a detached description of the stories' plots—man gets in trouble with his drug dealer for nonpayment of debts; woman hires lowlife to kill her husband—might suggest. Some of the stories are just plain hilarious, regardless of the underlying theme of masculine

degeneration: "Simultaneous Submission," about a "writer" who sells tall tales for alcoholics to use at A.A. meetings, or "Physics Package," about a man who purchases a shoulder-fired missile (which mysteriously grows in size over time) to help out his minister in "chasing the devil out of town."

A few of the stories are even rather touching. "Monocle" depicts the travails of a man born with only one eye, situated in the middle of his face, Cyclops-style. "Matahir's Flight" narrates the harrowing tale of an Indonesian man who stows himself away inside the wheel well of a jumbo jet on a flight from Jakarta to Los Angeles. A few others occupy a fairly eerie middle ground between comedy and tragedy through what they don't say and don't reveal (the Hemingway "iceberg effect"): "Arbor Day," which ends with the grievous injuring of a man hired to remove a tree from the narrator's yard, and "Down at the Igloo," about a bleeding man who walks into a diner and is served an ice cream cone. "The Man Who Loved Jimi Hendrix" (the title sums it up), "Affliction" (an ordinary story about a man pining for his secretary), and "At the Treeline" (a confusing story about armed revolutionaries) are among the stories I would call more or less complete misses, but in a book of 22 stories, the quality of execution in *Eighty-Sixed* is admirably consistent.

Few of the stories in this book were originally published in big-name literary journals. A number of them were published in online journals such as *Coelacanth* and *Prose Toad*. And, of course, *Word Riot* itself hardly qualifies as a publishing behemoth. That a writer of Brian Ames's obvious ability finds his publishing outlets in these modest venues tells us either that such venues are coming to take on an increasingly significant role in the publication of good writing or that the big names in both book and journal publishing are becoming less and less reliable as standard-bearers, less and less able to identify good writing with sufficient acuity that we can be confident talented writers and worthwhile books are being made available to their potential readers. (Or both.) Perhaps not all the fiction published by web-based or small-circulation magazines and out-of-the way presses measures up to the highest literary standards (neither does the fiction appearing in *McSweeney's* or *The Paris Review*), but if you can find Brian Ames there, you're doing pretty well.

John Sheppard's *Small Town Punk* was originally a self-published book offered through iUniverse, but even though it reportedly sold a respectable 2,000 copies in that format, it has now been republished by Ig Publishing. That a book as well-written and conceived as this one would only find a home with a "real" publisher through so circuitous a route says everything about the current clueless state of publishing in the United States. *Small Town Punk* is easily as "readable" as any of the story-driven fare that dominates American publishing, and it surpasses most "literary fiction" pumped out by those same publishers in the quality of its prose, the intelligence of its approach, and the soundness of its aesthetic execution.

Which is not to say it is particularly original, either in its form or, especially, in the characters and milieu it portrays. The "punk" of the title is literally one of those natives of the first punk rock generation of the late 1970s/early 1980s, as are his few friends in the "small town" of Sarasota, Florida. The novel depicts a few months in the life of the 17-year-old protagonist as he awaits graduation from high school, works part-time at Pizza Hut, and anticipates (or doesn't) whatever comes next. The episodes related are etched out in a relatively vivid way in this character's first-person account, but ultimately *Small Town Punk* is a portrayal of "alienated youth" of a kind that has become rather common in contemporary American (and British) fiction. In this case the novel attempts to show us "how it was" in the early Reagan era rather than posing as a sociological expose of present-day Kids In Crisis, but its status as an historical novel of sorts really only deadens its emotional effect. In some ways this is an asset to the book, since it reinforces the sense that for many young people like "Buzz" Pepper this was an emotionally dead time, but finally the alienated youth theme only seems all the more conventionalized and predictable when it's cast as the foundation of an historical re-creation, a glimpse of a previous era's teenage wasteland.

On the other hand, *Small Town Punk* mostly avoids melodrama, and Buzz Pepper's narration provides it with a compelling voice that raises it above a mere historical survey and allows the novel to avoid the more egregious uses of "psychological realism," which in this kind of historical narrative would no doubt become just a way of prying out "information" about how such characters perceived their situation. Although to describe *Small Town Punk* as either a "novel" or a "narrative" actually fails to precisely identify its formal/structural characteristics. I found the book most interesting as a kind of "in-between" work, not quite a novel if one's

definition of the form requires a traceable story arc, but also not exactly a collection of stories if one expects each episode to be itself a self-contained work capable of standing alone, apart from the larger whole to which it also contributes. A few of the "stories" in *Small Town Punk* would stand well enough on their own, might even provide a useful condensation of the book's strategies and concerns, but ultimately they seem to be conceived as parts of a whole. They are as likely to move sideways as forward, adding to the novel's generally plotless plot through accretion, a layering effect, rather than becoming dramatic points to be marked off on Freytag's Triangle. There's plenty of "action" to be found in each of the episodes—the sort one could anticipate from titles like "Wasted" and "Hot Cars"—but it's not the kind of action to which other pleasures, pleasures of voice, character, and setting, are required to be subsumed.

Perhaps it is the lack of obvious drama, of "high concept" or the exciting "hook," that accounts for the publishing history of *Small Town Punk*. Perhaps not even the smaller or more adventurous presses saw much in the way of sales from a book that shows no inclination to bend to the existing commercial winds and that takes "realism" seriously as the attempt to render life as the accumulation of non-events and ordinary frustrations it sometimes (often?) turns out to be. The novel has a mildly optimistic conclusion:

I turned 18, the age of majority. One more semester, and I'd be rid of the whole lot of them. Masturbatory thoughts of the day I'd walk out the door spun in my head.

I applied to the University of Florida, and was accepted. I would put two hundred miles between them and me. Two-fucking-hundred miles.

Until then, I closed the door of my room every afternoon and blasted my music as loud as I could. Then I went to work.

But the feeling evoked in the novel is one of limited opportunity enveloped in an atmosphere of swamp-like gloom. That the novel pulls this off while remaining a more or less "entertaining" read is to me a mark of its accomplishment, and that publishers (before Ig) would stay away from it despite its manifest stylistic and formal virtues hints to me that other similarly skilled works of fiction are being written and duly shunned by our aesthetically-challenged "book business."

On the one hand, I don't really understand why a novel like K.B. Dixon's *Andrew (A to Z)* (Inkwater Press) isn't published by a larger, "mainstream" press rather than the small, essentially regional press that has published it. (Inkwater is located in Portland, Oregon, and, as far as I can tell, attention to the book has been confined mostly to the Pacific Northwest, including a in the *Oregonian*, the only review the book has garnered.) It offers a reasonably engaging protagonist, who, as the novel's first-person narrator, possesses a generally lively writing style that at times can even be rather penetrating, and it is structured in a mildly unorthodox way—through alphabetically arranged entries that make the story of Andrew a kind of lexicographical guide to his life—that piques the reader's interest but surely doesn't really pose a threat to narrative coherence for most readers. It's at least as good as most of the "literary fiction" published by even the biggest New York publishers, and I have to conclude that the decisions by which this sort of fiction is published by these publishers are entirely arbitrary, at best guided by some wild guess about what might prove suitably commercial.

On the other hand, that one could imagine such a book as *Andrew (A to Z)* being brought out by a more commercial press suggests its most significant limitation as a putative work of "experimental" fiction, which its structured fragmentation clearly enough broadcasts it to be (and under which heading the *Oregonian* review introduces it). While the dictionary-entry form the novel assumes does fracture the "story" into seemingly arbitrary bits, ultimately the entries themselves still seem to have been chosen to illustrate certain pre-chosen features of Andrew's life and circumstances that eventually do add up to a fairly conventional account of a lightly-alienated, white collar employee and his elementary-school teacher wife. Fragmentation as a narrative strategy has by now been pretty thoroughly assimilated into the fiction writer's available array of structural devices, and unfortunately *Andrew (A to Z)* doesn't make especially provocative use of it. It presents us with the details of Andrew's experiences and obsessions in a shuffled, nonlinear fashion, but finally doesn't really encourage us to reflect very much either on the fragmented way in which we do in fact experience much of our lives or on the further variations that might be wrung out of fragmentation as a literary motif or narrative method.

Part of the reason why the alphabetic organization of this novel doesn't finally add up to much more than a modestly entertaining exercise in controlled discontinuity is perhaps that the underlying narrative is so familiar. Not much literally happens in *Andrew (A to Z)*, for reasons

Andrew himself ponders near the end of the novel: "My aversion to conflict and the respectfulness with which I indulge that aversion makes me inherently undramatizable. There is no rising action in the story of me; nothing is set in motion by an exciting force because exciting forces are invariably neutralized by my incessant, quasi-pathological cautiousness."

This brief metafictional moment would seem to be the author's ironic comment on the fact that he has created a character who doubts "there is a place for me in fiction." Through the gradual accretion of evidence that Andrew is indeed largely "undramatizable," Dixon has dramatized Andrew's very lack of dramatic interest. He is a modern American suburban man who doesn't quite understand how he got to be such, but who accepts his status more or less passively. He's a pretty keen observer of the confusions and limitations of his life, but he can't really bring himself to do anything in particular to change it. To me, this has become an increasingly commonplace kind of character in American fiction, and an increasingly uninteresting one, and *Andrew (A to Z)* does little to elevate such a character to a more consequential status as a "representative" figure in American life. The best he can do is provide the character with a quietly sardonic voice and the occasional perceptive remark. Which aren't nothing. Any novel containing passages like this is still worth reading:

It's entirely possible that there are too few intravenous drug users in my life—at least that's the feeling I get from Stephen who has a life full of them. According to him, if you are not personally acquainted with someone who's in prison for murder, then you are not leading a vital, authentic life. If your girlfriend hasn't burned you with a cigarette or stabbed you in the buttocks with a penknife, then you are not living at the white-hot center of it as you should be. But then, of course, Stephen is a romantic.

Reiterations

No doubt many readers of Zachary German's *Eat When You Feel Sad* (Melville House) would report that it isn't much preoccupied with telling a story. There's no sense of progression, no "arc," no apparent attempt to focus on those details and episodes in the protagonist's experience that carve a "story" from it, as opposed to an account of that experience as undifferentiated events.

And yet I would say that this novel actually does nothing else than tell a story. It does not have a "plot," but otherwise it focuses unwaveringly on recounting the activities of its protagonist, named simply Robert. Robert himself does nothing but act and react:

Robert walks into his building. He opens his mailbox. He looks in his mailbox. Robert picks up an envelope from Netflix. He closes his mailbox. Robert walks up stairs. He walks into his apartment. He opens the envelope from Netflix. He reads a description of the movie *The Squid and the Whale*. Robert walks to his bedroom. He takes off his clothes. Robert plays the album *Lambent Material* by Eluvium. He lies on the bed. His eyes are closed. Robert stands up. He puts on shorts. He walks to the kitchen. He looks at the window. He pours water into a glass. He looks at his cat. He thinks "I wish I was at my parents' house." Robert thinks "What's going on tonight? Should I call someone?" Robert calls Kelly. He leaves a voicemail. Robert thinks "I'm not sure what to do." Robert opens the freezer. He picks up an ice cube tray. Robert walks to his bedroom. He lies on his bed. Robert takes an ice cube out of the ice cube tray. He places the ice cube on his stomach.

The novel is structured by self-enclosed scenes such as this, each of which has a beginning, middle, and end, although not much in the way of drama is provided. Robert does this, notices that, listens to something, verbalizes a "thought." Through the accumulation of these scenes, Robert's life moves forward (punctuated by the occasional flashback or flashforward), but not because the novel's plot dictates that it must. Ultimately, the relationship between the actions narrated in passages such as this one is more paratactic (sentences that are essentially coordinate with one another, that could be connected with a simple "and") than hypotactic (sentences that are subordinate to an underlying thread of thought or direction), but such narrative drift is still a narrative. I would call German's method a radical application of the picaresque strategy, a form of storytelling in which one thing after another occurs, but without an artificially imposed plot structure. Robert's "story" is not about where events will ultimately take him as the properly dramatic outcome of what's come before but about the moments in his experience as they unfold, considered as themselves a sufficient source of story.

The paratactic strategy extends even to the verbalization of those thoughts. There is no "flow" of consciousness, only the sudden declaration in fully formed sentences: "I wish I was at

my parents' house"; "I'm not sure what to do." In another representative passage, Robert begins to "think" about his circumstances:

Robert is in a classroom. He is sitting at a desk. He thinks "I should ask to use the bathroom and then walk outside." He thinks "What's outside?" Robert thinks "Nevermind." Robert thinks "I should just not come to this class tomorrow. I should go to English and then after English I should walk outside. It doesn't matter. There's nothing outside probably." . . .

There is no pretense here that in reporting Robert's thoughts the narrator is actually "plumbing" the character's mental states. The method being used is, if anything, a deliberate mockery of the idea that such an undertaking is or should be desirable as a literary strategy. *Eat When You Feel Sad* is about as far as a third-person narrative can get from focusing on "interiority" as the primary goal of fiction. It relentlessly stays on the surface, merely relaying Robert's actions and conversations, summing up his thoughts in grammatically complete sentences when it becomes necessary to include what's happening "inside" as well. This is, of course, a wholly implausible way of representing human cognition, but it is finally no more implausible than the stream-of-consciousness or free-indirect approaches, which are equally artificial in their attempts to convey "mind" through verbal discourse. German's novel is if nothing else a very useful reminder that this is the case.

To some extent, the emphasis on exteriors could be a function of German's use of an attenuated, "plain" prose style. One thinks immediately of Hemingway or Carver, although German pushes this style even farther toward rhetorical constraint. If Hemingway's style helped convey a feeling of world-weary alienation, German's conveys one of near-immobility and utter confusion. Whether such a style is being used to "reflect" this condition or the condition is the inescapable consequence of the style itself is a question that could be raised, but ultimately the effect is the same. The novel's distinctively reduced rhetorical devices evoke a milieu of reduced energy and purpose. Robert's world is a world characterized by the perpetual occurrence of one thing after another, narratable in the most elementary kind of language.

I wouldn't say that *Eat When You Feel Sad* is always compelling or entirely without other problems. The theme of disaffected youth has really long since ceased to be shocking, and while German manages to treat it from a formal and stylistic perspective that adds interest, I myself

still find it hard to take the youthful ennui and aimless discontent altogether seriously. I think we all understand that American culture provides a difficult transitional period for "young people" who resist becoming future cogs in the mercantile machine, but I don't really think that we need updates of *Rebel Without a Cause* and *Catcher in the Rye* from each succeeding generation in order to underscore this reality. Even with German's formal/stylistic adventurousness in *Eat When You Feel Sad*, the novel doesn't completely manage to enliven an overworked subgenre.

Zachary German was 22 years old when this novel was published. I will be anticipating his next book to see whether this one is a fluke, whether he can transcend the limitations of the *Novel of Youth* and extend the narrative and verbal strategies employed in his first book. If he retreats to a more conventional approach, or if he simply offers more of the same, that will be disappointing.

Justin Taylor's *The Gospel of Anarchy* received mixed reviews at best, the most common complaint against it that it is flawed in what is usually called "character development." Steve Almond asserts that its characters "seem more like mouthpieces than genuine people. We learn little about them beyond their half-baked dogma, and the point of view shifts frequently" (*Boston Globe*). Brain Evenson criticizes Taylor for merely "creating character images that contrast from scene to scene, allowing these unexplained changes to do the work of character development" (*Bookforum*). Carolyn Kellogg regards its mode of narration as "a distancing agent, seeding a ubiquitous narrative skepticism" (*Los Angeles Times*).

While I would agree that *The Gospel of Anarchy* is a disappointing first novel, I don't think its main problem lies in a failure to create vivid characters. Indeed, since the novel is largely about the way its characters are willing to subsume their identities to the tenets of a burgeoning sect (some might say cult), or at least to find their identities in the formation of a collective, it seems very strange to fault it because it lacks distinct characters beyond the "half-baked dogma" they embrace. Similarly, since these characters are precisely trying to "distance" themselves from society at large, it's a curious response to them that finds "a distancing agent" inappropriate.

Furthermore, the injunction to develop "round" characters seems quite a reactionary expectation of a young writer, who may or may not find this a desirable goal, as is Almond's further pronouncements that novels "depend on rising action" in which "conflicts. . .have to be dramatized" and finding *The Gospel of Anarchy* wanting in fulfilling these hoary requirements. There's nothing in *The Gospel of Anarchy* that suggests Justin Taylor wants it to be judged as an "experimental" novel, but it nevertheless seems pretty dogmatic in its own right to demand that it provide "sympathetic" characters, a fixed point of view, and adherence to Freytag's triangle to be judged acceptable.

If *The Gospel of Anarchy* is not particularly audacious in form or style, Taylor is clearly a skilled enough writer, and the "shifts" in point of view help maintain interest in the story, however much the story is unfortunately all too predictable, the outcome of its depiction of a failed punk commune implicit in its origins in youthful naiveté, rigidity of belief, and in the narratives of failed utopias that precede it (I often thought in particular of Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* while reading *The Gospel of Anarchy*.) Taylor's first book, the story collection *Everything Here is the Best Thing Ever*, was widely praised for its portrayal of disenchanted youth, but part of the trouble with *The Gospel of Anarchy* is that it ultimately leaves the impression it began as one of those highly compacted stories and has been stretched beyond its capacity to bear the burden of both invoking its characters' spiritual ennui and depicting their attempts to re-enchant the world they've inherited.

The biggest problem with *The Gospel of Anarchy*, however, is that it is stretched to bear that burden in such a relentlessly earnest way its author seems not to be aware he is telling on overly familiar tale whose outcome is foreordained. In his review of the novel, Joe Coscarelli in the *Village Voice* complains there is too much "ambiguity as to whether [Taylor] means to mock his characters or endorse their anti-capitalist paradise," but actually whatever ambiguity there might be on this point is really all there is to maintain any interest in the story. Ultimately it doesn't really matter: the narrative seems designed to establish that the beliefs motivating the characters in their attempt to create an "anti-capitalist paradise" are precisely the sort of beliefs such characters in such a place and at such a time would hold—or did hold. Whether we are to find them compelling or ridiculous isn't finally what's at stake, although most readers will probably find themselves considering that question.

The novel begins well, with a portrait of its ostensible protagonist (the focus soon shifts away from him and settles on "Fishgut," a haven for the disaffected and the dropouts of the college town of Gainesville, Florida) in a state of extreme apathetic discontent, listlessly sorting through online porn while trying to decide whether to finish his education at the University of Florida. This character, David, meets up with an old friend who has fallen even farther into discontent, and who at the moment is engaged in a systematic act of dumpster-diving on behalf of his fellow residents of Fishgut. These episodes are fairly bracing, offering a vivid depiction of generational alienation, but they are not so freshly conceived or rendered to really seem shocking.

As if recognizing that such sketches of dissatisfaction and implicit despair can go only so far, Taylor devotes the rest of the novel to sketches of his characters attempting to ameliorate their despair. This is not an unreasonable or illegitimate thing to do, but the vehicle for this attempt, a hybrid ideology combining elements of anarchism, existentialism, and Christianity the group's de facto leader, Kate, calls "Anarchristianity," is not nearly as interesting as she—and perhaps Taylor—thinks it is. Apart from some scenes depicting David's sexual escapades with Kate and Kate's girlfriend, Liz, escapades that are themselves meant to represent a living-out of important tenets of the creed, most of the novel is taken up with an exposition of "anarchristianity" as inspired, at least retroactively, by a Fishgut resident named Parker, long since departed. While this part of the novel has some interest as an account of how religious sects (ultimately religion itself) get started, on the whole *The Gospel of Anarchy* doesn't give enough emphasis to this subject, either formally or thematically, to rescue it from the tedium that sets in when Parker and his "wisdom" become the novel's center of attention.

By the time we get to several pages of excerpts from the "holy book" concocted by Kate and David from some unorganized journals left behind by Parker, we've already been so immersed in the awkward hybrid of politics and religion that is anarchristianity it is very difficult to read these pages with the degree of interest Taylor clearly enough intends them to have. If the writings themselves were more lively, their ideas more provocative, we might still concede their importance to the novel, but instead we are given passages such as this:

Faith is the power by which we leap over the unbridgeable chasm, burst through the wall of the asymptote, realize Heaven on Earth. Grace is us granted that power, the fuel injected into faith's engine, the energy generated from its burning up.

Even if we could determine what such a claim is really supposed to mean, it's likely it would turn out to be just as banal as it seems. In my opinion, these pages act to finally bring down the novel as an aesthetic achievement. However much notions like this might appeal to susceptible twentysomethings, they're neither so vitally expressed we want to carefully consider them, nor so obviously ludicrous we know that satire is intended. They're just boring, and the eyes glaze while reading this collection of jottings.

It seems to me that Justin Taylor is too concerned in *The Gospel of Anarchy* with "capturing" his generation, with "saying something" about that generation's search for solutions to what they perceive as the problems of modern existence. This search is certainly a universal enough phenomenon, but unfortunately the novel essentially offers the same account of it as previous generations of literary seekers. Is fitting this particular kind of quest narrative to the changing if superficial particulars of each succeeding generation's social circumstances a worthwhile goal for the novelist? I tend to think not.

Although Robert Lopez's *Kamby Bolongo Mean River* received no reviews from the mainstream print media, the reviews it did receive from online publications and literary journals were unanimously fervent in their praise of the novel. Lauded for its formal daring, its "carefully crafted" prose, and its forthright depiction of mental instability, was welcomed as an innovative work that fulfilled its experimental ambitions.

That a novel perceived as unconventional would be applauded in this way is on the one hand an encouraging sign that a receptive audience (among reviewers and other writers, at least) for such work does exist. On the other hand, that this novel in particular was so highly admired for its putatively innovative qualities suggests to me that the reviewers might have been rewarding good intentions over actual achievement, the promise of an unconventional approach over the real thing. (And indeed it is rare enough that a novel that truly challenges reigning practices gets published.) If not, I have to conclude that these reviewers are simply giving too

much credit to a novel that is more derivative than it is original, too easily translated into aesthetically conservative terms.

Most of the reviews cite Beckett as an influence on Lopez's fiction, and, superficially at least, the situation portrayed in *Kamby Bolongo Mean River* does resemble those in works like *Malone Dies* or *The Unnamable*. But this is Beckett-lite, a catatonic version of Beckett's stories of isolation and despair in which the unnamed protagonist lies in what seems to be a hospital bed, sometimes masturbates (as he repeatedly tells us) and sometimes answers the phone (or imagines himself doing so). Beyond the repetitious notations of his surroundings, the narrator also seems to reminisce about his childhood—seems, because we can't be sure that anything we're told is more than a delusion, a strangely patterned fever dream. The son of a single mother with a sibling named Charlie, the narrator almost manages to explain his current circumstances by recalling the past—he was apparently sickly, often lost in make-believe, etc—but doesn't really quite. The dilemma he is in must remain murky and ambiguous, but ultimately it's hard to care whether the narrative situation gets resolved or not, or whether the narrator is actually as damaged as we are led to believe, so insubstantial does it all seem. It's a performance of isolation and injury, not the rendering of these conditions in language that makes them feel credibly present.

The language the narrator does use is mostly without affect, given over to the neutral recording of the narrator's circumscribed activities and perceptions and the equally spare details of his childhood. The repetitions of phrases and images gives the narrative voice an obsessive-compulsive quality that produces stylistic coherence, although finally the voice is anything but dynamic. One reviewer described it as "a deceptively simple voice that beguiles the reader with its awkward usages, and it quickly engenders sympathy with the narrator for having such a limited descriptor set" (*The Quarterly Conversation*), but it doesn't seem to me that Lopez is trying to elicit reader sympathy, at least not directly. Both the "awkward usages" and the obsessive vocabulary reflect the character's state of mind. As far as I can tell, the novel exists as an attempt to reveal an impaired state of mind, an afflicted consciousness. In other words, it is ultimately a recognizable manifestation of "psychological realism," however unorthodox its surface features might be. In attending to his words, with its "limited descriptor set," we are

exploring the protagonist's "mind," since it seems almost as if it is only through these words that he arises to consciousness in the first place.

The narrator himself discounts the role of words, remarking of his phone conversations that "when I listen I don't listen for the words. I listen for what is between the words and behind them. The way you do this is listen to how the voice sounds." The problem with this as a clue to reading the "words" of *Kamby Bologno Mean River* is that there is no "what is between the words and behind them." Whatever we learn about this character and his condition we learn through the words. Inferring more than what the "voice" says is pointless; we could read into the narrator's account any amount of further speculation, both about his life story and the context of its relation, but this sort of speculation would only result in the reader writing his/her own version of the novel. The narrator's language is our access to his mental life, which is really the only life he has. Capturing the reality of this is the novel's primary effect. To call him an "unreliable narrator" would be equally pointless. Determining what is true or what is false about his account, besides being a fruitless task, presumes there is some truth outside of the narrator's faltering discourse. I can see no reason, and no purpose, in holding on to this presumption.

And it is with the disposition of language that comparisons between Lopez and Beckett seem most inapt. Consider the following passage from *Kamby Bolongo*:

Someone asks you what you are doing and you say nothing.

I am almost always doing nothing it seems. It hasn't always been like this but it has been for as long as I can remember.

Charlie is always doing nothing whenever I talk to him on the telephone. I will call him up and ask what are you doing Charlie and he will say nothing like that. This is not another reason I feel sorry for Charlie because he has always liked doing nothing.

Beckett, using a similar motif (from *Malone Dies*):

I don't like those gull's eyes. They remind me of an old shipwreck. I forget which. I know it is a small thing. But I am easily frightened now. I know those little phrases that seem so innocuous and, once you let them in, pollute the whole of speech. Nothing is

more real than nothing. They rise up out of the pit and know no rest until they drag you down into its dark. But I am on my guard now.

The first is superficial, reiterative wordplay. (More like it occurs throughout the novel.) There is wordplay in Beckett, but it is never superficial. Malone isn't fooling around with the "nothing" that is "real." It's about to drag him down into its dark. In *Kamby Bolongo Mean River*, language is a passive mirror of the character's misfortune. In *Malone Dies*, it is the active agent of the character's attempt to validate his existence, to shed some final light, however dim and indirect, on the fact of his life and death. One can't imagine Beckett settling for Lopez's sort of facile mimicry of a diminished consciousness.

To the extent that experimental fiction simply reinforces through means other than conventional storytelling the notion that fiction's ambition should still properly be to achieve a kind of verisimilitude—the verisimilitude of psychological states—it's not accomplishing much. It's true that modern experimentalism began in the efforts of writers like Joyce and Woolf to take fiction inward, but their focus on subjective perception has long since become conventionalized as well. Beckett's fiction represents one of the first notable attempts to advance beyond psychological realism, but *Kamby Bolongo Mean River* doesn't use Beckett's example as motivation to exceed it. It faintly echoes Beckett's manner while otherwise it defers to the objectives pursued by every other "literary" novelist.

Heavy Gravity

Readers familiar with Rebecca Goldstein's previous fiction would no doubt find that *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* has much in common with the earlier work. It concerns itself with the intellectual nexus formed by science-mathematics-philosophy, is set in the campus world of academics, and supplements its focus on the life of the mind by introducing questions about Jewish identity and Judaism as a side interest. It is the sort of thing most readily identified as a "novel of ideas," although this novel may be the most insistent on foregrounding the "ideas" themselves as its central interest.

In novels such as *The Mind-Body Problem* (1989), *Mazel* (1995), and *Properties of Light* (2000), Goldstein takes as her subject characters working in the "hard" disciplines who struggle

to reconcile their commitment to the intellectual rigor of these disciplines with their physical and emotional impulses that tempt them away from that commitment, in some cases toward the suspension of reason and rigor represented by religion and religious tradition. *36 Arguments* continues the preoccupation with this subject but does so in the form of a conventional academic satire, a mode the earlier novels, for all their focus on academics and their eccentricities, did not really approach. These novels (as well as the short story collection, *Strange Attractors*) tried to satisfy the demands of both philosophy and of literary form (perhaps analogous to their protagonists' efforts to reconcile head and heart). *Properties of Light*, for example, finds a provocative way to use science to create a ghost story of sorts, as one of its characters comes back to quantumly "haunt" the woman responsible for his death.

36 Arguments for the Existence of God, however, doesn't really exhibit the same concern for transforming philosophy and science into literary devices. Granted, the "36 arguments" construct is used as a structural element, incorporated literally in the form of a series of propositions and their refutations as the novel's concluding section, and metaphorically by providing the novel's chapter titles, but otherwise this novel presents few surprises either formally or thematically, proceeding as a garden-variety academic satire complete with bursting egos, pretentious-sounding projects, and fierce political in-fighting. It provides Goldstein with the opportunity to portray the current phenomenon of "new atheism," but its appeal is largely restricted to the examination of this phenomenon as a "current issue." While some marginal interest might be added by dramatizing this phenomenon through attributing positions to fictionally depicted characters, finally not much about the controversy over new atheism is really illuminated by dressing it up as fiction rather than addressing it more straightforwardly through analysis and explication.

The most serious limitation of *36 Arguments*, however, is that as satire it isn't very funny. None of the characters rise above facile caricature—the female characters are all in one way or another too much woman for the diffident protagonist—and emphasizing the decidedly Jewish names of campus buildings (at "Frankfurter University") and a college president named "Shimmy" only goes so far. The most egregious failure is the portrayal of Jonas Elijah Klapper, "Extreme Distinguished Professor of Faith, Literature, and Values" and embodiment of pomposity, clearly enough modeled on Harold Bloom. Once one "gets" that this character is

based on Bloom, the endless reiterations of his girth, his affected speech and mannerisms, and his encyclopedic references to Jewish mysticism become almost unbearable. It's never clear whether Klapper is meant to represent the foolishness of literary study in general, or of a particular kind of anti-scientific literary discourse, or whether he just signifies that it's inappropriate to be Harold Bloom. Whatever the case, we can only conclude that, as Gordon Haber puts it in his review of the novel, Klapper "is supposed to be a comic figure because his interest in Judaism leads to messianic delusions, and because he's fat" (*The Forward*).

Because so much space is devoted to Jonas Elijah Klapper, and because presumably something is to be made of the contrast between Klapper's approach to "faith and values" and the approach the protagonist, originally a disciple of Klapper, eventually favors, or between Klapper's take on Judaism and that of "true" Hasidic Jews, or something or other, the insipidness of the novel's portrayal of him subverts any purely literary claims it might have to make on us. The flashbacks to this period in the protagonist's life prove almost completely superfluous and little in his interactions with other characters is of much interest. We are left with a subplot concerning the "Valdener Hasidim," a community of Hasidic Jews for whom both Klapper and the protagonist develop an increasing fondness. Interest focuses in particular on the current Valdener Rebbe and his heir apparent son, a mathematical genius in the making who is ultimately forced to choose between the potential of his genius and his responsibility to the community he is apparently destined to lead.

The protagonist, Cass Seltzer, a Frankfurter psychologist who has written a surprise best seller called *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*, is himself not a very compelling character. He exists mostly as an opportunity for Goldstein to evoke the milieu he inhabits and to raise the issues of faith and belief with which the novel is principally concerned. He has the consummately "moderate" personality that allows him to empathize with believers even as he is chosen to make the case for nonbelief in a setpiece debate near the novel's conclusion. He is clearly enough regarded as the "winner" of the debate, yet his admiration of the community spirit that maintains the Valdeners in their traditions and of the decision by the son to continue those traditions after his father's death is also palpable. The narrative never deviates from Cass's perspective, and we are inevitably led to appreciate both his intellectual toughness and his soft spot for tradition and solidarity.

The novel's concluding episode, a joyous celebration of a Valdener wedding, veers away from satire and rests ultimate sympathy with the community practices of the Hasidic Jews. This is the sort of thing some readers find "moving" or "transcendent," but I find it muddled and maudlin. It doesn't seem to me to rescue a sense of "mystery" about human life but indicates a willingness to disregard the truth. It doesn't invest Cass Seltzer with additional "humanity" but confirms his ability to equivocate. Cass may not be a believer, but he'd really, really like to be one, the irrationality of belief notwithstanding. The right kind of religious belief—not too intense, but with a lot of dancing—would be so nice and agreeable.

Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* is most immediately categorizable as satire, and in fact it would be more charitable perhaps to discuss the novel as a participant in this genre rather than as something making a claim to be fiction understood as literary art. Although certainly the best satire is also the most artful, I would still maintain that satire aspires to be primarily a mode of moral or political discourse, or of cultural criticism, and not an object of aesthetic contemplation. (Some works of literary art, however, do create secondarily satirical effects that add to their appeal, as in the fiction of Stanley Elkin, for example, while other "classic" satirical works take aim at a sufficiently universal kind of human folly that they retain their satirical edge, as in the plays of Moliere.) Satire needs to be aesthetically compelling enough that readers tolerate a message delivered in an indirect way through narrative and character rather than more efficiently through direct discourse, but ultimately it is judged by its purchase on the conditions it critiques, not its formal or stylistic accomplishments.

Unfortunately, even by this alternative standard, *Super Sad True Love Story* doesn't measure up. It is just another of those by now familiar futuristic satires that projects a few years ahead to reveal that current trends have reached a kind of logical conclusion, making the United States into a dying Empire ruled by clueless politicians and unabashed oligarchs, who have brought consumerist ruin on the land and are in the process of asserting class-based tyranny. What *Super Sad True Love Story* adds to the mix is the portrayal of a society addicted to cyber technology and its own ruinous effect on literacy and its relegation of books to the peculiar few. This will no doubt become a popular trope in later iterations of the dystopian vision, as writers continue to worry their vocation is headed for the dustbin. Shteyngart's narrative makes the

predictable points: that the wired world exacerbates our preoccupation with trivia, that it reinforces our tendency to self-absorption, that it enables a passivity the powers-that-be can exploit, ultimately that it makes us stupid.

That these are potential dangers in our use of digital technology seems undeniable, although its potential to do exactly the opposite in each of these effects seems to me equally real. More importantly, the novel seems to exist primarily to point out these dangers, and since I was already perfectly aware of them (as I imagine most readers of this novel are, as well), I found *Super Sad True Love Story* a particularly unrewarding reading experience. It offers few aesthetic pleasures apart from its oft-invoked theme, and it isn't very funny. (It becomes progressively even less so as the story plods on.) Once you get that the characters are addicted to their "appariti" (supercharged Blackberries of some sort), which has led to their passivity in the face of the authoritarian rule of the "Bipartisan Party," it's hard to take the rest of the narrative's reiterations of these notions as very "edgy."

The most noteworthy achievement in this novel is Shteyngart's evocation of the "voice" of the protagonist's love interest, a young woman who both carries the burden of the novel's indictment of digitalized culture and becomes its test case in the possibility of transcending that culture. She is presented to us both indirectly, through the protagonist's written diary, and directly through her own "apparat"-powered communications, reproduced dialogically with the protagonist's diary. Shteyngart's mimicry of the verbal mannerisms and patois of a young person wired from birth is compelling enough, although her eventual transformation into a more self-aware and responsible adult is less convincing and makes her contributions to the alternating narrative strands just as dull as the protagonist's. The latter's diary writing is flat and uninspired, while the protagonist is himself a standard issue slacker whose inability to either go all-out for material success or lapse into a resigned mediocrity accounts more for his holding on to the printed word than any real allegiance to "verbal" culture. He can't quite bring himself to discard his books and his antiquated writing habits, but he wishes he could. Being neither bold nor entirely complacent just makes him seem adrift, and ultimately irritating.

Shteyngart's vision of America in terminal decline, hastened by the technology of distraction, is one shared by Rick Moody's *The Four Fingers of Death*. One might almost think, in fact, that the two authors had commiserated with one another over the grim fate they both

foresaw and decided to compete for the title of dystopian of the year. Shteyngart probably wins, but only because *Super Sad True Love Story* so relentlessly pursues its dystopian "vision," its very existence so dependent on the explication of this vision. *The Four Fingers of Death*, while hardly a work of overpowering originality, nevertheless manages to embody its theme in a formal structure that provides interest in and of itself, to produce comedy that, although it is often satirical, also provokes laughter for its own sake, and to employ language that often enough enlivens the narrative rather than just dutifully carry it along.

One could call the novel a "frame-tale," as we are first introduced to Montese Crandall, a writer who inhabits a United States some fifteen years into the future and who writes a kind of minimalist fiction *reductio ad absurdum*: "very short, very condensed literary pieces, and by short, I mean very, very short. Shorter than you have probably read in your reading life. More than one word, usually, because one word is too easy, but quite a bit more modest than five score. The three hundred and fifty pages of a novel. . . are a tedious elaboration." Crandall manages to get himself assigned to a "novelization" of a low-budget science fiction film, which he will turn into the *The Four Fingers of Death*, the narrative that itself then constitutes most of the novel we are reading. The novelization relates the story of a manned mission to Mars undertaken by an American government desperate to distinguish itself in some way in the face of an undeniable loss of prestige and influence and increasing unrest. The mission goes horribly wrong, and a remaining crew member attempts to return to earth. This part of the novelization is related by that crew member, but before he can reach the earth he dies of a disease contracted on Mars and the rest of the novelization relates the aftermath of the mission, during which the astronaut's arm, still living as a result of the disease, wreaks havoc across the land and threatens to infect the world.

The first part of the narrative is the strongest, and not just because the narrator, Colonel Jed Richards, manages to buoy the story through the acuity of his observations and the urgency of his style. Implicitly it becomes obvious that Montese Crandall has discovered the virtues of maximalist storytelling, that what he previously regarded as "tedious elaboration" is something for which he has some talent after all. We are as well surely to note that Crandall has made this discovery while "converting" film into fiction, as if it has taken being confronted with the real differences between the visual storytelling of film and the verbal demands (and possibilities) of

fiction for Crandall to understand that fiction is language, not its dissolution. If the story Richards tells is finally not cutting-edge science fiction, just a recognizable SF kind of plot well-told, it is well-told, and the "commentary" on the skullduggery of the American government (the disease brought back by Col. Richards is a bacteria the government intended to use for biological warfare) is not so ponderous as to pull the narrative down into the heavier gravity of explicit satire.

The second part of Crandall's novelization does get bogged down, both by overworked devices such as the extended passages related from the point of view of a language-challenged young male whose every other word is "fucking" ("In fact, Vienna had just fucking called him, in that fucking ridiculously fucking sex voice of hers that sounded like a ten-year old on helium") and by more obviously satirical episodes and plot twists. Jed Richards's disembodied arm run amok in the Southwestern desert gives Moody his opportunity to present his dystopian vision of America hollowed out by corporate, political, and technological overreach and on the verge of a mass uprising of the dispossessed. Some of the episodes are funny enough, including those featuring a chimpanzee who through a scientist's experiment becomes aware of his circumstances in an animal research lab and begins to speak with great intelligence and fluency, but they seem mostly pasted together, the novel's maximalism stretched beyond aesthetic coherence.

One could say that the novel focuses at least as much on the physical fragility of living bodies, the way their limitations always act to check our pretensions, as on the political and economic dangers we are facing. In this way, *The Four Fingers of Death* offers more than the transient satire of *Super Sad True Love Story*. But both of these books are pretty clearly motivated by a perception that the United States is currently heading in a destructive direction that could perhaps still be avoided if the warnings signaled through the narratives are duly registered. For those reading these novels who aren't already aware that this country faces dangers of the sort they dramatize, such signals may be useful, but for those of us already quite aware of the ominous portents for American culture we can discern all too plainly, the novels' most fundamental reason for existing at best only reinforces what we already know. Finally nothing in either of them allows them to sufficiently transcend their origins in topical satire that we should want to read them beyond their notoriety as works of satire. *The Four Fingers of Death* is lively enough to pay off the time spent with it, but certainly *Super Sad True Love Story*

holds little purely literary interest. Like most satires of its kind, it is a self-consuming artifact: once it is no longer topical, it will have exhausted its value.

Finding the Right Means and Medium

If it is at all possible to call a novel a "poet's novel," *Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder* (Coffee House Press) would seem literally to be one. Its author, Travis Nichols, is currently an editor at the Poetry Foundation, writes a poetry column for the *Huffington Post*, and, as far as I can tell, has prior to this book mostly if not exclusively written poetry, including a collection, *Iowa*, published earlier this year.

Is this, then, a poet's novel only in the narrowest, most reductively descriptive sense (he's a poet who has written a novel) or is it a novel informed by the sensibility and the assumptions about form and language more specific to poetry, and thus one to be judged according to those assumptions rather than those readers and reviewers usually themselves bring to the consideration of fiction? If the latter, should we consider *Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder* some kind of hybrid of poetry and fiction, a separate category of fiction (or of poetry), or should we simply look for it to bring to our reading of fiction something different, some strategy or emphasis we don't ordinarily allow for in our reading of plot- or character-driven novels?

It is the success of *Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder* that it poses, and partially answers, these questions; it is its failure that those answers are only partial, and to some extent unsatisfying. The novel seems clearly enough written against the grain of the approach taken by most professional novelists, an approach that encourages immediate engagement with character and event, establishes context through setting and relevant background, above all eases the reader's way into and through the story with an exposition-laden prose. It really doesn't do these things, at least not quickly or directly, and doesn't ever do the last-named. However, it does in my opinion eventually accede to the essence of this approach, even as it arrives at shared ends through somewhat unorthodox means.

Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder ultimately does tell the story of a World War II pilot who, along with his grandson and his girlfriend, visits in his old age the scene of his crash-landing in the Polish countryside. The story is told to us by the grandson, at least indirectly, as

the novel takes the form of a series of letters written to "Luddie," the presumed rescuer of the grandfather (the grandson calls him the "Bombardier") who may or may not be still alive (it turns out she isn't). Through the letters, we learn a little bit about the narrator's own past, about the Bombardier's life since the war, about their trip to Poland, but most of the narrative is taken up with the trio's attempts to locate Luddie and the Bombardier's crash site, the presumed target of the bombing raid that resulted in the crash. The search is complicated by the Bombardier's obviously faulty memory, but the novel concludes with the trio's discovery of the ruins of the bombed-out target, presumably validating the Bombardier's remembered experience.

It's precisely this validation of the memory of heroism (even if the Bombardier doesn't necessarily think of it as such) that makes me less than satisfied with this novel, although it does redeem itself as a departure from novel-writing business as usual in other ways. Most readers will note from the beginning the narrator's oblique and repetitive prose style, as almost any chapter of the book will illustrate:

Something has happened to me, but it is not what I thought would happen to me when I told you something was going to happen to me.

Something has happened to me because I left New England and came back to the Midwest, where I was born.

I should have known better than to come back to where I was born because time is not a circle.

Is it a line?

I should have known better because it's always dangerous to come back, especially if you leave from a new home to come back to where you were born. It's always dangerous because if you give where you were born a chance, it will wrap its roots around your insides and pull you down close to the ground.

The narrator's letters act neither as "chatty" correspondence nor as a narrative device that substitutes for conventional expository narration but could just as easily be replaced with some other device that gets the story told. The narrator's halting, circuitous language emphasizes its own unfolding as language, working to ensure that we are always as aware of this language as

we are the story it is struggling to move along. The narrator is struggling with the story, and the manner of telling reinforces that struggle. Perhaps we could say that this method is "poetic," not so much because more often than not language is laid out on the page in a compressed way that seems "verse-like" but because it does stress so concerted the effort to find efficacious expression of what one wants to say, to find the right means and medium.

In wondering whether time is, in fact "a line," the narrator is also announcing the novel's preoccupation with the relationship of time and memory, whether the latter always conditions the former, or whether it is possible to get an accurate sense of the former while thinking of it as a "line." The narrator moves in circles recording his own and the Bombardier's experiences, and the trio themselves essentially move in circles while trying to pin down the location of the Bombardier's crash. The novel seems to be suggesting that time—or what really happened—is inevitably lost in the attempt to recall it, or to narrate it, even, or perhaps especially, something as momentous as World War II and the experiences of the "greatest generation" that fought it. But the last-minute discovery of the "real" site, however much stumbling around is involved in the process, left me, for one, feeling disappointed that Nichols didn't fully extend this meditation on our perception of time through to the novel's conclusion. It left me thinking that despite the haze the passing years had enveloped around the events of the war, the narrative was affirming that the haze was ultimately penetrable through determination and a little patience.

Thus it seems to me that *Off We Go Into the Wild Blue Yonder* winds up to some extent reinforcing the discursive conventions of fiction. Its stylistic and structural departures delay and condition the resolution of the novel into a well-shaped narrative, but they ultimately provide it nonetheless. In doing so, the novel becomes less an effort to explore the borderlands between fiction and poetry as their boundaries have currently been determined, and more an acknowledgment of those boundaries. It's a book worth reading, however, as its modest challenges to novel-writing convention still make it a more satisfying reading experience than most literary fiction

I agree with Dan Magers in *New Pages* that John Cotter's *Under the Small Lights* (Miami University Press) "has less of the expansiveness of prose, and more the concise cognitive breath of poetry," although this should be amended to specify the "expansiveness" of a certain kind of

expository prose employed by some novelists. Other writers of fiction have always preferred a more "concise" kind of prose, and while such prose could be called "poetic" in its effect (I'm not sure what the word "cognitive" adds to this formulation), it is not usually because the writer in question is seeking to emulate lyric poetry but because the writer finds this style of prose most effective in evoking the fictional world he/she is after. One could say that, in consciously pursuing a concise style, writers such as Hemingway or Carver or Mary Robison do seem more attuned than many "expansive" writers to the role played by language (literally the use of this word rather than that, the assembling of words into sentences) in the creation of fiction, and that this deliberate restraint results in a prose more immediate in its effect.

Cotter's novel does seem to originate in this orientation toward style, but to simply associate it with the "concise. . .breath of poetry" does not really capture just how Cotter achieves his particular "concise" effect. *Under the Small Lights* is a novel that proceeds primarily through dialogue, but it is not the usual kind of snappy, faux-film dialogue to be found in much of today's "literary fiction," nor is it simply the perfunctory use of dialogue many novelists believe is necessary to write a "proper" novel—here's some exposition, here's some dialogue, here's some more exposition' here's a part where the character must "speak for himself." Instead, both character and event are revealed through dialogue, the latter element sometimes consisting of dialogue. Furthermore, at times following and accurately attributing the dialogue on the reader's part can be its own kind of action. The following scene features three characters, the narrator, Jack, in love with Corinna, who is (or will be) married to Jack's friend, Paul:

"One of those girls came by today," I said, tongue loose with gin. "She buzzed up. Her. . .the other one already told me the other day that she was 'intrigued.' She said, 'Are you intrigued?'"

"Intrigued?" Corrina bit her lip. "So she's Anais Nin?"

"Right, so. It was a bad day. I don't mean to get morbid or. . .I'd been at the. . .I don't know what happened but I'd been at class, then I went to the Cafe du Paris to have a coffee and a sandwich. I was reading Beckett's poems."

"I saw that you had that," Paul said. "I was curious to read that."

"They're pretty grim." The buzzer jarred and I jerked to press talk.

"This is Bob Dole. Who's winning?"

"Bob Dole."

"Really," Paul said, eyeing Corrina, "because of all people. . ."

I leaned on the buzzer. "Anyway I was real sad, like, heartbreak and worry and. . . she came in the door and said 'Last time I saw you, you were naked.' Yeah, I know, right? Cute. So. I figured, alright we'll talk, and I made some tea." I started walking down the hall to unlock the door for Star and shouted, "And I told her everything about how I was bawling, and she was like, see you!"

"It's already unlocked!"

"Oh!"

"So, Jack!" Corrinna yelled. She softened when I came back to the room. "When are you going to get a girlfriend?"

She was fixing a second drink, long fingers collecting the wet bottle caps.

"I don't know."

We are presented here with a situation that unfolds, and a group of people who speak, more like what might be found in real life than what is usually found in novels. We're not really sure of the significance of the subjects of conversations, which anyway continue to shift. We must infer from the reference to Bob Dole that the characters are watching a Presidential debate, which ultimately acts only as the backdrop to the ongoing conversation, itself conveyed as a disjointed affair often left incomplete and marked by serial interruption.

Much of the novel is organized around scenes like this. The obvious analogy is to the use of dialogue made by the dramatist, and indeed the protagonist of *Under the Small Lights* is himself occupied throughout the novel in writing a play (with his friend, Bill), suggesting a congruence between Jack's artistic inclinations and his role as narrator. What this novel accomplishes with the strategy is enhanced, of course, by the contribution of Jack's voice as narrator and thus by the focus on Jack's growing estrangement from his circle of friends and his ultimate disillusionment. This process is dramatized in various self-contained episodes that range

freely over time and place, their relative brevity and discontinuity mitigating against our perceiving them as "acts" in a novelized play, even as the burden of dramatic development is carried by the subtly revealing dialogue. Ultimately what we learn about the novel's characters and their toxic intimacies is conveyed through what we can discern in their at once both urgent and aimless talking with one another.

There is nothing especially new or revelatory about this strategy. Fiction driven by dialogue to the extent it seems to be appropriating theater is a well-established mode, especially in English fiction (the novel of manners most particularly), and no one has experimented more thoroughly with the possibilities of embedding narrative structure within dialogue than William Gaddis. But Cotter's willingness to make his dialogue more than just narrative drapery, to challenge readers to interpret it as something other than perfunctory chat, is admirable enough at a time when most writers are urged to think about "narrative arc" and "polished prose" as the writer's compelling concerns—all the tricks that make passive, complacent reading the norm. Readers could find the interchanges between characters in *Under the Small Lights* initially rather elliptical, the overall narrative strategy somewhat disorienting, but the closer attention they are asked to pay is worth the effort, if what we want from our experience of fiction is more than simple compliance with workshop tested formulas, an experience that perhaps makes the aesthetic choices made by writers an opportunity precisely to enhance our appreciation of what's at stake in such choices.

Most readers would probably find *Under the Small Lights* finally to be a recognizable slice of "lifelike" realism, albeit one still loosely fitted to the mold of the bildungsroman. However much it might frustrate the attempt to make language transparent to plot, it does so for the sake of building character and scene in a way that ultimately conforms to convention. I might find this to be the novel's most serious limitation, but I can easily imagine many readers finding the payoff to be a rewarding one. It is a novel that takes us to a familiar place, but it does not follow the same old well-worn route.

The "novel in stories" has become an increasingly common form in current American fiction, so while Pamela Ryder's *Paradise Field* is recognizable enough in its use of the developing conventions of the form, it expands the possibilities of this hybrid genre just enough to warrant publication by a press (FC2) that is one of the longest-lived publishers of "experimental" fiction, and illustrates that the "story novel" still might hold some potential for surprising us.

The overarching narrative to which the individual stories contribute (although not necessarily sequentially) concerns the final decline and death of the protagonist's father. These two characters (the protagonist is referred to throughout simply as "the daughter") and their at times problematic relationship emerge as the book's primary focus, but not every story in fact directly concerns them. Still, even the stories set elsewhere (France, in "The Renoir Put Straight") or apparently about other characters ("Arrow Rock") depict experiences universal enough (a young child observing the behavior of the adults around her in the former story, for example) that they might surely echo the lives of the daughter and her father, or may in fact refer obliquely to these two characters even if they are not directly identified (the characters in a motel room in "Arrow Rock"). "Badly Raised and Talking With the Rabbi" apparently takes place at the father's funeral, but in this case the daughter is identified only indirectly through a one-sided conversation carried on by the woman who may have been the father's live-in girlfriend.

This latter character makes a couple of appearances in the book, although her relationship with the father is not much developed. Since this is finally a collection of stories, however, such development is not a generic requirement, as "unity of effect" properly applies first to the discrete story and its self-sufficient aesthetic needs. This gives *Paradise Field* as a whole a more impressionistic surface quality while at the same time preserving the distinction between "story" and "novel," the tension between the two helping to sharpen our sense of how a "novel in stories" might be defined as a category of fiction in its own right, not simply as a series of stories with in-common characters or setting, or as an "episodic" novel. How far beyond the sort of unity we expect to find in a novel can such a book as this go, it seems to ask implicitly, and still have a broader coherence that transcends the separate goals of each particular story?

The book's impressionism is further reinforced by the variety of techniques employed in the individual stories. The first, "Internment for Yard and Garden: A Practical Guide" takes the

form of an instructional pamphlet for the "suburban Jew" on the proper disposition of the recently deceased, which begins to periodically blend together with specific details about the case of the daughter and her father, thus introducing us to this situation as the book's subject. The second story, the title story, takes us back to the daughter's childhood and narrates a series of phone calls between father and daughter that seems to establish the father's frequent absences from home as the source of the daughter's ambivalence about their relationship. Other stories emphasize the father's nostalgia about his days as an air force pilot, while eventually attention focuses mostly on the daughter's efforts to care for the father in the last stages of his old age.

Many stories rely substantially on dialogue, but others, such as "The Song Inside the Plate" and "Irregulars" consist of long blocks of prose. Similarly, some are more fully developed narratives that could be called "stories" of the conventional kind, while others, such as "Recognizable Constellations and Familiar Objects of the Night Sky in Early Spring," rely more on juxtaposition and association, while still others are very brief scenes that might qualify as flash fiction. Most of the stories are told in the third-person, with the viewpoint staying very close to that of the daughter (although without much attempt at "free indirect" psychologizing), but "Mitzvah" (about the father's stay in a nursing home) brings us even closer to the daughter's perspective by instead employing a second-person narration, the references to the daughter as "you" giving us an even more immediate appreciation of the daughter's troubles by implicating us in her actions. In the book's final story, "In Other Hemispheres," the daughter visits with her father's spirit one final time as his coffin is being taken to the cemetery, where the image of his body being lowered into the ground merges with one final reverie returning him to the cockpit of his airplane as it falls to earth.

While *Paradise Field* is formally interesting, however, what finally commends this book most to readers interested in something other than the customary sort of literary fiction is its way with language, a style that seems perfectly suited to the subject and methods of the book but that also seems reminiscent of the more adventurous prose of writers such as Noy Holland or Dawn Raffel. These are writers influenced by Gordon Lish (who indeed provides a back cover blurb for *Paradise Field* as well), and Ryder's fiction does feature the kind of sentence building and sonic effects identified with Lish's approach to writing:

They went to where there would be canyons, where the daughter had once walked in her younger years, had traveled along the bluffs and ledges, had seen those vast regions of sage and mesa cleft with chasms of stone and the rivers of their incisions--and now wanting the father to see--while there was still time, while there was still breath and sense and flow through these most turbulent of tributaries within his fisted heart--wanting the father to see again what he had already seen, though long ago and largely from the air. ("As Those Who Know the Dead Will Do")

In an interview, Ryder says of style in fiction that "Language always prevails over content. You've got to let the language win out, even if it changes what you think you want to say" ("Through the Viewfinder: Pamela Ryder with Peter Markus"). In the above passage (the first paragraph of the story), we can see a sentence in the process of "winning out." It seems to continually extend itself, adding detail and changing direction, not simply to accumulate information but to seek out the possibilities of its own prolongation and potential associations, through such devices as assonance, consonance, alliteration, and repetition. These stratagems are applied lightly, so that the wordplay doesn't distract from a story's expository and descriptive imperatives, but almost every story offers passages that might prompt us to pause and consider the dexterity with which the sentences take shape, making *Paradise Field* a consistently pleasurable and rewarding reading experience.

Kyle Minor has obviously made a concerted effort in *Praying Drunk* to bring unity and aesthetic order to what could otherwise seem just a miscellaneous collection of stories — if even calling them “stories” would give the book a nominal unity, since some of the pieces appear to have originated as essays. The first and most general sign of order comes from an author’s note in which we are told, “These stories are meant to be read in order.” If this is not sufficient admonition that we notice the book’s overall aesthetic structure, we are further told explicitly that “this is a book, not just a collection.”

At the next level, the book is divided into two sections, each with a separate title. The two sections provide for a kind of mirroring effect, as motifs, settings, and characters reappear with variations or embellishment. Finally, the stories are grouped together in even smaller sections (marked off by black pages), the stories in each section presumably echoing each other

thematically or in some other way providing appropriate resonance. Two of the stories, “Seven Stories About Sebastian of Koulev-Ville” and “In a Distant Country,” stand alone in sections of their own, the two of them having in common a setting in Haiti, which contrasts with the other stories set in (mostly Southern) America.

Beyond these imposed structural arrangements, *Praying Drunk* is united by its general focus on its author’s own experiences (in some of the pieces a character is explicitly identified as “Kyle”) growing up and living in a downscale, religion-soaked milieu whose legacy in suffering and death is hard to escape. The first story in the book, the aptly titled “The Question of Where to Begin,” succinctly announces the book’s preoccupation: “We begin with the trouble, but where does the trouble begin?” (Although “will the trouble end” might be just as apposite a question).

Suicide is a prominent subject (particularly the suicide of a character named “Danny,” whose case is featured in several of the stories, approached from different perspectives), and a pervasive sense of regret and helplessness toward the hardships of life is probably the strongest impression the book as a whole leaves. A few of the stories are centered on events directly concerning the author (or his fictional surrogate), such as “You Shall Go Out With Joy and Be Led Forth With Peace,” about the narrator’s childhood experience of being bullied, but most of the stories take in the experiences of other characters (including family members), making *Praying Drunk* seem less autobiographical than an exercise in providing witness to the “trouble” endemic to American Bible Belt culture.

The book does portray the trouble in an occasionally powerful way, but finally the careful scaffolding Minor has constructed for it has the effect of muffling that power. The book is caught between the impulse to evoke the culture and struggles of the Bible Belt and what seems like a retroactive concern with aesthetic design. The motifs and echoes act as substitutes for the lengthier, more thorough development of characters and themes we might find in a novel, rather than as parts of a coherent, wholly satisfying treatment of the subject.

Paradoxically, the effort to unify the stories using these devices only reinforces the ultimate impression of the book as a miscellany. Structure is so conspicuously imported that the effect is to call attention to the fact that most of the stories are really only loosely associated by theme or setting and that the repetitions are just unavoidable artifacts of the stories’ separate

publication histories. In this case, the book as a whole turns out to be less than sum of its parts because the pieces seem jammed together with an unnatural force.

The pieces that seem to most awkwardly occupy their place in *Praying Drunk* are those that are in fact the most self-consciously unconventional. “The Truth and All Its Ugly” transfers the suicide theme to a futuristic setting in which the father of “Danny” replaces him with a robot version following on the boy’s suicide. Suffice it to say that the substitution doesn’t work out well. As the only story in the book that substantively departs from the conventions of narrative realism, “The Truth and All Its Ugly” sits uneasily among the more straightforwardly realistic depictions of pain and suffering. It suggests that these more conventional representations are ultimately insufficient to the task while unfortunately proving much less effective than those stories, as it ultimately seems more a gimmick than an integrated contribution to the book’s overall treatment of the theme.

Two pieces, both titled “Q & A,” are structured as interviews with the author about the book we are reading, introducing a metafictional element into our consideration of the book’s aesthetic implications, but these self-reflexive interludes also make for an awkward tonal shift and seem an additional artificial reinforcement of an already artificial aesthetic design that mutes the effect of the best stories in the book — best because the least labored. At worst, this creates the impression that a strained attempt is being made to elevate the stories collected in the book beyond their actual merit.

In their way, “Seven Stories About Sebastian Koulev-Ville” and “In a Distant Country” are tonally and thematically discordant as well. Each of these stories, set in Haiti, maintains some continuity with the stories set in the U.S. by focusing on the characters who are in Haiti working as Christian missionaries, but the shift in focus from stories centered directly on Bible Belt cultural assumptions and their consequences to a focus on characters bringing these assumptions with them in their missionary work interrupts the reader’s contemplation of the former, asking us to redirect our attention to these characters’ encounter with Haitian society (and vice versa). Perhaps these stories would work better in another context, as part of a broader portrayal of the American influence in Haiti, or of Haitian history and culture more generally, but here they are more difficult to appreciate because they so abruptly seem to change the subject.

The problems with *Praying Drunk* are problems of structure and coherence, not of the author's command of language. Minor's prose style is often trenchant and direct, in a manner that suits the emphasis on missteps and misfortune, but this approach can also be rhythmically extended to become almost lyrical. The narrator of "There's Nothing But Sadness in Nashville" describes his brother's travails:

The real money's in Christian rock, a scene that's a hammerblow, every flirtation leaving him for weeks on the bean bag chairs in Murfreesboro after he's been stiffed paychecks, accused of creepiness with underage fans, ratted out to image-conscious A & R guys. He does the same stuff everybody else does. One night he's smoking pot with a teen pop idol while members of her entourage tryst on dingy apartment couches, the next night she's on the late night shows talking about her virginity pledge. What sets my brother apart is he says the same things no matter who is in the room, and most people prefer what passes for the truth to what's actually true. So he calls and says, "Enough. I quit. Enough." No more touring, no more producing, no more engineering, no more songwriting, no more so much as sitting at the bar at Boscos with anybody wearing Diesel jeans, anybody with spiky hair, anybody with eye makeup, anybody in Nashville who's ever been to San Francisco.

Kyle Minor's evident writing skills at the sentence and paragraph level suggest that better work is to come, once he has resolved the formal uncertainties manifest in *Praying Drunk*. The order imposed on the stories in this book can't conceal their marked variability of purpose, so variable that the ultimate purpose of collecting them here appears arbitrary.

Whatever judgment might be made about the merits of particular stories in Edie Meidav's collection, *Kingdom of the Young*, a judgment about the book as a whole has to begin in the observation that it does not serve very well as an introduction to Meidav's work as represented by her preceding three novels, *The Far Field* (2001), *Crawl Space* (2005), and *Lola, California* (2011). Those novels are intricately constructed, expansive works that immerse the reader in their episodic details and unhurried, sauntering prose. *Kingdom of the Young* is not only a much slimmer volume, which of course is not unusual for story collections that assemble a writer's ongoing work, but in effect the stories seem conceptually thinner as well, more concerned with

tone and atmospheric effect — although this simply may represent a novelist’s attempt to adjust to the differing demands of the short story.

But if the stories in *Kingdom of the Young* are working in a different mode than Meidav’s novels, the most conspicuous manifestation of this difference can be felt in the absence in many of the stories (not all) of the sort of vivid detail offered in the novels. These details are not necessarily conveyed by flourishes of description, but are built up through a layering effect created via shifts in time and perspective, used by Meidav as the structural foundation of the novels. Thus many of the stories seem abstract and quasi-allegorical where the novels are concrete and immediate. *Crawl Space* could be described as an account of evil in the world, but its story of an elderly Frenchman accused of war crimes during the Nazi era creates moral ambiguity in its comprehensive first-person narrative of its protagonist’s controversial life. The story “I Never Had Any Problems with You” might also be called a story about the presence of evil, but its highly compressed form — a letter of sorts from a father to a daughter — acts more as a mystery story in which the reader must read between the lines for the apparent truth the father has devoted himself to hiding than an inquiry into the commission of evil itself. The daughter does not fully emerge from the story as a character at all, merely the means to ultimately revealing the father’s complicity in the terrible acts carried out by the government for which he serves as a functionary.

Similarly, Meidav’s most recent novel, *Lola, California*, could be read as a meditation on male hubris and its effects on those closest to the novel’s central male figure, although this reading would unnecessarily restrict the full scope of the novel’s concerns, explicit and implicit. In *Kingdom of the Young*, “The Golden Rule, or I Am Only Trying to do the Right Thing” could as well be taken as almost a kind of parable about the sovereignty of male prerogatives. The novel and the story even share the underlying structural trope evoking the male figure in his final decrepitude, awaiting death, a device through which the rest of the character’s life and its influence are related, but again what emerges from the portrayal of Vic Mahler in the novel is its complexity, a complexity that in turn conditions the experiences of all of the other characters in the novel, through the depth of their response to Vic Mahler’s overwhelming presence in their lives. The principal male character in “The Golden Rule” (referred to by the nurses taking care of him as “the Groper”) too exerts unavoidable influence on the women around him, especially his

wife. Even more than the narrator of “I Never Had a Problem With You,” the Groper is — as a character — mostly a cipher, emptied by his infirmity of all personality except that which is summed up by his new moniker and important to the story for the emblematic role he plays as a husband who disappoints.

Of course, it is an entirely sound strategy to approach the short story in a way that most effectively exploits its differing formal possibilities. Short stories cannot create the complexity of character or achieve the kind of narrative amplitude possible in the novel, so attempting to achieve tonal consistency or emphasize stylistic invention (in general, to cultivate more “poetic” effects) are certainly worthy and legitimate ambitions. However, while Meidav is by no means a minimalist or “plain” stylist, her prose often features lengthy, relatively complex sentences, and doesn’t really work through obvious poetic devices but rather through accretion: they accumulate largely expository clauses and phrases, as if the sentences, separately and sequentially, are endeavoring to pack themselves full of as much annotative information as possible:

Nothing is not useful. They drive poorly to a eucalyptus clearing where they lie on their backs wearing cardboard-tipped swimsuits, letting rain drum the flat of their bellies, their viewers not just each other but the imaginary, slightly shocked audience they always tote around to cheer them on. They have come to this clearing as if rain-spattered beatnik exhilaration had been their mission back at alpha, drugged without drugs, beatitude theirs to find even if their own chivalric code means that the next day they can never talk about the previous day’s hijinks.

Although Meidav’s writing is lucid and subtly evocative (“drugged without drugs”), it really makes no effort to be “lyrical” or “rhapsodic.” Neither is it purely functional: Meidav’s language does not artlessly “disappear” into the narrative “flow” of plot, and requires the reader’s appreciative attention. But her periodic sentences and chains of subordinate clauses work best in creating the kind of densely textured work exemplified in *The Far Field*, *Crawl Space*, and *Lola, California*. In the more compressed space available in the short story, at least as represented by what she has attempted in *Kingdom of the Young*, Meidav’s prose style works less well, especially in stories that deliberately foreshorten depth of character and plot and thus necessarily emphasize effects of language, such as the title story, the book’s first, which takes the form of a single, multi-page paragraph of sparsely punctuated sentences that presumably is

intended to reset the reader's expectations toward a more formally unorthodox, verbally adventurous approach, an impression reinforced by the following story, "Romance; or, Blind in Granada." In both cases, however, the predominant effect is not the kind of poetic dynamism such an approach requires as substitute for character development or "world-building," but a sense of continuous exposition that struggles to maintain its narrative momentum.

Not all of the stories in *Kingdom of the Young* grapple unsuccessfully with the imperatives of the short story. Perhaps because it is narrated in the first person, giving the story the cogency added by voice, "The King of Bubbles" effectively exploits its reduced scale, relating an essentially plotless story (although with a surprise ending) in which the narrator observes his surroundings while sitting in a health club hot tub. "Dog's Journey" is the most compelling of the several stories set in Cuba (or some other more generalized Latin American country with a troubled political history), largely as a result of the greater specificity of detail it provides. "The Christian Girl" likewise immerses us in the lives of an Eastern European Jewish family before the war, and it too could be said to have a surprise ending (although in retrospect not so surprising after all). These are rather disparate stories in subject and theme, however much Meidav has attempted to provide the book with some additional unity by grouping the stories under three broad headings ("Believers," "Knives," and "Dreamers"). This miscellaneous quality is only reinforced by the inclusion (as a "Coda") of two works of creative nonfiction. These essays considered separately are well done and interesting enough, but finally they seem a little too obviously an effort to augment an otherwise slender collection.

Kingdom of the Young ultimately confirms that Edie Meidav's skills as a writer are indeed better suited to novels — long ones at that — rather than short fiction. At a time when short stories are probably less welcomed by mainstream publishers than ever — and they've never been all that welcome — certainly no writers should be discouraged from testing the potential of the form, especially if it allows them to experiment with previously unexplored techniques and strategies. But while novels like *Crawl Space* and *Lola, California* are not "experimental" in the sense by which that term has come to designate a specific mode of self-consciously unconventional fiction, nevertheless their essential realism is not of the sort that encourages distracted, superficial reading. Readers unacquainted with Meidav's work might turn first to these more abundantly devised and engrossing books.

Women's Voices

Sarah Gerard's *Binary Star* is not a formally conventional novel, although it is an intensely realistic one. Conventional storytelling and realism are frequently conflated, as if the latter requires the former to manifest itself or the former naturally produces the latter. But neither is the case. Plot-driven fiction, to the extent it does indeed have "plot" (of the sort diagrammed by Gustav Freytag in his famous "Pyramid"), could actually be called a distortion of reality, as it falsely implies that life unfolds as a "story," complete with discernible beginnings (the exposition), middles (the rising action) and ends (the climax). "Realism" is arguably better served by a formal structure that minimizes plot, that in fact more closely achieves fidelity to real life by eliminating it altogether.

Gerard does not entirely eliminate plot in *Binary Star*. Things happen. The novel's twin protagonists, an anorexic woman and her alcoholic, sometimes violent boyfriend, embark on a road trip across the country, so that much of the novel takes the form of a picaresque journey, albeit one that seems headed to nowhere in particular. Even so, the narrative isn't always organized chronologically, as it moves freely into flashbacks depicting earlier episodes in the protagonists' troubled relationship, as well as the woman's experiences as a graduate student and a teacher. By the end of the novel the woman and the boyfriend, John, have apparently split, so there is some change from the circumstances obtaining at the beginning of the woman's story (she is herself the narrator), but on the other hand it certainly does not seem that the psychological or existential problems causing her anorexia have abated, as she tells us she is down to 85 pounds. "All that's left is a remnant," she declares.

This self-characterization is actually the final expression of the metaphor evoked in the novel's title and that is extended throughout the novel as a kind of structural conceit. The narrator and John are associated with binary stars:

A binary star is a system containing two stars that orbit their common center of mass.

Binary stars are gravitationally bound.

Gravity is the way we fall together.

The narrator is a graduate student in astronomy, so the facts we are offered about the nature of the binary star system reflect her own awareness that her relationship with John can be figuratively captured in this binary star metaphor, to which she returns so insistently that it becomes a conceit that really provides the novel with its primary formal strategy. While this might seem to bring an underlying "poetic" quality to the novel's aesthetic scheme, the device is employed so explicitly, with so little effort to conceal its pertinence to the novel's two main characters, that really it serves mainly as another way of exposing us to the narrator's perceived world, of making as realistic as possible what it's like to live in the world of the anorexic.

It does seem to me that depicting the narrator/protagonist's experience of the world as realistically—as close to the truth of the situation—as possible is the fundamental ambition of *Binary Star*. The novel's reluctance to impose a conventional plot on its main characters' experience, to offer us a familiar narrative of redemption, is one way of achieving its realism, but the style Gerard has her narrator employ also contributes to the overall impression we receive that we are being immersed in the narrator's reality. The prose is the very definition of spare and restrained, paragraphs are attenuated, often no more than a sentence or two. Many passages consist of extended dialogue, which is presented without quotation marks, as if observing this convention might require too much energy. Thus the narrator's account of her increasingly desperate condition mirrors that condition, reinforcing the story of her plight through the very way she tells the story.

Binary Star succeeds on its own terms, effectively depicting the circumstances in which someone with an eating disorder must struggle to cope with a situation she clearly can't control. If the characters are not especially memorable as characters (although the extremity of their situation is), they are believable, and that seems their primary purpose in the novel—to believably illustrate the damage done by eating disorders and addiction. This is a novel whose subject is its most important element, and all others—plot, character, point of view, style—are subordinate to it, valuable for bringing the subject to life, not for their own sake. The novel has aesthetic interest, but to read the novel for its aesthetic features is ultimately to miss the point.

None of this is problematic if you believe that the objective of a work of fiction is precisely to make us believe in its world (in this case, an approximation of the "real" world), so

that we might share the perspective of one or more of its characters and in so doing "empathize" with that character. This is a common expectation of fiction, an expectation whose importance for some readers I do not discount. For me, however, it doesn't often enter into my reading experiences. There are some novels in which being lured into a character's perspective is a crucial part of the aesthetic effect, as in one using an unreliable narrator, for example. But I am generally drawn to fiction in which advancing literary art is a purpose sufficient unto itself, not a tool for producing empathy or identification. *Binary Star* is in many ways admirable, although more in the way of a good deed performed well than as a flash of artistic brilliance.

I share Scott Esposito's enthusiasm for Heather McGowan's *The Duchess of Nothing*, although I don't exactly agree with his analysis of the novel's narrative strategy:

The premise of Heather McGowan's *Duchess of Nothing* seemingly is not the most promising material for a novel, yet McGowan has fashioned an engrossing, entertaining book. She accomplishes this not through plot but instead through a stream-of-consciousness narration that beautifully characterizes her unnamed protagonist in a voice that is by turns tragic, farcical, pathetic, poignant and hilarious. (*Conversational Reading*)

This claim about "stream-of-consciousness narration" is echoed later in the review, in the suggestion that McGowan presents us with an "unadorned reality filtered through an unstable mind." But *The Duchess of Nothing* is not really a "stream-of-consciousness" novel, at least not as the term has been used in the critical discussion of this technique that has accumulated since its introduction by novelists such as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Dorothy Richardson. In the work of these writers, stream-of-consciousness is a variant on, an intensification of, third-person narration. It is more or less the culmination of the movement toward psychological realism in fiction, which might be said to have begun—at least in English language fiction—with Henry James's use of the third-person "central consciousness" approach. James's fiction helped to bring about the transformation of the omniscient narrator—knows all, sees all—into the much more limited narrator essentially restricted to the vantage point of the character whose experience is being related (called by some the "free indirect" method). But the narrator is still

of the third-person variety, originating from outside that experience and telling us the story on the character's behalf.

Stream-of-consciousness takes this a step farther and attempts to provide a window of sorts on a character's experiences as they are being processed through that character's mind. Such narration is frequently fragmentary and discontinuous, in an attempt to mimic the way such processing allegedly occurs, or at least to mimic it as closely as written language is able to do so—it is, like everything else in fiction, ultimately an illusion created through prose. If reality ultimately exists in the mind of the beholder, then the stream-of-consciousness method is an effort to have fiction reflect what is really real.

The Duchess of Nothing is a first-person narrative, so, however much we are made to view the world through the constructions of its protagonist, it can't really be said to consist of her stream of consciousness. While I certainly agree that McGowan portrays this character through "a voice that is by turns tragic, farcical, pathetic, poignant and hilarious," it is a voice, a garrulous and idiosyncratic one, in fact, a voice that in many ways works in a manner that precisely reverses the effect created by the stream-of-consciousness strategy:

Across the cafe Toby stands at the coffee machine gazing into a silver jug. His lips move, to some terrifying soliloquy, I imagine. Behind him well-dressed citizens sip their coffees, quietly content being Italian. If you could understand the strength it takes to sit here quietly, I tell the boy, If I had the power to describe how it feels to do exactly the opposite of what I'd like. I wish you could see the storm that rages beneath my surface. I was never meant to sit quietly, I tell the boy, This sitting quietly was never my idea. I flick my skirt idly, exposing my knee. It stares up at me, a hilly rebuke. I want to leave everything behind as soon as it is a minute past new. Every night after supper I'd like to drop the plate I'm washing, turn, never see any of it again. And yet I remain. I swallow my coffee, I remain.

Although it is Toby who is described as engaged in "some terrifying soliloquy," *The Duchess of Nothing* itself is an extended soliloquy, its narrator's overflowing monologue interrupted only occasionally by a word or two from "the boy" (her sole companion through most of the book). The narrator may feel there is a storm "raging" inside her, but it's really the storm of words she releases that manifests her inability to "sit quietly," her desire to "leave everything

behind as soon as it is a minute past new." Whereas stream-of-consciousness tries to direct our attention to the internal drama unfolding in human consciousness, the narrative strategy in this novel externalizes everything, articulates explicitly in the narrator's own language what in s-o-c would remain half-formed and implicit. It's as if the narrator literally can't resist translating into comprehensible speech every thought that comes into her head.

In his *Boston Globe* review of the novel, Richard Eder accurately notes the protagonist's "grandiloquent self-proclamation," but I cannot agree with Eder that she is an example of an "unreliable narrator." Eder believes that her reticence in fully disclosing the particulars of her past (or even of her present arrangement with "Edmund," brother of "the boy") creates an incompleteness of context that suggests willful manipulation on the narrator's part. While it is true that the novel is somewhat short on expository detail, I would argue that this is simply the consequence of the narrative method McGowan has chosen and to which she remains faithful: no "infodumps" if that would make the narrative voice ring false. I would argue further that it is this method that otherwise invokes the somewhat misshapen world and off-kilter perspective that, to me, are a large part of this novel's appeal. For the narrator to be "unreliable," we would have to believe she is deliberately presenting us with a false account of herself, her actions, and her background (and that we would be able to tell, ultimately, that the account is false), but that she is in effect working out as she goes what she thinks about her situation does not, in my view, make her unreliable. It makes her, as Scott Esposito puts it, "by turns tragic, farcical, pathetic, poignant and hilarious."

Eder is ultimately rather contemptuous of "the woman," as he chooses to call her. She is "pitiable," guilty of "track-covering, the shame that flickers beneath the arrogance." She has a "skewed and inflated vision of herself and her life." She is "cold." And indeed the narrator does seem frustrated with her situation, unable to square her sense of her own worth with the increasingly desperate circumstances in which she finds herself. She is certainly impulsive. More than anything, however, she is instinctively unconventional and incapable of settling for "normality"—confronting the possibility of accepting a normal life at the novel's conclusion, she instead lights out for the territory: "Then I go out once more, slamming the door behind me. I like the sound so much, I open the door and slam it shut several times." I suppose one could feel contempt for a woman who doesn't behave as she ought, who turns her back so decisively on

domestic bliss, but I just find her a very interesting character quite unlike most protagonists of most literary fiction. Both she and *The Duchess of Nothing* itself are much more convincingly "transgressive" of established norms—of female behavior and of conventional "psychological realism"—than other novels sometimes accorded that label. Anyone interested in a refreshingly different kind of reading experience should read this book.

In her review of Nell Zink's *The Wallcreeper*, Lionel Shriver judges that the novel exists in a kind of narrative void so that "when all is said and done, you're pretty much left with a strong voice and snappy one-liners. There's an arbitrary quality. . . a sense that one thing could happen or something else altogether and it wouldn't matter." Despite Zink's stylistic skills, the narrative lacks "a story that really rolls."

There is certainly a great deal of drift in the account of her life given by the novel's protagonist, Tiffany, even to the point that episodes follow each other almost randomly, but I am inclined to agree with Daniel Davis Wood, who interprets Tiffany's continual recourse to the "snappy one-liners" as "a strange sort of stylistic coping strategy" in the face of the essentially traumatic experiences she recounts. This perspective on the plotlessness of *The Wallcreeper* helps us to perceive a certain kind of compensating unity in the novel—a unity of voice and style—but Shriver's complaint that it meanders sufficiently to at times verge on the aimless does identify a quality of the novel that often threatens to induce lethargy even in readers otherwise willing to acknowledge the narrator's stylistic charms.

Ultimately, however, it is not really plot or story that this novel lacks, but more broadly an attention to form, the creation of an aesthetic order that engages the reader's interest as a substitute for conventionally developed plot. Even in mainstream literary fiction (perhaps especially in mainstream literary fiction), "form" is too often conceived as identical to plot, but in the most interesting fiction, the former transcends the latter, converging with voice and style to provide a work with its aesthetic identity, to fashion the "art" of the art of fiction. In *The Wallcreeper*, it is as if Zink gave all of her effort to creating a distinctive voice (at which she succeeds), one that leans heavily on witticisms and arresting expressions, while leaving form to take care of itself—which unfortunately it ultimately fails to do. If Tiffany's narration is intended

as a kind of experiment with formlessness, the actual effect is paradoxically to put even more emphasis on character and, if not story of the well-made variety, on what happens.

This is not an auspicious context for an appreciation of *The Wallcreeper*. Aside from Tiffany, none of the characters in the novel are very interesting (although perhaps it is Tiffany's egocentric account that prevents her husband, Stephen, from becoming an interesting character, since finally we know so little about him it is difficult to apprehend him fully), and Tiffany herself through most of the novel is surely not a very likeable character. This finally does not prevent her from being a compelling character in her own way (compelling perhaps in her determination not to be a likeable character), but eventually her exasperating behavior palls from repetition, and the "snappy one-liners" are not enough to sustain any consistent concern for what she does. She spends a good deal of time relating her adulterous affairs, but again their sameness eventually becomes wearisome rather than salacious.

Eventually Tiffany becomes involved in a quasi-radical kind of environmentalism (quasi because it is related in such an affectless way, just something else she's gotten involved in), but most of these episodes seem designed principally to provide us with "information" about European environmental issues and EU bureaucracy. They are the most tedious parts of the book, but in their gratuitous way help to highlight for us the novel's more serious flaw. Without a sense of how these interludes contribute to the realization of the novel's formal ambitions—largely because it doesn't seem to have any such ambitions—the reader must conclude they have been included for no particular reason at all.

A Certain Kind of Narrative

Although nothing definitive can be said about prevailing assumptions in American writing by considering any particular first novel, Eric Lundgren's *The Facades* seems to reflect an understanding of what makes a work of fiction "unconventional." Whether such an understanding arises from influences absorbed in a creative writing program, through the halls of which many younger writers do indeed pass, or simply from noting what works get called "innovative" by critics and reviewers, many ambitious novels embody a widely-held conception

of a departure from convention. However, this conception encourages a preference for a certain kind of narrative more than it encourages many challenges to narrative itself.

The Facades does exemplify this preference, but the first thing that should be said about it is that it is a well-written, well-paced, atmospherically persuasive novel that rewards the reader's time. It compels attention from its first few lines:

I used to drive downtown every night, looking for my wife. The rush hour traffic was across the median and I traveled the westbound lane of I-99 without delay or impediment, sure I was going the wrong way. The city assembled itself, scattered lights in the old skyscrapers meandering the night sky like notes on a staff. What could I have hoped to find there? People didn't just disappear, I thought at the time. They left fingerprints, notes, receipts, echoes. If Molly had walked from her opera rehearsal to the corner deli and had not materialized there or returned, she must have left a residue behind.

Unlike some novels, *The Facades* continues from this memorable and compelling opening to satisfy the reader's curiosity about the narrator's predicament. The narrator, Sven Norberg, searches for his wife, a prominent opera singer, but he finds only "echoes" of her presence. In the meantime, his relationship with his son deteriorates to the point that the son leaves to join a religious cult. As Sven roams through the fictional city of Trude, his experiences give the reader a sense of the city "assembling" itself—although Trude, a version of a Midwestern rust belt city in decline, is in such a state of disrepair that the impression we get is of a city disassembling itself as well.

Sven is very aware of Trude's degraded status, but his voyage through the inner depths of the city only confirms this degradation for the reader, while the entropic city also mirrors the loss of energy and purpose in Sven's life in the wake of his wife's disappearance. The most devastating manifestation of the increasing disarray and loss of control Sven experiences is the growing alienation of his son, Kyle, who finds both purpose and a surrogate father in Bob Lily, head of the First Church of the Divine Purpose.

Other subplots also dramatize the general loss of function encountered everywhere in Trude. Among the problems confronting Trude is, of course, a financial crisis, and the city's

oafish mayor has decreed that all public libraries will be closed to save money. In defiance of this decree, a group of radicalized librarians occupy the main downtown branch, and throughout the narrative are engaged in a standoff with the police. Sven has a more direct experience with the police himself, in the form of two detectives supposedly investigating his wife's disappearance but who at best produce only fabricated evidence and at worst rely on the dreams of one of the detectives (nicknamed "The Oracle"). These episodes are half satirical and half surreal, but they never quite stray from the realm of possibility, nor do they descend into freakish whimsy such that the novel loses its direction among superficial distortions of fantasy. The book refuses to indulge in the sort of facile surrealism, increasingly common in American fiction, that takes from the modernist surrealism of the early twentieth century its distortions of reality but without its specific philosophical intentions—as if simply to depart from the protocols of literary realism remains a bold move. The vision of American decline presented in *The Facades* is appealingly askew, but it is also close enough to the existing circumstances of decline that the novel's fictional world seems both aesthetically autonomous and uncomfortably recognizable as the world we live in.

The Facades could plausibly be described as a post-apocalyptic narrative, which has been popular enough among contemporary writers (among them Cormac McCarthy, Steve Erickson, and Ben Marcus) that it has developed into a genre of sorts, incorporating elements of both literary fiction and science fiction. Although no particular national trauma or catastrophic event has resulted in Trude's devastation, as a de-industrialized Midwestern city it represents a culmination of a phenomenon long in the making but here rendered starkly as an urban dystopia, a fate that indeed may await more than one rust belt city in decline. Unlike much post-apocalyptic fiction, however, which frequently succumbs to sensationalist plot devices or is too obviously didactic, *The Facades* avoids narrative melodrama and refrains from heavy-handed allegory. Lundgren does not distort his fictional world in order to offer a warning about the dangers we court in our present practices, but creates a subtly distorted world and allows it its own logical integrity. If this novel shows the influence of the post-apocalyptic setting, it does so in a more seamless way than many other entries in the genre, without repeating overused conceits or settling for the expected effects.

A primary feature of the fictional world that is Trude consists literally of its buildings, and thus Sven casts his observant eye on the landmark structures he encounters, including the Ringstrasse, a labyrinthine shopping mall that was built by the Austrian emigrant architect Klaus Bernhard and is his “greatest statement on the impossibility of fulfillment with a capitalist culture,” now itself mostly reflective of Trude’s decline:

The Ringstrasse still made quite an impression as you approached on I-99, the whitewashed spirals of concrete looming under the night sky. Bernhard had envisioned it as the locus of a second city, a new downtown for an ideal Trude to replace the declining original. He wanted the mall to look Greek, noting wryly that the Oracle at Delphi was once surrounded by junk dealers and souvenir sellers. The exterior of the mall was blinding in its early years. It gave off an almost holy radiance. . . . As we walked in the west entrance, I had to admit that Bernhard’s detractors had a point. It wasn’t very successful as a mall. The vast echoing chambers, the blank concrete, exposed the ultimate hollowness of the retail urge. This was especially the case in the mall’s outer rings, where the large department stores were housed. One tiled path might lead you directly to a perfume counter, while another curved around to a copper statue of Hermes presiding over a dried-up fountain full of rusty pennies.

We also get detailed views of the Opera House, where for years Sven’s missing wife Molly presided as a local diva, and the Trumhaus, a home for senior citizens where Sven’s mother currently resides and where Bernhard himself spent his final days, an account of which we get at the novel’s conclusion. This conclusion reinforces the parallel between Sven and Bernhard in their common state of loss—it may be that Sven’s loss may just be a later, faint echo of Bernhard’s, who not only also lost the woman he loved but ultimately “failed to create a world he could live in.”

Sven Norberg finds himself inhabiting the city built by Klaus Bernhard, if anything now even more unlivable, but it becomes increasingly apparent that Molly Norberg, at least, has voluntarily escaped the dreary confines of Trude (and thus avoided the metaphorical fate of Bernhard’s beloved Ulli, who, Bernhard claims on his death bed, is buried “under the labyrinth” of the Ringstrasse.) As Sven is told by a resident of the Trumhaus, however, people like Sven and Bernhard “could never leave Trude.” They are necessary parts of the landscape, the

American urban landscape that in both its human and its human-created forms is finally the real subject of *The Facades*. Lundgren's achievement lies in skillfully invoking this landscape and making us believe in it enough that we might think we inhabit it ourselves.

William Luvaas is probably best known for his 2013 book *Ashes Rain Down*, a linked collection of stories depicting a mountain community trying to subsist in a near future in which climate change has wreaked its havoc and the world order has apparently collapsed. Prior to this book, Luvaas had published two novels, *The Seductions of Natalie Bach* (1987) and *Going Under* (1994), as well as another collection of stories, *A Working Man's Apocrypha* (2007). The two novels are more or less works of conventional realism — although stylistically quite well executed — but in *A Working Man's Apocrypha* several stories seemed to be moving away from strict realism (a couple anticipating the post-apocalyptic fables of *Ashes Rain Down*). That book shares realism's goal of evoking a specific place and the people who live there, but it does so through an imagined extension of current reality, one in which the laws of that reality don't entirely apply.

Beneath the Coyote Hills could also be described as a departure from realism as practiced in most literary fiction, although in this case not via post-apocalyptic fantasy but by calling into question the reliability of the narrative it constructs. The story relates the travails of a luckless writer who in the novel's present has gone "off the grid," living as a squatter in the southern California desert. Intertwined with Tommy Aristophanos's first-person account of his struggle to endure in this stark environment — an account that moves freely in time to provide the backstory that led Tommy to his current circumstances — are excerpts from Tommy's novel, one that he has apparently been writing for many years. These excerpts eventually provide us with the life of "V. C. Hoffstetter," a man whose inexorable rise to success offers the reverse scenario of Tommy's apparent failure.

Hoffstetter may be a projection of Tommy's own brother, of whom we don't otherwise see much but who, like Hoffstetter and unlike Tommy, was highly ambitious and presumably achieved his ambition. Fictional versions of both Tommy and his brother also appear in Tommy's novel — entitled *The Great Hofstetter* — so it is perhaps appropriate to regard V. C. Hoffstetter (a.k.a. "Volt") as Tommy Aristophanos's imagined alter ego. Volt — a self-obsessed,

self-righteous, sociopathically ruthless corporate executive — represents Tommy’s attempt, conscious or unconscious, to reframe his failures as a kind of success. Indeed, Tommy’s chronicle of his journey from promising writer and family man to desert rat at first seems to position *Beneath the Coyote Hills* as a kind of meditation on the American obsession with material success, as well as on male aggression and the vagaries of luck.

But then we find that Tommy’s fictional creations have crossed over into his “real life.” About halfway into the novel, just when his life finally seemed on track (he has a family and relative job security), Tommy discovers when applying for a home mortgage that the CEO of his broker’s parent company is ... V. C. Hoffstetter. Shortly after this, Tommy’s life begins to unravel: he loses his job, his son is diagnosed with cancer and eventually dies, and his wife’s insurance company declines to pay their son’s medical bills. When his house is scheduled for repossession, Tommy insists on a meeting with Hoffstetter since, he tells his wife, “I invented him, for crissake. Who do you think I’ve been writing about all these years? You think I don’t recognize my own creation?”

We might attribute Tommy’s seemingly delusional state to the epileptic seizures — “spells,” he calls them — he has experienced all his life. The worst of these spells put him in a “dark fog” or “waking darkness”:

I move back and forth from past to present without transition, can’t be sure if events are happening around me or inside my head. All day, disjunctive voices call my name; I turn and find no one there. Time shatters at my feet, vagrant images like figments of torn-up photographs perch an instant on the event horizon of the brain before being sucked into the deep hole of amnesia. I wince from present to past, not sure where I am.

This description comes close to approximating the structure of Tommy Aristophanos’s narrative and its effect on the reader. Tommy seems to inhabit a space where time has indeed shattered, a state of being in which the notion of temporal progress has become irrelevant; and the reader moves with him “back and forth from past to present” — although the resulting episodes do have a larger coherence, are more than “vagrant images” flashing before his brain’s “event horizon.” But ultimately we too can’t be sure if events are happening to and around Tommy or mostly inside his head.

This disorienting effect is only magnified when we learn further that “Tommy Aristophanos” is the “model” for a character in a novel written by Volt Hofstetter’s wife. When Tommy and Lizbeth Hofstetter meet and discuss the implications of their respective authorship of one another, surely some apotheosis of metafictional legerdemain has been achieved. Luvaas uses their encounter to reveal one final piece of Tommy’s life story — that his father was killed in a car accident while Tommy was at the wheel, the guilt over which has caused him to repress the circumstances of his father’s death, perhaps sabotaging his efforts to attain a conventionally successful existence. Lizbeth Hoffstetter is finally able to get Tommy to accept the truth of what happened (including the fact that Tommy himself was not to blame), which, if it doesn’t signal Tommy’s recommitment to a stable life, does lead him to burn his novel manuscript. He has now realized that “you can’t rewrite your life by fantasizing your way out of it, but you can learn to stop railing against your fate and accept it.” As if symbolically reinforcing Tommy’s act of purification, the olive grove he has been occupying is consumed in a seasonal wildfire.

In destroying his manuscript, Tommy believes he has in effect made Hofstetter and his wife disappear. The novel’s conclusion seems to encourage us to interpret the self-reflexive complications — who’s authoring whom, what’s real and what’s imagined? — as symptoms of Tommy’s febrile brain in its medically untreated state and to regard his purification by fire as a cleansing of illusions and the prelude to a necessary reorientation to the world. If this is the case, if the metafictional maneuvering is just a way of embellishing an otherwise straightforward story of self-discovery, of externalizing a character’s internal conflicts, it doesn’t seem merely a cavil to ask whether this strategy is perhaps needlessly baroque, implicitly professing to be more radical than it really is. If the effect of most works of metafiction — of “postmodern” self-reflexivity in general — is to undermine our assumption that fiction offers direct access to reality, the blurring of the line between illusion and the presumably real in *Beneath the Coyote Hills* suggests that reality itself is often indistinguishable from fiction.

While this is an apt enough formulation of Tommy’s experience of his reality, likely some other, less oblique strategy for evoking his troubled relationship with the world would have worked just as well. The potential distraction caused by what some readers might regard as narratorial sleight-of-hand is not finally balanced by a palpable engagement with the representational questions raised by such flagrant artifice. Luvaas ultimately does not push the

book's metafictional questioning to the point of exposing his own narrative as a literary mirage, but then it would be difficult to understand why he might want to do that in the first place. For surely we are meant to take Tommy Aristophanos and his personal dilemma seriously. Despite the shadow of doubt cast over his corporeal status, Tommy is a vividly rendered character, both in the color of his narrative voice and in his depicted efforts to adapt to his circumstances. To disclose that he is a mere figment of the imagination — not just the author's imagination but that of another fictional character — seems a superfluous gesture, perhaps even inimical to the novel's thematic intention.

Like Luvaas's previous work, *Beneath the Coyote Hills* is a novel that seeks to be about something. *Ashes Rain Down* is about the catastrophic effects of climate change. *Going Under* is about the degradation of family life caused by alcoholism. *Beneath the Coyote Hills* goes into considerable detail about the subprime lending scam that led to the financial crisis of 2007–2008. And while it would be an oversimplification to say that any of these works are solely or primarily about such topical issues, to obscure these issues in a metafictional cloud would be a puzzling strategy indeed.

Another consistent feature of Luvaas's fiction — one ultimately grounded in the underlying assumptions if not necessarily the traditional practices of realism — is the attention it pays to the influence of place, specifically the West Coast from southern Oregon (Luvaas's native region) to southern California. The depictions of climate-ravaged Sluggards Creek in *Ashes Rain Down* and of the southern California desert in *Beneath the Coyote Hills* is one of the most impressive achievements of these books. California seems to serve in William Luvaas's imagination as the most appropriate setting for tales of extremity: the elemental, harsh qualities of the landscape reinforce the sense of stark clarity with which the characters must learn to view their circumstances. The final set piece in *Coyote Hills* — describing the fire that will send Tommy Aristophanos on his way again, “traipsing like Cain along the highways” — is an especially compelling example of Luvaas's skill at rendering the tangible power of the environment:

There's nothing so terrifying or exhilarating as fire. Something eternal that touches the earth. So you might half understand the orgiastic thrill it gives an arsonist. All that furious energy. But what we feel most is animal fear, watching flames move up steep

hillsides freight-train fast, forming their own updraft, sucking air up from the valley, right out of our lungs. Fire wends snake-slow up ravines, leaving them aglow like rivers of molten lava. At dusk, a surreal orange nimbus backdrops the Coyote Hills. Clouds of smoke glow incandescent red. We watch hot spots flare up higher in the mountains, secondary blazes kindled by embers falling in the tall timber. Soon the entire San Jacinto Range will be ablaze.

The primary strength of Luvaas's fiction is in the vigor and lucidity of the writing, and these qualities are evident in *Beneath the Coyote Hills*. If this novel ventures somewhat equivocally into postmodernist whimsy, it is nevertheless an admirable book well worth reading.

Upon the publication of her previous book, *Drone and Apocalypse* (2015), Joanna Demers told her institution's newsletter (at USC's Thornton School of Music), that the book "has a fictional premise, but it's not a novel. It's not a fictional story." Yet on her author website we are told that in addition to her scholarly work as a musicologist, Demers "has also written two novels," one of them *Drone and Apocalypse*, the other her new book, *Anatomy of Thought-Fiction: CHS Report 2214*. On the new book's back cover, its publisher, Zero Books, identifies it as a "philosophical novella." The title of the book itself self-announces the split personality it seems to embody: "Anatomy of Thought-Fiction" implies a philosophical analysis, a kind of metacommentary on an analytical strategy; that such an anatomy is apparently carried out in the "CHS Report, 2214" of course appears to suggest we should expect some version of a science fiction narrative or setting.

Pointing out what initially could be taken as an apparent slippage between categories, on the part of both the author in conceptualizing the genre into which her work fits and the reader in determining the generic expectations appropriate to the work, is not to accuse the author of intellectual confusion or question these books' integrity. It is first of all simply to indicate the dilemma Demers faces in attempting to establish a "creative" alternative to straightforward scholarly writing by invoking a "fictional" context in which to address the concerns pursued in the scholarly writing but without deferring to the usual scholarly protocols. The line between fiction and nonfiction, the creative and the critical, may have by now become blurrier and blurrier, but perhaps there is after all a point where to call an act of writing "fiction" only

obscures that work's actual achievement, as well as the ultimate utility of the term "fiction" to identify a form of literary writing the boundaries of which are not so infinitely elastic it effectively ceases to exist. Both *Drone and Apocalypse* and *Anatomy of Thought-Fiction* may take us to that point.

Each of these books in its way an extension of Demers's 2010 book, *Listening to the Noise*, an unambiguously nonfictional work of academic scholarship that examines the musical genre she designates as "experimental electronic music." Demers is clearly a devotee of this music, and her book attempts to discern why and if, despite its rejection of most of the traditional assumptions governing music and musical experience, and also despite its often radical transformation of musical "sound" beyond what many listeners would even consider to be music, listening to experimental electronic music could still be described as an aesthetic experience. The book demonstrates Demers's thorough familiarity with all of the varieties of electronic music (including what is called "sound art," the most radical metamorphosis in conceptions of musical expression) and is not so dependent on musicological language or wedded to academic procedures that it could not serve the general reader as an illuminating guide to the evolution of avant-garde ideas about music.

A reader might indeed finish *Listening to the Noise*, however, with the sense that its author has not finally communicated all she might like to say about electronic music, that simply to establish a plausible role for aesthetic appreciation — however altered in its application — does not adequately attest to the profound effect this music can have, and that it clearly enough has had on Demers herself. This fundamental gap between what a scholarly book is able to express and the greater urgency felt by the writer toward the subject — the need to actually register the aesthetic influence exerted by the music — would seem to be the immediate motivation for writing *Drone and Apocalypse*. The focus here is specifically on drone music, and the book's purpose, Demers explicitly tells us in the preface to the book, is to evoke "the ineffability of music through doing rather than just writing." Presumably she means that the form her book takes, its "fictional premise and creative methodology," allows her to do more than just explain or interpret drone music, about which it may be the case "there is nothing substantially new to say," anyway. It allows her to "experiment with the ways [drone music] simultaneously

evokes and deflects meaning,” which would appear to require that Demers engage in a mode of writing somewhat closer to literature.

Drone and Apocalypse does feature a fictional character, clearly enough a disguised version of Joanna Demers in her preoccupation with drone music, although she is otherwise provided with altered circumstances — as a woman who lived in obscurity as an administrative assistant at a university (a music department) but who left behind (the present of the book’s fictional frame is the year 2213) a collection of journals that in the future Demers posits has acquired a good deal of fascination for providing “some of the most idiosyncratic insights on the philosophy of art of her era.” From these journals, the “Center for Humanistic Study” has constructed an “exhibition catalog for the end of the world” (the book’s subtitle) featuring Cynthia Wey’s “commentaries on the apocalypse” and a series of “descriptions of speculative artworks” prepared by Wey, accompanied by the Center’s attempt to re-create (or create) the artworks. *Drone and Apocalypse* echoes *Listening to the Noise* in its exposition of the aesthetic qualities of drone music — Cynthia Wey even contending it is often “beautiful” — but this book more specifically contemplates the way the aesthetic nature of drone music, its mission to reach some ultimate limit in the meaningful organization of sound, inherently provokes reflection on the apocalypse. “Drone music is an art,” writes Wey, “that can almost casually conjure the heat and death and terror and joy that the apocalypse will bring, its torturous moral dead ends.”

These fictional commentaries — nominally fictional, since much of their analysis is similar to what we find in *Listening to the Noise* — are really the book’s primary source of interest; the imagined artworks (which might be regarded as extreme versions of conceptual art, ideas about art with no execution beyond the printed pages of Cynthia Wey’s journals) seem a perfunctory, even superfluous, addition, at best perhaps significant as an indication that Cynthia Wey’s musical interests are part of an essentially aesthetic sensibility. But finally *Drone and Apocalypse* can’t fully conceal its origin as a work of explication rather than imaginative fiction — if indeed Demers even wants it to be completely concealed. *Anatomy of Thought-Fiction*, on the other hand, does endeavor to more seamlessly take on the semblance of fiction. No author’s preface announces its purpose or establishes its fictional frame. Here the book is presented to us directly as a work compiled by the Center for Humanistic Study (published a year after its “exhibition catalog”), which in its “editors’ introduction” informs us that the book is the

discovered manuscript of “Joanna Demers,” who conceived her book as an antidote of sorts to the scholarly writing of her time, which “had so detached itself from the lived experience of scholars and public alike that, Demers feared, it would be regarded in subsequent eras as a particularly effete form of thought-fiction.”

The book proves to be a critique of the notion of “thought-fiction,” defining it as “a concept that serves a purpose even though it is known to be untrue.” As such, thought-fictions are common enough phenomena of human discourse (to some extent being indistinguishable from what might just be called metaphorical thinking), but “Joanna Demers” contends in her manuscript that “they are especially prevalent, indeed unavoidable and indispensable, in our ways of thinking about music,” in fact “the condition for the possibility of musical thought.” The author supports this assertion first by looking at some of the common musical thought-fictions (that musical form can be construed as “architecture,” for example) and then by more extensively considering what are currently (current for “Joanna Demers”) the two related thought-fictions most strongly enabling discussion of music, pop music specifically: that “music is alive,” but also that “music is dying out.” The latter construction in particular allows Demers to insightfully survey popular and electronic music in the era of digital technology, and after the death of David Bowie, and account for the pervasive sense that somehow popular music as we have known it is reaching its final phase, that it is now indeed moving inexorably to its death (“there will never be another Bowie”).

This commentary on pop music is supplemented with citations to theorists and philosophers such as Lacan, Marx, and Hegel, in a familiar academic manner, which unfortunately only reinforces the questions most readers expecting *Anatomy of Thought-Fiction* ultimately to cohere as fiction must likely develop concerning the designation of the book as a novel.

Neither the analysis of popular music styles (which is itself perfectly coherent) nor the theoretical grounding seem the sort of thing scholars would immediately dismiss, so that it becomes difficult really to understand why it could not stand alone as a work of academic criticism without the gratuitous fictional disguise, which finally seems cursory and unpersuasive. A novel might indeed be written that performs aesthetic transformations with the notion of a

“thought-fiction,” even as it blurs the line between fiction and expository discourse, but regrettably this book is not it.