

DM | DANBURY MUSEUM



Hello and Happy New Year!

The end of the year is often a time for reflection, looking back at the past year's accomplishments. Like all of you and your families, friends, and colleagues, we've faced substantial challenges these last years, but this year in particular we've had some real successes as well.

In 2022. . .

- We opened the Charles Ives Birthplace museum to the

public
in
July.
This
was
a
major
accomplishment
that
was
made
possible
through
the
generosity
of
Savings
Bank
of
Danbury.
Museum
staff
researched
and
wrote
the
tours
and
continue
conducting
the
tours
each
weekend.
We're
most
grateful
for
the
many
wonderful
and
interested
visitors
to
the
Ives
Birthplace-
-
we've
been
treated
to
some
very

special
impromptu
concerts
by
extraordinary
musicians!

- Our social media platforms combined to reach more than 1 million people. In addition to our shorter posts, we've tied to integrate some of the longer, richer stories into our posts as well.
- In addition to weekly tours of the Ives Birthplace, we welcomed visitors from all over the

country
this
summer
and
autumn
thanks
to
free
tours
funded
by
CT
Office
of
the
Arts/CT
Humanities
and
the
Danbury
Cultural
Commission.

- We
initiated
what
we
hope
will
be
a
summer
tradition-
-
music
outside
in
the
museum
gardens.
Outdoor
music
is
the
perfect
complement
to
the
gardens
that
are
so
beautifully
maintained
by
the

Danbury
Garden
Club
Civic
Committee.

- Held multiple free Covid-19 vaccination clinics in conjunction with the CT Department of Public Health and Griffin Hospital.

And to come? Well, there's a *lot* to look forward to. We have new events and programs planned, we're bringing back Cursive Camp this July, and there are some great partnerships ahead, too. We want to finish out our 80th year on a high note, so our Board of Trustees has voted to keep [ALL tours free through April 1, 2023](#). There's also a refreshed version of our website that will be coming your way in the new year!

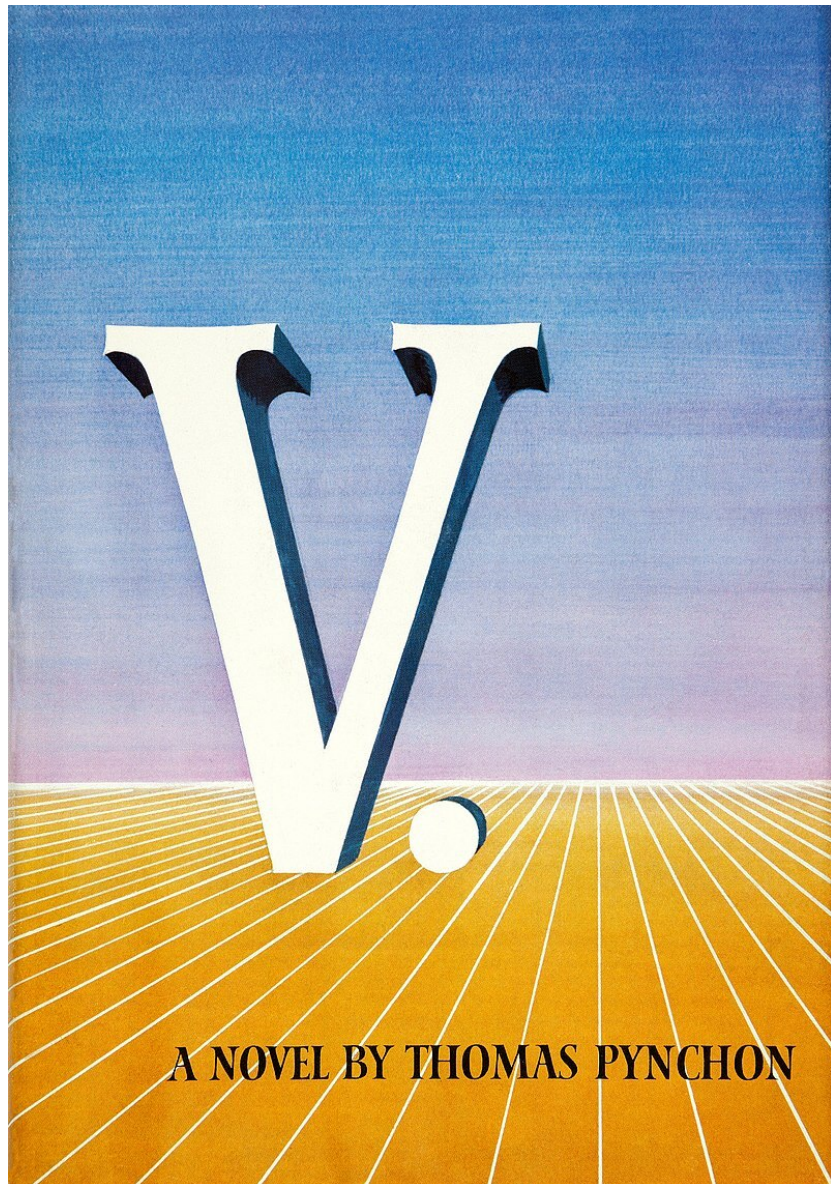
Before we bid you farewell for 2022, we're glad to have our essayists with us to close out the year. John O'Donnell makes the case for reading and reconsideration of Thomas Pynchon, and Thomas MacGregor considers the mushroom. Thanks once again to both John and Tom for their always thoughtful and interesting reads.

All of these things happen because of you--your support, your advocacy, your care and concern for preserving the history of our Danbury community. Thank you for your stalwart belief in our mission and we wish you health and happiness in 2023.

Brigid Guertin (*Executive Director, City Historian*)

Patrick Wells (*Research Specialist, Social Media Manager*)

Michele Lee Amundsen (*Collections Manager, Newsletter Editor*)



The Case for Pynchon

By John O'Donnell

2023 will mark two very important dates in literary history. They are both concerned with the same author. That author is Thomas Pynchon. I don't think that he has received the recognition that he richly deserves. There are several reasons for this neglect. The first is his reclusiveness. He does not do interviews about his work or his life. The only photographs that exist of him are primarily from the early period of his life. He has guarded his privacy for virtually his entire career. The second main reason is his tense relationship with the literary establishment. These two factors have resulted in a neglect of his body of work and resulted in an uncertainty about his standing in the literary world. I think that both factors should be considered and dismissed when looking at Pynchon's oeuvre. The anniversaries I am referring to are the 1963 publication of Pynchon's first novel *V*, and the 1973 publication of his masterpiece *Gravity's Rainbow*. Let us now take a closer look at this novelist who

deserves much more attention than he has received.

The novel *V.* won a William Faulkner Foundation Award for the best first novel of the year. It was also a finalist for the National Book Award. Then in 1966 Pynchon published *The Crying of Lot 49* which also garnered estimable reviews. Sadly, your essayist, who prided himself on keeping up with and reading quality fiction, missed both books. I think that my high school English Department as well as my undergraduate and graduate departments were staffed by very competent faculty, but not one of them mentioned Pynchon's works. He was not on my radar either, but then a great book review brought him to my attention.

In my last semester of graduate school, I read a review by Richard Locke in the March 11, 1973 *New York Times Book Review* of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Locke's review finally put Pynchon on my radar. The title of the review has a great subtitle: "One of the Longest, most Difficult, Most Ambitious Novels in Years." Early on in the review he writes "in fact, it is the longest, most difficult novel to appear since Nabokov's *Invitation to a Beheading* four years ago; its technical and verbal resources bring to mind Melville and Faulkner...*Gravity's Rainbow* is bone-crushingly dense, compulsively elaborate, silly, obscene, funny, tragic, pastoral, historical, philosophical, poetic...inspired, horrific, cold bloated, bleached and blasted." What he was doing here was pointing to the fact that *Gravity's Rainbow* is an encyclopedic novel. The textbook definition of this type of novel is a long, complex work of fiction that incorporates extensive information (which is sometimes fictional itself) often from specialized disciplines of science and the humanities. This definition perfectly describes the novel. I immediately ran out and bought the book. Unfortunately, the pressure of coursework forced me to postpone reading it until my graduation in June. I then spent the entire summer of 1973 slowly ingesting this book. The only word I can use to describe this experience was gobsmacked. I have never read a novel that had such a profound effect on me. It was the most enjoyable reading experience and because it is such a masterpiece I have continued to read it (four times as well as listening to it as narrated by George Guidall). It gives even more pleasure and insights the more one reads it.

I became a Pynchon devotee and quickly read *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* and then was hoping for something new but alas this did not happen. I started to do research on Pynchon but as I said above the biographical information is very scanty. He was born May 8, 1937, in Glen Cove, Long Island, NY. He was the son of an engineer, Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Sr. He has been described as a voracious reader and a precocious writer. He wrote short, fictional pieces for his high school newspaper. He graduated from Oyster Bay High School in 1953. He then went to Cornell University to study physics. He enlisted in the US Navy at the end of his sophomore year. In 1957 he returned to Cornell but changed his major to English. He is reputed to have taken a course with Vladimir Nabokov but like so much of his life, this is shrouded in mystery. After his graduation Pynchon worked for a time as a technical writer for Boeing in Seattle. His experiences at Boeing inspired his distrust of corporations which he put to good use in both *V.* and *The Crying of Lot 49* by skewering corporate

life in the fictional Yoyodyne Corporation. He also began to examine technology more closely and to distrust it as well. After resigning from Boeing, he spent some time living in New York and Mexico and then California while writing *Gravity's Rainbow*. That novel shared the 1974 National Book Award (with Isaac Bashevis Singer). Although the Pulitzer Prize Jury unanimously recommended the book for the award, the Pulitzer Board vetoed the jury's recommendation, and no award was made. Pynchon had clearly run afoul of the literary establishment.

After *Gravity's Rainbow* there was an eleven-year wait for Pynchon's next book: *Slow Learner* which was a collection of his early short stories. He has continued to publish and added five novels to his output. But these novels have not garnered as much attention as his earlier ones. The literary establishment looks at him very coldly and he has held on to his reclusiveness as tightly as ever. Despite these obstacles, I think that his body of work stands alone. He is the most important novelist of the last sixty years and is deserving of the Nobel Prize in Literature. He rejuvenated, revitalized, and reinvented the encyclopedic novel with *Gravity's Rainbow*. The opening lines of that novel describe the onset of the V-2 rocket in World War Two: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now." I think these lines also aptly describe Pynchon's writing career!

John O'Donnell first became a history devotee while in elementary school. He was raised in Brooklyn and frequently went to Prospect Park which has a Revolutionary War monument. He was hooked!



Mushrooms

by Thomas MacGregor

For the past 49 Christmas Eve suppers (Wigilia), I have eaten cabbage soup with mushrooms (kapusta). I had never tried this meal item until I married my wife, a second-generation person of Polish descent. As mushrooms are fungi, neither animal nor vegetable, they were a good substitute for meat when a meatless meal was required for Wigilia in days past. The custom has continued to the present.

Early in our marriage, when playing golf with my father-in-law, I accompanied him into the woods to forage for wild mushrooms after one of my many errant tee shots went astray. He always knew which types of mushrooms to pick and which to bypass. While there are over 2000 varieties of edible mushrooms, there are 80 varieties in the United States that are poisonous, some being extremely toxic. When we brought our bounty home, my mother-in-law cleaned the mushrooms, cut them into bite-size pieces, and strung these together with a needle and thick thread to make what looked like a necklace of mushroom pieces. Finally, she hung them outside on the clothesline to dry. The next Christmas Eve these dried mushrooms were in our Christmas Eve cabbage soup.

Mushrooms lack chlorophyll, typically exist on decaying material in nature, and are found in nearly every state in the Union. However, for commercial purposes, Chester County Pennsylvania accounts for nearly 47% of the mushroom trade. Mushrooms are quite nutritious and supply B-vitamins, selenium, copper, potassium, and antioxidants. When dried in the sun, they can produce and provide Vitamin D. Because of their nutrition profile, mushrooms are an important food source for vegetarian diets. According to the James Beard's *American Cookery*, the 17th-century settlers found every variety of mushrooms, except truffles, in great abundance in Connecticut, New York, and Pennsylvania. Most mushrooms today are cultivated on specialized farms as our wilderness diminishes.

While there are nearly two thousand varieties of native mushrooms, the more common varieties of cultivated mushrooms in the United States are white button, followed by crimini, portabella, oyster, porcini, and shiitake. For our cabbage soup this Wigilia we used dry porcini mushrooms (*Boletus edulis*). An interesting note from the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*: a single porcini mushroom is called a “porcino,” although no one eats just one. Porcini are brown-capped mushrooms, having convex-shaped caps and a nutty and meat-like taste. Compared to common button mushrooms, porcini are very earthy-tasting. They are the closest cultivar to the wild mushrooms that my father-in-law and I collected. Porcini are sometimes confused with shiitake mushrooms. Shiitake are meatier but less woodsy-tasting, yet can be used as a substitute when porcini are hard to find. Fresh porcini are very weather-dependent and are only available for a month in autumn and a month in late spring. Dried porcini can be found in specialty shops year-round if there was an abundant harvest that year.

When my wife and I were on a tour of Poland in September of 2014, we came across many older-women vendors selling their morning collections of mushrooms on a street in Gdansk. The smell was fragrant and the mushrooms were huge. Mushrooms are an important staple in the Eastern European cuisine. A December 4, 2022, *New York Times* article reported that enemy land mines in the pine forests of Ukraine were placing mushroom collectors in peril just before the holidays and the winter season. Many pickers braved the dangers because mushroom hunting is a peaceful respite from this brutal war. One picker collected over 500 pounds of mushrooms for his family and friends to make it through the winter.

You may want to add some different varieties of mushrooms to your 2023 cuisine, but, if you want to forage for them in the wild, find an expert to accompany you. Though I often see wild mushrooms on my hikes in the woods, I prefer to forage through the produce aisles at my local supermarket for the cultivated varieties because it's the safer option.

After 33 years at Boehringer Ingelheim, Dr. Tom (UConn '85) retired to his garden and piano.

Save The Date!



Friday, March 10, 2023
@ the Amber Room Colonnade

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