

The MANTELPIECE

Issue 1

Literary Magazine

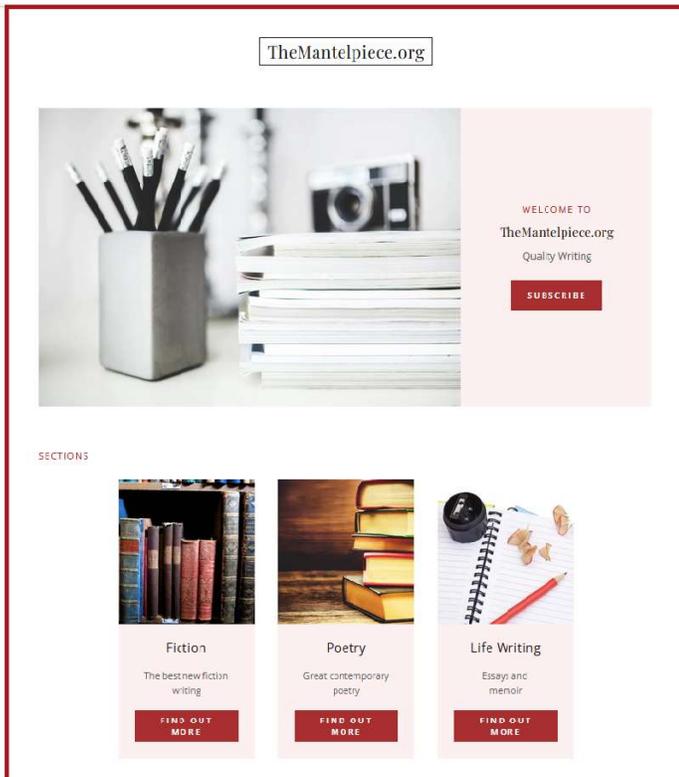
July 2023





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The Human Touch

Navigating the Future of Literature in the Age of AI

The advent of artificial intelligence (AI) has brought significant changes to various fields, including literature. With the rapid development of AI technology, the question arises: what does the future hold for literature in the times of AI?

One of the most significant impacts of AI on literature is the rise of automated writing. AI tools, such as GPT-3, can generate articles, essays, and even books with remarkable accuracy and coherence. This development raises the question of whether AI-generated literature will replace human-authored literature.

However, it is crucial to note that literature is more than just words on a page. It is the human experience and perspective that make literature compelling and enduring. AI-generated literature may be technically proficient, but it lacks the human touch that makes literature resonate with readers. Literature is not only about information but also about empathy and emotional connection.

Another significant impact of AI on literature is its potential to enhance the reading experience. AI-powered tools can personalize reading recommendations based on a reader's preferences and reading habits. For example, an AI algorithm can analyze a reader's past reading history and suggest books that are likely to interest them. AI can also enhance the accessibility of literature by translating works into multiple languages and providing audio versions for the visually impaired.

However, there is a concern that AI-powered personalization may lead to a narrowing of literary tastes. Readers may

only be exposed to books that fit within their established preferences, limiting their literary horizons. Additionally, there is a risk that the personalization of literature may lead to an overreliance on algorithms and automation, diminishing the role of human editors and literary critics.

Finally, AI has the potential to democratize the production and distribution of literature. Self-publishing platforms, such as Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, allow writers to bypass traditional publishing houses and distribute their work globally. AI-powered marketing tools can also help independent authors reach new audiences and build a following.

However, the rise of self-publishing has also led to a flood of poorly written and edited books flooding the market, making it harder for readers to find quality literature. Additionally, there is a risk that AI-powered marketing tools may prioritize popularity over literary merit, leading to a homogenization of literature.

In conclusion, AI has the potential to revolutionize literature in many ways, from automated writing to personalized reading recommendations and democratized publishing. However, it is crucial to recognize that literature is more than just words on a page. It is a reflection of

the human experience and perspective, and the emotional connection between reader and author that makes literature so powerful. As such, while AI may enhance the reading experience, it cannot replace the essential role of human authors and editors in creating and shaping literature. □

LH



Fiction

Battling the Bindweed

Lillian Heimisdottir



I had never seen a man use a sickle in real life until we moved into the house on Primavera Avenue. Sure, I had seen sickles in cartoons and animated movies, but I didn't know that you could buy tools like that at the local garden center. The reason my father had purchased such an antiquated gadget was that we had rented a house with an enormous garden that had been left unattended for over a year and now looked like an unsurpassable jungle.

So, my father had gone out to buy all kinds of appliances to attack the massive bushes and impenetrable weeds that were entangled beyond comprehension. He had acquired trimmers and shears, a rake and a shovel, an electric hedge-cutter and some hand-tools to rotate the soil. Then there was this funny looking thing that I recognized from pictures of ancient farming in my history schoolbooks.

"Wow, let me see this," I said and grabbed the tool to inspect it.

"Careful, it's sharp," my father warned.

But I had already removed the cover from the blade and started hatching the thistles, which were over five feet tall and fell like little trees as I chopped them down.

"Here, take the shears and start cutting the hedges," my father commanded. "Or better yet, get the rake and gather together the branches and the leaves. I'll do the cutting."

He started trimming the hedges with the big shears and soon cut-off twigs and leafy branches came flying on the ground. I did the best I could to rake them together and stuff them in large plastic bags. It was a tedious task and I was perpetually poking holes in the bags with the pointy ends of the cut-off branches. Also, I was constantly scratching my hands and forearms, even though I wore thick working gloves and tried to cover my arms with my shirtsleeves.

"Take care not to rip the bags or everything will fall out of them," my fa-

ther shouted when he saw how clumsy I was.

"The branches are too big. I can't get them properly in the bags without tearing the plastic."

"Let me see that," my father said in an annoyed tone, as he took over the job.

The way he did it seemed to work fine. He could fill the bags without making a single hole in them. So I decided to let him just take care of the whole procedure and snuck off to another part of the garden where I was out of sight. And of course, I took the sickle with me. I was really fascinated by this magical-looking tool.

I walked to the wall that enclosed the garden and started to look for lizards and other creatures that might be living in the cracks, but apart from a few spiders and horseflies I saw no sign of animal life. So I took to inspecting the plants closer. I kicked a few large weed stems with my foot, which resulted in them releasing huge amounts of a dust-like material that was foul smelling and stung in my nose and made my eyes burn.

Then I noticed the tangles of bindweed climbing up the wall and the tree trunks. I actually found it quite pretty with its white trumpet-like flowers, but it was clear that it was a brute of a plant, out-competing all other vegetation in the garden. The bindweed crept along the surface of the soil, climbing fences, other plants and whatever else it did encounter, forming a dense, entangled mat of greenery. Entwining its way around other plants, this super-weed would eventually strangle them and take over the whole vegetation.

I took the sickle and started hacking at the bindweed. First gently and carefully, just to see if it would somehow defend itself, by releasing a foul-smelling, itchy powder, like the other weeds. Then gradually I chopped harder, taking down larger parts of the entangled web of green rubbery weeds.

"Take that, you creepy monster," I hissed as I mowed the weeds to the ground.

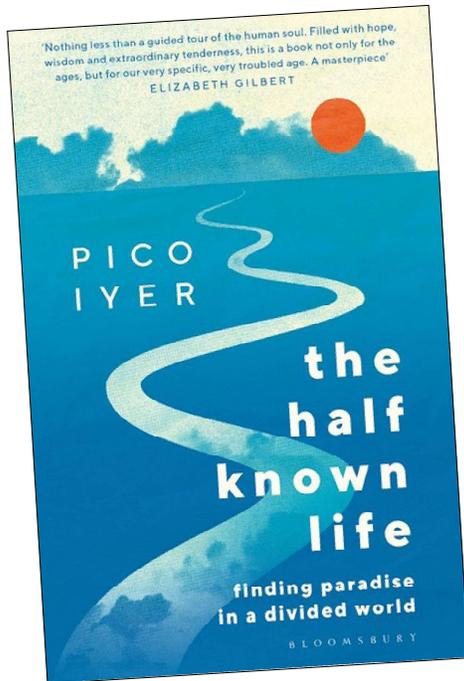
I hacked and beat the bindweed and tore out large heaps of it, and while I did so I got more and more excited. I began picturing myself in a fight with an invasive species of alien creepers. I was Earth's only hope in the battle against the murderous invader. I must have gotten carried away, for suddenly, while tearing up a large chunk of greenery, I fell on my back and was instantly covered by the creepers and heaps of leaves from the plant. While I struggled to get up, I felt how the bindweed tried to wind itself around my legs and arms, making its way to my neck, ready to choke me and take over my body. I let out a loud scream and tore the disgusting vines off me as fast as I could. With the sickle still in my hand, I was prepared to defend myself against this ferocious attacker. I lashed out and hacked and tore the leaves, while stamping with my feet on the stems, trying to kick the roots out of the soil. All the while, I screamed profanities at the green assailant, ensuring the aggressor that it would not get me alive.

"What on earth are you doing?" My father stood looking down on me with an expression of anger and incomprehension on his face.

"Give me that thing," he said and snatched the sickle from my hands. "Go, take the rubbish bags out." He shook his head in disbelief and muttered something inaudible.

I walked away from the bindweed, thinking that I had missed the chance to eradicate the danger it presented to our garden and the whole of the country. Nobody would be able to stop its spread now, and before long Earth's surface would be covered in green creepers that would annihilate all other life on the planet. If only I could get my hands on that sickle again! □

New Travel Books



The Half Known Life - Finding Paradise in a Divided World by Pico Iyer (*Bloomsbury*). Pico Iyer, known for his insightful and lyrical writing style, has spent a significant portion of his life as a passionate traveler. However, he has recently shifted his focus to emphasize the virtues of finding stillness. In his writings, Iyer highlights the spiritual and environmental benefits of taking a moment to relax and reflect on past pilgrimages or simply clear the mind.

Iyer has extensively traveled and lived in various parts of the world, an experience that profoundly shapes his writing. His exceptional ability to observe and capture the essence of the places he visits is evident in his keen attention to detail, effectively conveying the atmosphere, people, and subtle nuances. Within his works, he frequently explores themes such as identity, belonging, and the concept of home in today's increasingly interconnected world.

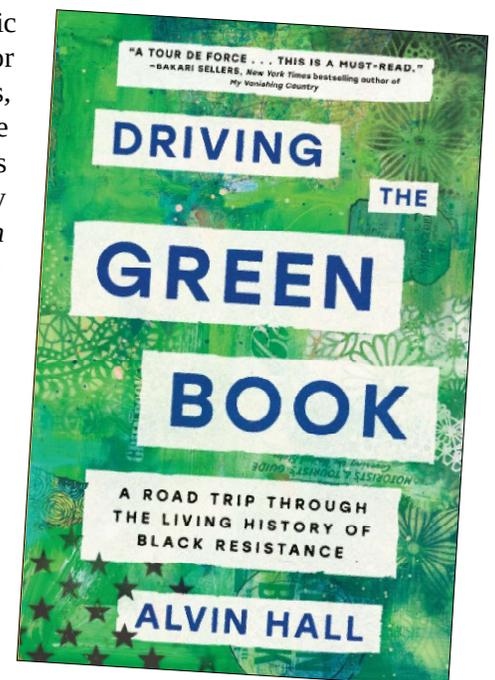
In his latest book, Iyer combines his inherent restlessness with a desire for tranquility. The author recounts and reports on his journeys through some of the world's most turbulent and divided places, such as Kashmir, Jerusalem, Sri Lanka, and North Korea. In these explorations, his ultimate pursuit is often the quest for peace and quiet amid the chaos.

Overall, Iyer's writing reflects his profound insights and ability to convey the human experience with a balance of introspection and lyrical beauty. His newest book serves as a compelling testament to his unceasing exploration, both inward and outward, as he seeks solace in the midst of a turbulent world. □

Driving the Green Book - A Road Trip Through the Living History of Black Resistance by Alvin Hall (*HarperOne*). A compelling journey through America's haunting racial past, guided by the acclaimed broadcaster Alvin Hall and the iconic *Green Book*. Throughout history, the open road has been fraught with dangers for countless Americans. During the era of Jim Crow, Black travelers faced locked doors, hostile encounters with the police, and the looming threat of violence, both in the South and the North. From 1936 to 1967, *The Negro Motorist Green Book* served as a lifeline for millions, providing a definitive guide to safe establishments where they could find rest, food, and lodging. While many people are familiar with the *Green Book* from its portrayal in the 2018 movie of the same name, Alvin Hall sought to delve deeper into its true historical significance.

With his companion Janée Woods Weber, he embarked on a journey from New York to Detroit and New Orleans, retracing the steps of the *Green Book's* world. Along the way, they visited motels, restaurants, shops, and stores that once offered a warm and welcoming atmosphere for Black Americans. They also explored notable landmarks of historical and cultural significance, from theaters and clubs where renowned artists like Duke Ellington and Lena Horne performed to the Lorraine Motel, the site of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination. Importantly, they gathered firsthand accounts from the remaining witnesses who experienced the *Green Book* as a vital tool for survival. These remarkable individuals not only endured but also triumphed over hatred, building thriving Black communities against all odds.

Driving the Green Book is an essential work of national history, shedding light on a pivotal aspect of America's past, while also offering a hopeful narrative of Black resilience and resistance. The book includes 25 striking black and white photographs and ephemera, providing a visual window into this extraordinary journey. □



Mad to Live

In Memory of Jack Kerouac

Ashley Andresson

The only people worth our time are those
who never yawn or say prevalent things;
The ones who are desirous of the world
and those who yearn for everything at once.

They burn like Roman candles in the night,
before exploding bright across the stars.
They glow and burn to ashes as they chase
their lofty dreams with wild tenacity.

And as we watch them going up in flames
we know that they have drunk life to the lees,
and with their charismatic force they have
forever changed the landscape of our hearts.



Heatwave

Lillian Heimisdottir

The street is lined with trees that must have been planted many decades ago, so large and massive are they. I ask Carmen if she knows what kind they are, but she shrugs, “Just trees”.

“Over there are palm-trees—Palmeras,” she says and points at a large roundabout with all kinds of tropical vegetation.

“They’re nice, but I like those large leaf trees that provide cooling and shade when you walk down the street on a hot afternoon.” I look at the enormous crowns that almost touch the windows of the old houses on the Avenue.

“It must be pleasant living in those apartments overlooking the street. I mean those houses are practically pieces of art in their own right,” I say to

her and point at the decorated balconies with wrought iron railings.

Carmen glances up at the carved facades and shrugs again, “Those apartments are very expensive. Some of them have belonged to the same families for generations.”

I stare longingly at the high windows with the ornamented arches and wonder what it must be like to look down on the people going about their business. I walk through this part of town every day on my way from the subway and enjoy admiring the affluence here before turning into the side-street where my flat, that I share with three other people, is located.

In front of our building, Señora Gonzáles is busy sweeping the street.

She exchanges a few words with Carmen, but she speaks too fast for me to understand what she is saying. It is clear though, that she is upset about something.

“She was talking about the heatwave,” Carmen explains to me as we walk up the stairs to our apartment. “She says it’s causing the trees to shed their leaves although it’s only the middle of the summer.”

“Yeah, that’s sad.”

I look out into the backyard where some boys are playing football, despite the hot weather. When the sun sets, the old people will come out and sit on the benches, talking till midnight.

“I think we should go to a bar tonight,” says Carmen. “No sense sitting at home in this heat.” □



Photo Hector Jean Fournier

In Praise of Indifference

A Treatise on the Art of Not Caring

Erik N. Patel

There's a most excellent state of being that's been sadly, almost criminally, neglected in our feverishly passionate age. I refer, of course, to the art of indifference. I do not mean the cruel and cold variety that turns a blind eye to the suffering of others or shirks one's duties, oh no, but the breezy, nonchalant kind of indifference that allows us to amble through life with a delightful lack of concern. This essay, then, is my modest attempt to sing the praises of this underrated virtue, and if it leaves you untouched, well, that's quite fitting, isn't it?

Take a moment to reflect upon our culture's obsession with passion. We're constantly bombarded with the message that passion is the key to success, the path to fulfillment, the secret ingredient in the recipe for a meaningful life. "Find your passion," they say, "and you'll never work a day in your life." Well, I'm here to tell you that I tried this, and all it got me was a procession of half-baked projects and a host of unfulfilled ambitions.

Yes, I once jumped into the fiery pit of passion, with results both comical and tragic. I thought I'd pen the next great English novel—twelve attempts later, I have a collection of first chapters that would make even the most patient publisher tear their hair out. In a passionate flurry, I turned to photography, only to discover that the world doesn't need another pretentious monochrome portrait of a rusty bicycle. I attempted to learn Italian, dreaming of reading Dante in the original—now my Italian vocabulary extends to ordering pasta and making polite comments about the weather.

And who could forget the jazz band? A few weeks of fervent practice and grand dreams of jamming like Coltrane, and all I had to show for it was a disgruntled neighbor and a saxophone that now serves as an expensive dust collector. Passion, it seemed, promised much but delivered little, leaving me a jack of all trades and master of none, hopping between hobbies like a particularly dissatisfied kangaroo.

But indifference—oh, there's a path less trodden. Indifference isn't glamorous; it's rarely extolled in rousing speeches or uplifting Instagram quotes. In fact, it's mostly scorned or, fittingly, ignored. It's never been the subject of an inspirational TED talk, and you won't find a shelf full of self-help books titled *The Power of Indifference* or *Find Your Meh*. But hear me out—indifference, my friends, might just be the secret to a more serene life.

Why, you may ask? Well, indifference offers a liberation that passion does not. It frees us from the anxiety of always needing to be engaged, always needing to care, always needing to "do something". It rescues us from the tyrannical expectation of having an opinion on everything—from the Middle East conflict to whether pineapple is an acceptable pizza topping.

With a healthy dose of indifference, we can amble through life, observing the world with detached interest. We can stroll through a park and appreciate the rustling leaves, the children's laughter, the sunshine filtering through the trees, without feeling the need to capture the moment for our social media followers. We can simply exist, unburdened by the need to "make every moment count."

Indifference allows us to attend a dinner party and remain blissfully disengaged from passionate debates about politics, dietary choices, or the merits of postmodern literature. We can sip our wine, nibble our hors d'oeuvres, and respond to passionate outbursts with a noncommittal, "Is that so?" Imagine the serenity of a world in which we could simply listen without feeling the need to take a side, to protest, to change someone's mind.

And what of art, you ask? Surely, art requires passion? Well, consider this: with indifference, we can visit a museum and stand before a grand masterpiece of modern art—a jumble of colors that is supposedly a commentary on existential despair—and say, "Hmm, interesting. I wonder what's for lunch?"

Now, I know what you're thinking. A world characterized by indifference would be a world devoid of progress. "Without passion, there would be no innovation, no art, no change!" you cry. And perhaps you're right. But let's not forget the flip side of this coin—without indifference, we would be a world perpetually embroiled in passionate conflict, a world without pause, without respite, without the chance to simply let things be.

So, I say, let's hear it for indifference. Let's toast to the blissful freedom it offers, to the quiet rebellion it embodies. Let's celebrate its soothing balm in a world frenzied with fervor. Whether we care deeply about our toasts or not is, of course, quite beside the point. And so, I raise my glass—whether I'm passionately fond of the drink inside it or not—and say: "Here's to indifference. Long may it continue to not particularly matter." □

Haiku

Lillian Heimisdottir

Rain clouds hide the sun
Leaves are falling from the trees
Soon the summer's gone

Walking with my dog
Near the old, enchanted pond
No sign of a frog

Languid summer pace
Not a worry in the world
Sunshine on my face

Sunset and a crow
Like a cut-out silhouette
In the afterglow

Evening falls and I
Am awoken from my thoughts
By a barn owl's cry

Counting flocks of sheep
Grazing in a meadow field
Soon I'm sound asleep

Clouds of golden hue
Sail across the evening sky
Still so much to do



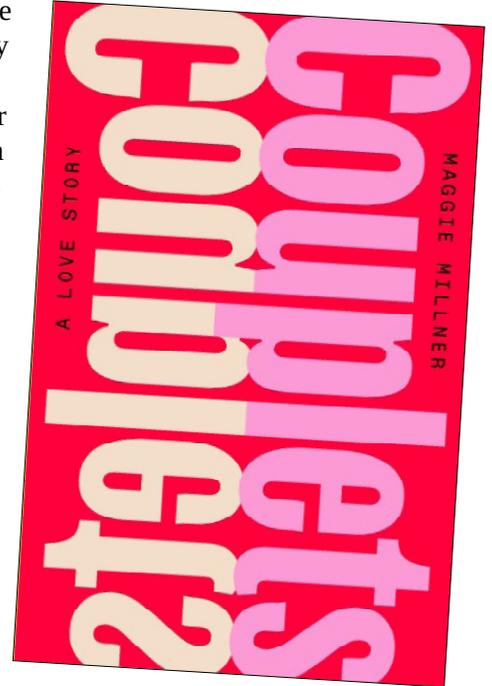
New Poetry

Couplets - A Love Story by Maggie Millner (*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*). Set within the vibrant backdrop of the Brooklyn queer community, Millner delves into the consequences that arise when the intensity of longing becomes entwined with the boundaries of poetic form. Her novel takes shape through a series of poems, primarily employing the eponymous couplets.

The narrative is straightforward—a woman betrays her boyfriend to embrace her true sexuality for the first time, embarking on a journey of self-discovery. Through tightly woven and exquisite lines, Millner unveils the nature of her protagonist's sexual desire: insatiable, obsessive, recurring, and attentive. While the story unfolds chronologically, *Couplets* also spirals into philosophical inquiries surrounding control and surrender.

Struggling with the mundane aspects of her previous life, the protagonist succumbs to an affair with a queer, polyamorous editor, relinquishing the trust she had placed in her. Millner presents a woman who awakens to the vast possibilities of existence, despite the constraints placed upon her hands, mind, and heart. Each page brims with elevated stakes, prompting readers to consider if they, too, are merely sleepwalking through their own lives. Millner peels away the layers of a “long and torturous” journey towards self-awareness while reveling in the intricate pivots and grooves offered by strict verse. Even the line breaks themselves echo the fragmented themes of yearning, grief, hope, and passion. With restlessness, imagination, and audacity, *Couplets* pushes the boundaries of erotic literature, advancing its canon.

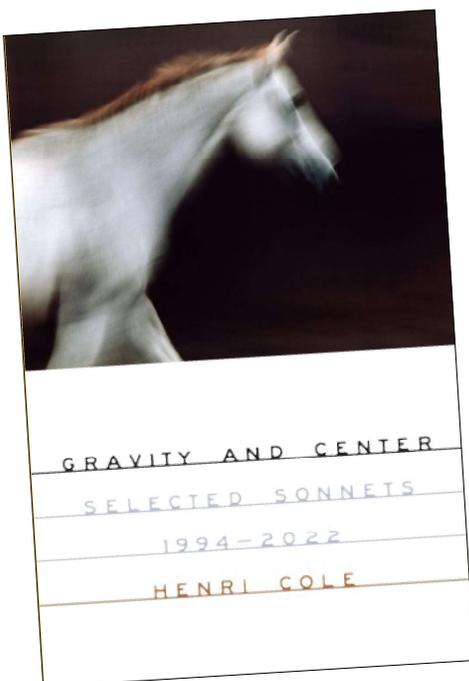
Millner's ultimate triumph lies in bridging the gap between the book's opening line and its seemingly identical second, exposing the disparity between the assumed self and the equally genuine self that one cannot help but construct. □



Gravity and Center - Selected Sonnets 1994-2022 by Henri Cole (*Farrar, Straus and Giroux*). In this collection of sonnets, crafted by one of the most distinctive practitioners of the form, the delicate balance between various dichotomies such as mind and body, nature and culture, self and society, freedom and restraint is meticulously calibrated. Henri Cole diverges from rigid metrical and rhyme patterns, yet preserves the sonnet's inherent qualities of precision and conciseness, generating a dramatic effect through its “little fractures and leaps and resolutions.”

Gravity and Center presents a rich collection of original work spanning nearly three decades, showcasing the profound talent of Cole, one of America's most esteemed living poets. Throughout his evolving journey as a writer, Cole has developed and expressed his own distinctive approach to the sonnet, a form renowned for its enduring complexity. In his afterword, Cole shares, “For some reason the lean, muscular body of the sonnet frees me to be simultaneously dignified and bold, to appear somewhat socialized though what I have to say may be eccentric or unethical, and, most important of all, to have aesthetic power while writing about the tragic situation of the individual in the world.”

Cole's writing seamlessly intertwines the confessional and the abstract, the intimate and the cosmopolitan, the stringent and the enraptured by beauty. Whether delving into the complexities of personal identity, capturing the lives of creatures and flora, or grappling with the tumultuous events of our time, his language emanates a radiant luminosity, offering the reader an experience of profound mastery over unique and unexpected poetic forms. □



Such Stuff As Dreams Are Made On

The Merging of the Fantastic with Realism in Literature

Jonathan M. Clark

In William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the wrongfully exiled Prospero muses that life is nothing more real than a reverie caught between two long sleeps. Here, the Bard lands on something that storytellers have grappled with since we first sat around a campfire to hear a tale.

There are so many elements of daily life that go far beyond the narrow limits of realism as we have come to understand the term today. Real life is filled with prophetic dreams, spiritual epiphanies, déjà vu, eerie coincidences, synchronicities, and still more first-hand experiences that test the assumptions of so-called realism. And so narratives that contain only the sepia tones of Kansas and never the bright colors of Oz can end up falling flat as the plains.

The fantastic, it might be said, is a critical element to revive realism, to bring it out of its clinical stupor and into a more vivid, Technicolor state. And if we look through the history of literature, we see the fantastic serving this role in an ever-evolving relationship with realism.

Before we trace this history to find the many ways the fantastic can aid and uphold the underlying values of a more genuine "real" than realism, it's important to mention what we aren't

talking about. There is, of course, a difference between the kind of fantasy we will be analyzing and that of Tolkien, Lewis, or Rowling.

This much more recent form of fantasy literature (much of it directly spawning from *The Lord of the Rings*) acknowledges itself as an escape from the world. Even Tolkien, whose work was often compared to his traumatic experiences of the First World War, vehemently denied any connection between his Middle Earth and our Earth. Lewis, for his part, was making self-aware allegories to the story of Christ, while Rowling quite clearly crafted escapist fiction for children threaded with coming-of-age relatability.

You could argue that a work like *The Lord of the Rings* contains profound truths that resonate with our world, but it would be much harder to say that it is meant to illustrate our world directly.

What we'll be looking at is the use of the fantastic not as a way out of what is real, but as a direct route into it.

Enter Ovid

Let's begin our examination with Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Published in 8 CE, it already contains within it a sophisticated and robust use of the fantastic as a means to express what is real.

To make Ovid's use of the fantastic even more on-the-nose for our purposes, the introduction of magic occurs—as the title suggests—in moments of transformation. Mushrooms are turned into humans, crowns are turned into constellations, and all the while the characters of the stories must navigate these shifting realities as best they can.

For Ovid, the fantastic is a way to highlight the central wonder of existence and its only seeming constant: change. As Heraclitus might have said to Ovid a handful of centuries before on a peninsula not so far away, "You can't step in the same river twice."

This also points to the wisdom of alchemy that would come much later during the Renaissance, an era when European thinkers dusted off their Ovid and Heraclitus. In alchemy, inner transformation is described as a kind of magical process—one where the subtle, mystical features of the material world must be changed so that their gross, physical presentation can change.

In Ovid's stories, transformation crosses all known boundaries, be they animal, vegetable, or mineral. There are even leaps from the profane to the sacred. If we look around, we know that these

miraculous changes really do take place. All life on earth likely came from a common ancestor, and from this soup came upright beings who recognized within this chaos the shimmer of divinity.

Such insights are grand, even cosmic. And they touch on arcs and narratives that diminish the perspective of individual humans to the point of absolute incomprehensibility. The fantastic—typically in the form of a god’s caprice—is Ovid’s way of encapsulating that in a story. It works, not because it makes those enormous processes understandable, but because it honors their place beyond our understanding.

Rather than trying to solve these great mysteries, Ovid uses the fantastic to declare the mystery itself as what is true.

Shakespeare’s Ghosts and Witches

While Shakespeare tapped into profound existential questions about human life, he often did so with the help of the fantastic. This is particularly true in his greatest works.

Hamlet famously begins with the apparition of the recently deceased king. Though Prince Hamlet learns of the murder of his father by talking directly to his ghost, he still can’t quite

come to grips with the revelation. This is partly because he is apprehensive to believe the reality of a ghost. And yet, this event is enough to begin the action. Over the course of the play, Hamlet is torn between the part of himself that knows the ghost is telling the truth and the other part that needs to prove it by some other, less fantastical, means before seeking revenge.

In *Macbeth*, the title character and his wife are only able to confront the demands of fate and the inevitability of death thanks to the three Weird Sisters who tell him of his future as usurper of Macduff’s throne. The question becomes clear: if the witches never told



Illustration Helen_f/stock.adobe.com

Macbeth he was destined to become king, would he and his wife have taken the treacherous, blood-soaked road to the throne? The fantastic acts as the burning knowledge that he will, he must be king—the overwhelming ambition that drives so many who have come to power.

Shakespeare can lean even further into the fantastic with works like *A Midsummer's Night Dream*, but it is in the two tragedies mentioned above that we find the most alluring for our purposes. Because it's in these examples that the fantastic is used in a way that makes the characters more recognizable as humans just like us.

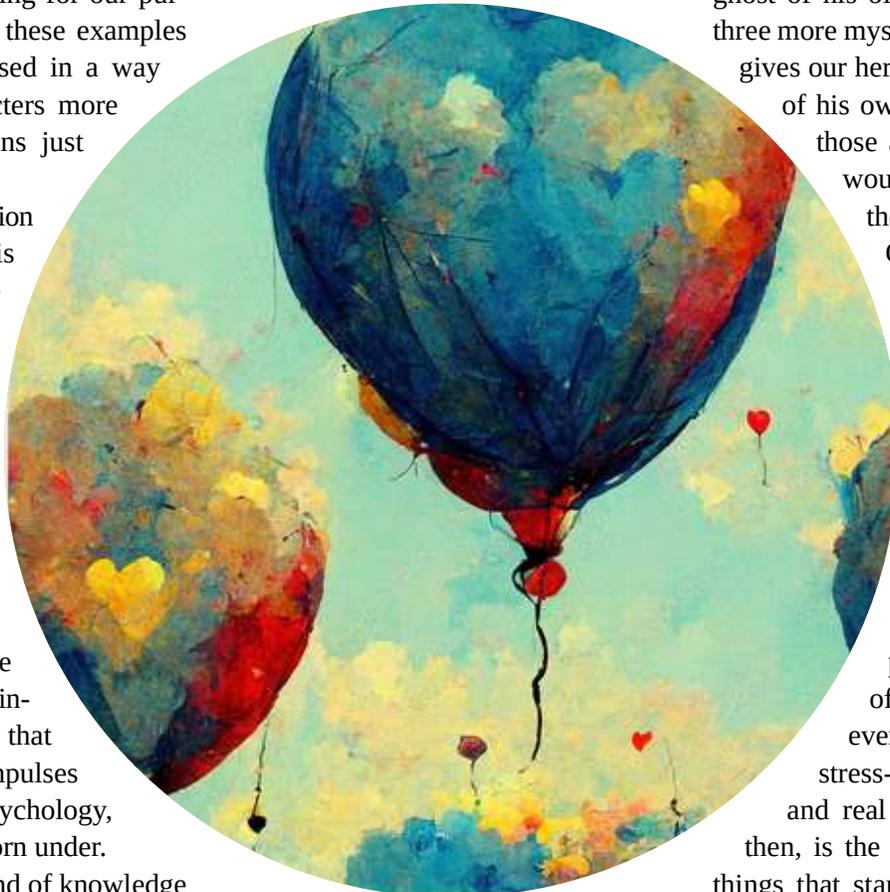
Hamlet's indecision conflicts with his knowledge of his father's murder. Macbeth's guilt conflicts with his knowledge of his fate to rule in Macduff's place. In both instances, the fantastic element provides that kind of knowledge that we all come with when we are born. These are those innate understandings that we can't shake, the impulses caused by instinct, psychology, or the stars we were born under.

This is a magical kind of knowledge that we've all experienced. And so to render it comprehensible from the stage, Shakespeare gave it the fantastic forms of ghosts and witches. Those are characters that can speak in iambs and follow stage directions.

They embody what psychiatrist Iain McGilchrist would refer to as right brain thinking, the kind that uses the gestalt of a situation along with in-born wisdom to simply know. And one could say that the anxious vacillations of Hamlet and Macbeth represent the over-rationalizing that left brain thinking is heir to.

Gothic and the Dark Fantasy

Shakespeare was not the last European writer who found ghosts a perfect vehicle for that element of life that is more real than real. Gothic literature helped create the modern ghost story, and it did so with a fairly clear epistemological argument that upheld non-rational forms of knowing as equal, if not superior, to rational ones.



That is to say the Age of Reason had its discontents, and for inspiration in their counterattack, the Romantics looked back past the Renaissance to the Middle Ages. There in the so-called "Gothic" times (as in post-Roman), they saw everything they adored: a love of aesthetics, a more spiritual conception of the world, and a connection to the emotions.

The writings of the Romantics introduced Gothic literature to a steadily growing readership. These tales began with works like Horace Walpole's *The*

Castle of Otranto, published in 1764. In that story the fantastic is, well, quite fantastic. But later writers would reel this in for a more calculated effect, finding ghosts to be the perfect vehicle for the intrusion of knowledge and the force of the past on the minds of the living.

The success of this bled into all forms and genres of literature. Charles Dickens' 1843 masterpiece *A Christmas Carol* even does this. The protagonist Ebenezer Scrooge is visited by the ghost of his old business partner and three more mysterious phantoms. Each gives our hero important knowledge of his own life and its effect on those around him. (An angel would play a similar role in the 1946 film and fellow Christmas classic *It's a Wonderful Life*, directed by Frank Capra.)

Being the Victorian era, ghosts were also often used to show madness in its many forms, as in Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel *Jane Eyre*. Here, the supernatural presence of ghosts and demons eventually resolve into stress-induced hallucinations and real people. The fantastic, then, is the temporary stand-in for things that stand within reach of the senses but just beyond what the mind can grasp.

The Gothic eventually used the fantastic to characterize all that we cannot know. The things we don't know and might never have the capacity to understand can still be active forces in our lives, and so they can be turned into characters. Henry James accomplished this with harrowing precision in his 1898 novella *The Turn of the Screw*. In this novel, ambiguity is used for maximum effect, with ghosts amplifying the incomprehensibility of things like death and human cruelty.



Magical Realism and Ways of Knowing

While the fantastic can be incorporated to describe cosmic, spiritual, and psychological states of knowing, it can do all this while also providing sociological nuance—as it does in magical realism.

Much ink has been spilled over the legitimacy of a term like “magical realism.” For instance, it is conspicuous how many of the works that fall into this category are by writers from South America, calling into question how much magical realism is simply fantasy written due south of the United States. Yet within even this controversy, we see how the fantastic works to describe the lacunae of understanding between civilizations.

The trademark of magical realism is the presence of the fantastic in an otherwise real setting, treated as if it were part of the everyday. Gabriel García Márquez’s short story “A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings” from 1968 is the perfect example of this. The humans in the story deal with this angelic figure in all-too-human ways, never being distracted by his possible origins in heaven long enough to enter a bout of religious ecstasy.

By using the fantastic in this way, Márquez describes a clash of civilizations. He does this by illustrating the cohabitation of two ways of knowing—a cohabitation that marks the South American experience (and indeed the experience of people all over the world) where Western and non-Western ways of seeing and understanding the world must now live side-by-side.

For magical realism, the intrusion of the fantastic only works in one direction. The reader recognizes that an angel falling from the sky is quite an amazing, reality-bending event. That the characters of the story are not overawed by it brings us into a mental space where two ways of knowing exist. There is one that sees the angel as a miracle, the other that sees it as simply an event like any other, maybe an opportunity to make a bit of money. In the same way, between two ways of knowing, things can be generated that appear both miraculous and mundane—depending on the worldview.

The fantastic elements will spark something in the reader, and that reader will then have to reconcile the lack of surprise in the characters. Over the course of a literary work, one assumes the reader might settle in, able to hold both of these views at the same time.

The Fantasy of Realism

The examples above show us plenty of instances where the fantastic is used to create a literary experience that does not deviate from reality. Instead, the fantastic is the best way into it.

That might make us question, then, the method of strict realism as a literary mode. Is it not itself a form of fantasy? By eliminating essential elements to the human experience of life, is it not a fantasy by omission? Is it not the long held fantasy of industrial reasoning that yearns for a world that is totally scrutable and therefore totally controllable?

Strict realism feels less than real when we see the fantastic as a carrier of truths far too big for those pre-twister moments with Auntie Em at the farm, when we see the land of Oz as a reality always living underneath Kansas.

The illusion of realism, that it can capture what really is (nothing more and nothing less), reveals itself to be just that, an illusion. Or as Prospero might say, it is “melted into air, into thin air.” □

The End of an Era

Reflecting on the Literary Legacy of Martin Amis

Eleanor Jiménez

Martin Amis, a colossus of the British literary landscape, was born in Oxford on 25 August 1949, into a family deeply rooted in the world of letters. His father, Sir Kingsley Amis, was a towering figure in post-war British literature, and it was inevitable that Martin would inherit his father's love for language. Yet while his lineage was illustrious, Martin would make his own indelible mark on the literary world with his distinctive, audacious voice.

After studying at Oxford University, where he graduated with a degree in English literature, Amis cut his teeth in journalism. He worked for *The Times Literary Supplement*, *The New Statesman*, and *The Observer*, developing his acerbic wit and keen eye for cultural critique. It was during these years that he also began to hone his craft as a novelist, publishing his first novel, *The Rachel Papers*, in 1973.

The Rachel Papers earned Amis the Somerset Maugham Award in 1974, setting the stage for a career marked by both critical acclaim and controversy. The novel's biting satire and vibrant prose introduced readers to Amis's unique literary voice, a voice that would come to define an era of British literature.

Throughout the 1980s, Amis produced some of his most celebrated works. His novel "Money" (1984), a scathing satire of Thatcher-era greed and decadence, was an instant classic, cementing his status as one of the



Martin Amis at a book signing in 2007

Photo by Javier Arce - Wikimedia Commons

UK's foremost novelists. Other major works from this period include *London Fields* (1989), an apocalyptic satire of London life, and *Time's Arrow* (1991), a daring exploration of the Holocaust told in reverse chronology.

Amis was a master stylist, and his work was marked by a virtuosic use of language and a dark, biting humor. His prose was irreverent, incisive, and deeply concerned with the moral questions of his time. Whether writing about love, politics, or the horrors of history, Amis brought a relentless energy and razor-sharp intelligence to his work.

Alongside his novels, Amis was a prolific essayist and critic, contributing to a wide range of publications on both

sides of the Atlantic. His collections of essays, such as *The Moronic Inferno: And Other Visits to America* (1986) and *The War Against Cliché: Essays and Reviews 1971–2000* (2001), showcased his ability to engage with the cultural zeitgeist and his unflinching honesty.

As a literary figure, Amis was also part of a group known as the New Fiction or the Literary Brat Pack, alongside authors like Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, and Salman Rushdie. These writers, known for their experimental style and their willingness to engage with contemporary culture and politics, were instrumental in shaping the direction of late 20th-century British literature.

Amis's personal and professional relationships with these authors were significant, influencing the direction of his own work and shaping literary discourse at large.

Amis also delved into memoir writing, most notably in his autobiographical work *Experience* (2000). Here, he provided intimate insight into his life, relationships, and his encounters with notable literary figures, shedding light on the man behind the authorial persona.

Amis was often at the center of controversy, both in his writing and his public statements. He was unafraid of sparking debate, whether through his novels, essays, or interviews. Yet de-

spite—or perhaps because of—this, he remained a towering figure in the world of letters, his work resonating with readers and fellow writers alike.

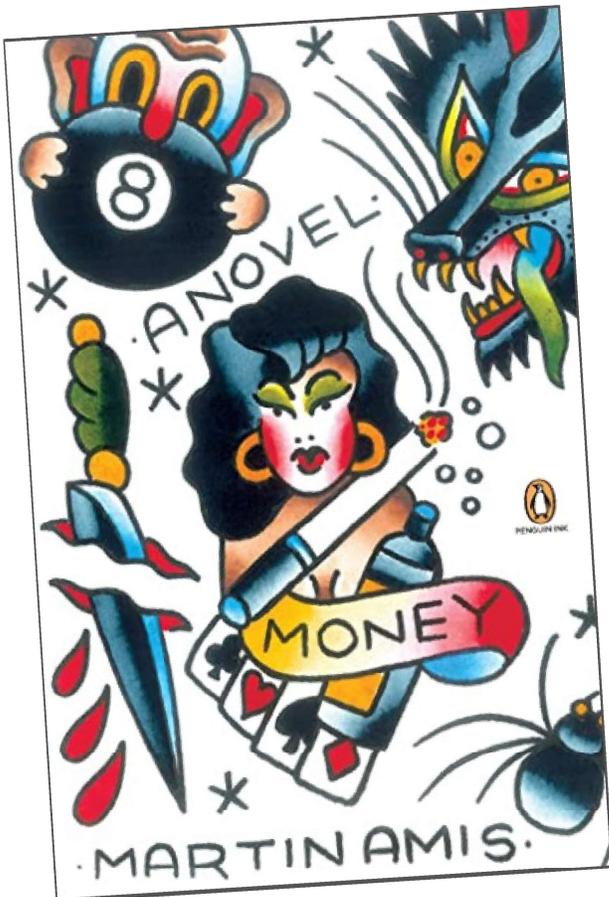
In his later years, Amis continued to write, producing novels such as *The Zone of Interest* (2014), a chilling exploration of the Holocaust, and *Inside Story* (2020), a novel that blurred the boundaries between fiction and autobiography.

The loss of Martin Amis on 19 May 2023 sent ripples through the literary world. His death marked the end of an era, yet his influence continues to be felt. Through his novels, essays, and criticism, he left an indelible mark on modern literature, pushing the bound-

aries of what fiction could do and how it could speak to the world.

In the end, Martin Amis's life was a testament to the power of words: to challenge, to provoke, to satirize, and ultimately, to illuminate. His legacy is in his work, a body of writing that bristles with intelligence, wit, and a relentless desire to confront the world head-on. His contribution to literature was immense, his impact enduring. As we remember Amis, we remember a writer who was never afraid to venture into the zone of interest, who boldly went where others feared to tread. His words will continue to resonate, a testament to a life devoted to the power and possibility of literature. □

Unveiling the Materialistic Metropolis: Martin Amis's Landmark Novel *Money*



Martin Amis's novel *Money*, published in 1984, stands as a potent critique of the materialistic and consumerist culture of the 1980s. Through the life of protagonist John Self, an indulgent director of TV commercials, Amis satirizes the ethical issues inherent in a capitalistic society.

John Self's lavish spending on hedonistic pleasures, portrayed with a comic undertone, epitomizes the novel's theme of excess, reflecting the moral decline in consumer societies. However, despite his material wealth, Self is plagued by emptiness and loneliness, underlining the hollowness of a life driven by consumerism.

Amis's novel also innovatively employs metafictional elements, blurring the lines between fiction and reality by introducing Martin Amis as a character. This not only challenges the nature of authorship but also underlines the distortion of reality in a materialistic society.

In *Money*, self-destruction and consumerism are intimately linked. John Self's deteriorating health and financial status due to his extravagant lifestyle critique the damaging effects of unchecked capitalist values. Additionally, the novel comments on America's pervasive influence on global consumer culture, symbolizing America as the embodiment of hyper-consumerism.

Despite its humorous veneer, *Money* offers a scathing commentary on the societal and individual consequences of rampant consumerism. Its unique blend of dark humor, caricature, and metafiction serves to amplify this critique. As such, Martin Amis's *Money* remains a relevant masterpiece, exploring the moral and spiritual pitfalls of relentless pursuit of material wealth. □

A Captivating Culinary Journey

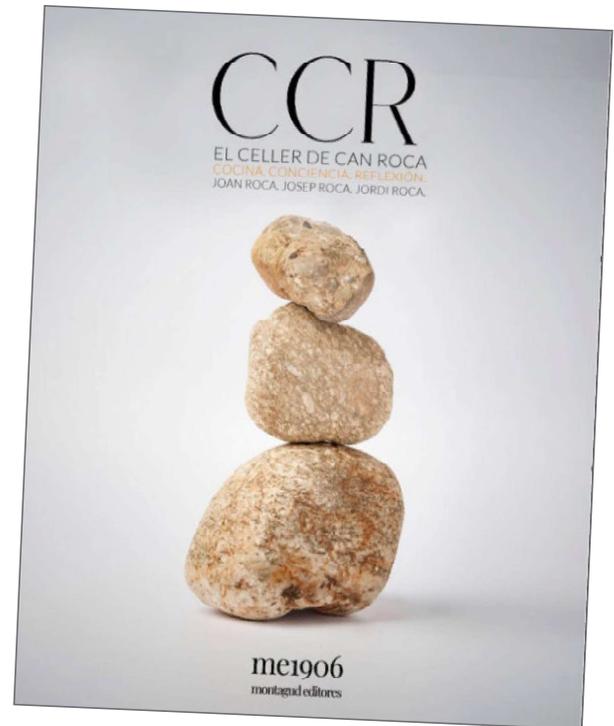
El Celler can Roca's Latest Creation

Hector Jean Fournier

Step into a world of gastronomic wonder with *CCR - Cooking, Consciousness, Reflection*, the extraordinary cookbook that captures the essence of El Celler de Can Roca. From the very first page, this magnificent volume takes readers on an immersive culinary journey that will leave them spellbound.

With its impressive 560 pages, this book is a true treasure trove of culinary artistry. The Roca Brothers, led by the visionary Joan Roca, have meticulously crafted an exquisite collection of 150 creations that redefine the boundaries of taste and presentation. Each dish is a masterstroke, seamlessly blending ingredients, techniques, and flavors in innovative ways that leave a lasting impression.

The attention to detail is awe-inspiring. The step-by-step descriptions provide a glimpse into the intricate process behind each creation, allowing aspiring home chefs and seasoned professionals alike to replicate the magic that unfolds at El Celler de Can Roca. The accompanying 454 stunning photographs truly bring the recipes to life, capturing every nuance and texture with remarkable precision.



Joan Roca - Founder and head chef of El Celler can Roca

Photo ACN

CCR is not just a cookbook—it is a celebration of culinary consciousness and reflection. It delves into the philosophy and inspirations behind the Roca Brothers' work, touching upon concepts such as academicism, innovation, and tradition. These thoughtful reflections, combined with the eloquent texts by writer Josep Maria Fonalleras, offer a deeper understanding of the artistic process and the driving forces behind their exceptional creations.

Beyond the culinary delights, the book also highlights the Roca Brothers' commitment to society. Their various projects, showcased within its pages, demonstrate their unwavering dedication to making a positive impact, be it through collaborating with local communities or showcasing the natural treasures found near El Celler de Can Roca.

The sheer magnitude of *CCR* is matched only by the passion that emanates from its pages. It is a testament to the Roca Brothers' unwavering pursuit of excellence and their desire to share their art with the world. Whether you're an avid food enthusiast, a seasoned chef, or simply someone who appreciates culinary brilliance, this cookbook is an absolute must-have for your collection. □

Pont de Ferro

The Iron Brigade at Girona

Lillian Heimisdottir



Photo: Sergi Vázquez Anguela

“I recognize the lion by its claw,” my friend Hector said and banged knowingly with his knuckles on the iron railing of the pedestrian bridge, crossing a muddy river in the town of Girona in northern Spain, some thirty kilometers from Barcelona.

“Meaning?” I asked.

“This bridge was designed and built by none other than Gustav Eiffel, the creator of the famous Eiffel-tower in Paris,” Hector said, and waited for me to show some sign of being impressed.

“Wasn’t he French?”

“Yes, he was,” confirmed Hector. “But he was commissioned to do work outside of his home country, since he

was considered such a great engineer.”

“Wow,” I said and tried to sound enthusiastic. I leaned my head sideways in the hope that this would help me to spot some connection to the famous tower.

“Yeah, I can see it now. There is definitely a likeness,” I said, and took a few photos on my phone, while Hector was busy looking at an inscription on the railing. The people of Girona sure were proud of their famous bridge.

“When does the restaurant open? We don’t want to be late,” I said, trying to get Hector to focus on the actual reason why we came to this town.

“Yes, we’ll go there now. It’s just around the corner, in the center.”

Girona is famous for its restaurants, many of which have been accredited with Michelin stars and are fully booked for months in advance. We had managed to get a reservation for lunch in a so-called fusion restaurant and we didn’t want to be late, lest our table would be given away to some walk-ins.

I finally managed to drag Hector away from the bridge and we made it to the restaurant on time, where we had some of the best food I’ve ever tasted. Expensive but fabulous.

On our way back to the car we crossed the Iron Bridge again, but this time Hector was so exhausted from all the eating that he didn’t give it any attention. □

Embracing the Enigma

A Profile of Renowned Street Artist Banksy

Erik N. Patel

In the realm of contemporary art, there are few figures as elusive and captivating as Banksy. An anonymous street artist whose work has garnered international attention, Banksy's thought-provoking and politically charged creations have left an indelible mark on the art world. This essay aims to delve into the enigma that is Banksy, exploring the artist's background, artistic style, and the profound impact of his work on society.

Banksy's true identity remains shrouded in mystery, adding an air of intrigue to his art. Speculation and rumors have circulated for years regarding the identity of the artist, but Banksy has successfully managed to keep his personal life hidden from the public eye. This intentional anonymity has become an integral part of his brand, allowing the focus to remain on his artwork rather than the artist behind it.

Artistic Style and Themes

Banksy's work is characterized by its distinctive stenciling technique, combining witty and satirical imagery with powerful social commentary. Often appearing overnight on walls and buildings in unexpected locations, his artworks challenge societal norms, tackle political issues, and highlight injustices with a sharp wit and biting humor. Banksy's pieces touch upon a



The Flower Thrower by Banksy on a wall in Muelheim, Germany

Photo annacovic/stock.adobe.com

range of topics, including capitalism, consumerism, war, poverty, and government surveillance, sparking conversations and provoking viewers to question the status quo.

The Socio-Political Impact

One of the remarkable aspects of Banksy's art is its ability to transcend traditional gallery spaces and reach a wider audience. By choosing public spaces as his canvas, Banksy brings art to the masses, bypassing the exclusivity often associated with the art world. His thought-provoking murals act as catalysts for social change, generating dialogue and drawing attention to issues that might otherwise go unnoticed.

Banksy's work has also acted as a powerful tool for dissent and resistance. His subversive imagery has challenged oppressive regimes, sparked protests, and given a voice to marginalized communities. From his powerful depiction of a young girl releasing a heart-shaped balloon in defiance of war to his controversial portrayal of British police officers engaged in a pillow fight, Banksy's art strikes a chord with viewers and urges them to question the world around them.

Commercial Success and Criticisms

While Banksy's art originated in the streets, it has inevitably found its way into galleries and auction houses, commanding significant prices. This transition from public to private space has drawn criticism from some who argue that it contradicts the artist's original intent. Banksy himself has expressed skepticism about the commercialization of his work, emphasizing the importance of accessibility and public engagement.

Nevertheless, the popularity of Banksy's art has catapulted him into the mainstream art market. His anonymity, combined with his rebellious



The Girl with the Pierced Eardrum by Banksy on the side of a building in Bristol

and provocative style, has led to a cult following, making him one of the most influential artists of the 21st century. However, the artist's insistence on anonymity has also raised questions about the value and authenticity of his pieces, with unauthorized reproductions and fraudulent works occasionally surfacing.

Banksy's impact on contemporary art cannot be overstated. His art challenges conventional notions of artistic expression, blurs the boundaries

between street art and high art, and addresses pressing social and political issues. Through his thought-provoking and visually captivating creations, Banksy has inspired a new generation of artists, activists, and thinkers to challenge the status quo and strive for a more just and compassionate world. While the enigma of Banksy's identity persists, his art speaks volumes, igniting conversations, and leaving an indelible mark on the cultural landscape. □

Photo Electric Egg Ltd./stock.adobe.com

A Tiptop Day

Chris Legg

Eleven hours up in the air
it took for them to arrive
over the crowded shoulders eagerly stare
waving through the Terminal hive.

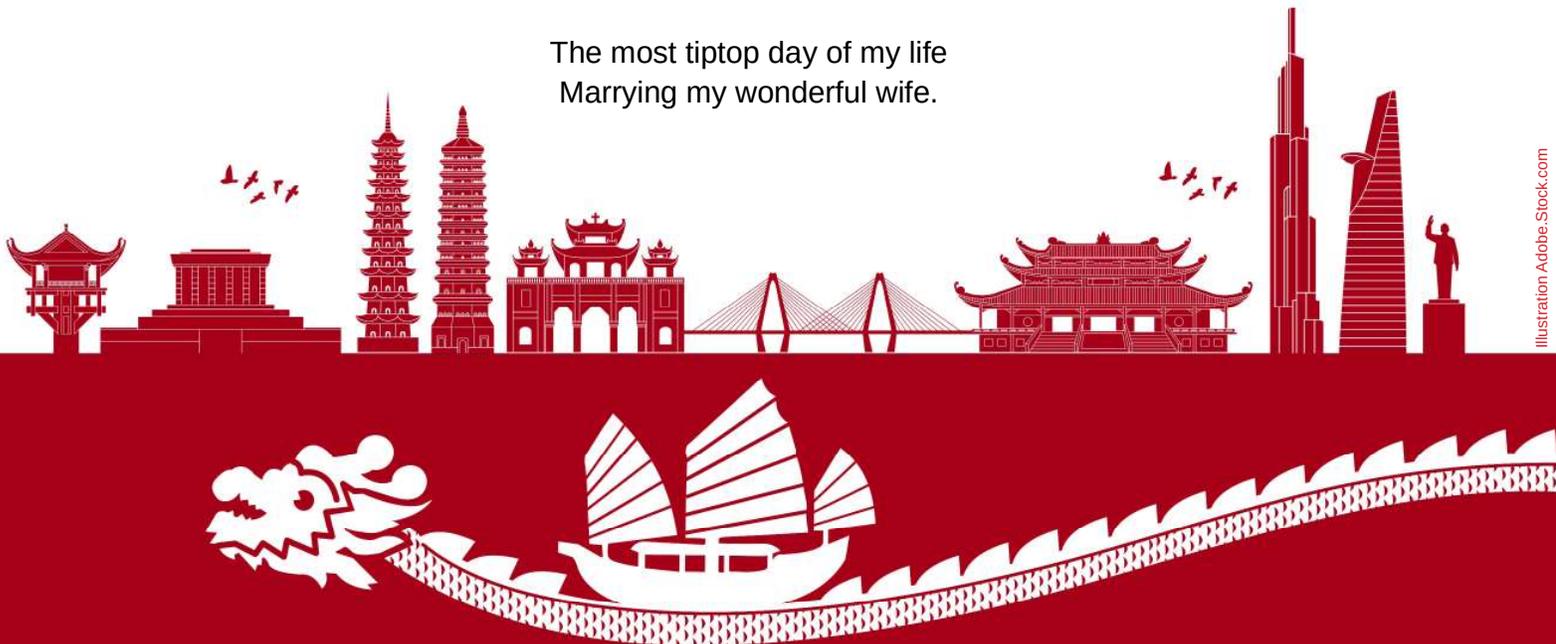
Missed you hugs and kisses exchange
holding Huong for the very first time
brit bodies bare humidity strange
ready for celebrations sublime.

Huong's stunning in her lavish white dress,
suited and booted in the hot July sun
preparation with minimal stress.

Two families join to make one
roast pig, betel leaves, money too,
betel leaves, fruit, cakes, given in gift
strange gifts for a Westerner, true
back home you'd feel quite miffed.

Andy's best man speech
showing pictures of me when I was young
our family trips to Bournemouth beach
dancing, guitar playing much fun.

The most tiptop day of my life
Marrying my wonderful wife.



The Message in the Land

Jonathan M. Clark

The heat. The light. The midst of a drought, already the stuff of legend.

He roamed the land like an animal in migration. As if something in his body was called by a drive long since folded into his species. He wore short sleeve button ups and cargo shorts, a sports watch that left its mark in a tan line.

He didn't use the Subaru's air conditioner. He rolled down the windows, letting the wind whip through him. The dirt rose off the roads and caught in his sweat. He arrived at destinations dirty, damp, ready to work.

The work: to scan the countryside in search of lost civilizations. The drought, in the third month of its siege, had burned all the grass and crops to a brittle brown. But the grass grew green where old walls and ancient post holes were, the soil there retaining water from the features underneath.

The past, the only thing that could thrive in such a present.

He traveled up and down the Mississippi, the continent's legendary artery. It was always nearby, in view or just behind the next scrim of trees. It felt right in a drought to orient yourself around a wide river—especially so far away from the university, his favorite bar, the California landscape that he'd known since he was a graduate student.

He pulled off the highway just before East Saint Louis and found the motel that matched the email. It sat long and flat, its mid-century signage faded like bleached bones, the remnant

of a former glory. The reader board below it declared:

Long Last Motel

Vacancy

He checked in and received his key and entered the dark room in a daze—hair blown wild, luggage baking in the backseat of the Subaru.

He fell back onto the bed, arms spread out cruciform. He stared into the ceiling. It reminded him of two years ago, how he stared at ceilings then, when the divorce had ended the world—or just his portion. At least this ceiling wasn't spinning.

That evening, he skimmed notes on Mississippian culture and the builders of Cahokia. He read about their lives, the way things might have been. An entire way of being now gone. How does it feel, the end of civilization? It's that kind of question that keeps you coming back, as if the next unearthed pottery sherd might reveal the secret unity behind the dazzling diversity of all human existence, grant direct access to the minds of those people building mysterious mounds in what would one day be called America. The surviving material could never get you close enough to know, but he liked to wonder.

His phone buzzed. Unknown number.

"Hello?"

"Gabe."

The voice hurt. Maybe Margaret's voice would always hurt—how a wife can turn into a wound.

"It's you," he said.

"My whole life."

"How're things?" he said.

"Sorry for calling. I just need to tell you."

He shifted the papers off his lap and scooted down into a lying position on the bed. Again, the ceiling.

"Surprised you got me. The service is bad here."

"Are you okay?" A familiar question of hers.

"I'm okay,"

"It's the house. We had to evacuate."

"I heard about the fires. Bad this year."

"It took the house."

The next morning, he fueled up down the road, grabbed a Gatorade and cheese sticks and stood in line.

Then hours of driving and surveys.

He stood on top of a hill and read the land, looking for green in all that brown. It would tell him humans built there. Claimed some space, erected shelter, placed wood in the earth that would one day hold that extra bit of water—how just a little bit of water makes all the difference in the world for the things that live here. And how no matter what you build, it will be destroyed, leaving a scar of green grass until, one day, not even that.

He strained his eyes into the binoculars. But all he thought of was his old house back in California, years since he'd last seen it. When he moved out, with his head low and the pieces of his days all apart, he thought he'd never live in a house again. What does a man alone need a house for? He needs

only his car, some money, the use of his limbs to strangle a living out of the world that tries, oh how it tries, to strangle the life out of him.

But in the aftermath of the divorce, there was no vivid struggle, only a vague, deep doubt. He asked himself questions like *What am I doing?* and these questions caused even the simplest duties to go untended for months. His mind spread out in long tendrils of thoughts that didn't do him any good, did no one any good. But he liked to wonder.

His old house—as real as the heat and dirt and sky around him, if not moreso. The argument in the kitchen

about the student. The argument in the bedroom about the time spent at the university, the long hours and what they meant.

But there was no house. No white cabinets, no built-in shelves, no forest green shutters giving rhythm to the front face, no front face—every detail eaten by the fire that was gorging itself on California. A mighty Cape Cod, all wood, all gone.

What did the arguments matter? The infidelities? The reconciliations? The humiliation and rage and guilt and love that seeped out into the walls? Did they rise into the night sky with the smoke?

The land reasserted itself. What

was that out in it? A green rectangle sketched in the field with undeniable corners. A possible site, Mississippian or, perhaps, a settler's house. Too soon to tell.

He finished checking the panorama in front of him as a formality. Soon, he was in the Subaru and bouncing down a dirt road to the rectangle. The only house he passed on the way squatted against the sun's heat and light. Its windows, blinding squares.

Finally, the road turned and became a straight shot to the spot in question. He picked up speed.

Large rocks protruded out from the road, like the backs of obscure crea-



tures that lived in the earth, fought on its behalf—how a glimpse can awaken a myth, bear a legend.

The Subaru rose and dropped.

A groan and hiss.

He stopped and got out. The front driver side tire sat half flat, the rest of its air going fast. He stood in the middle of the dusty road and looked off to his destination and back to the tire.

His shoulder blades pressed into stony dirt as he lay down to examine the damage. The front axle was bent, mangled by one of the large rocks the Subaru couldn't clear. It would need a tow.

He grabbed the Gatorade and drank, his sweat in full force. He pulled out the phone. No service. Just passed one o'clock. It would be the heat of the day soon, as if it could get much hotter.

But there was a house a little ways back. He could walk to the site and then turn around to get help. He sighed and took the last drink from his bottle and walked down the road to the green lines.

He stood before the patch of land, insects roaring. He climbed over the barbed wire fence at a T-post and considered the formation. To see it in person never got old—the signs of life from long dead humans. It made you feel like you could be in all times at once, or that maybe, in some way, you were there, that it was you who built this shelter, as if you were all people who ever lived, if only you could remember.

But this was a fleeting awe. The rising heat made everything blurry, confused.

He focused. He saw the lines meeting at right angles, that all-too human feature. He wondered how the men and women who lived there might have fought the heat, how they would enter this shelter for shade. And then, also, he wondered at the simple miracle of shelter itself, how it was one part of a long chain that led to a summer like this. When the built environment became our only home, it was only a

matter of time until the earth no longer was.

And as he stared into this rectangle, his mind rose above the earth to visit another house hundreds of miles away, one taken back by fire. Fire, shelter, death, the passing of time. What did the builder of this home think of these things?

But the heat and light.

He took notes and snapped pictures.

Satisfied, he turned toward the house that stood up the road, and he walked, dropping his things off at the car on the way.

The house: two stories covered in crumbling, gray asphalt tiles. Silence, a bad sign—how the human ear hungers for the human voice in crises large and small.

He walked up the porch steps and opened the screen door and knocked. Nothing. No other house for miles, and he'd already sweat out his Gatorade and every last drop of water he'd ever drank.

He cupped his hands around his brow and looked through a window. Furniture sitting dumb in the dark.

"Hello?" he called.

Silence.

He stepped off the porch and walked the perimeter, looking for signs of life.

"Hello?"

The sun on his skin. The panting heat.

In the back were narrow steps leading to a door, a rail made of piping. He scaled the steps in a single lunge and knocked.

The sun pressed.

He reached down to the knob.

Locked.

His heartbeat broke into a sprint.

He grabbed hold of the pipe rail and kicked the door. It rejected him, but allowed some promising give. He kicked and kicked and kicked.

He kicked again. The rail jerked out of place—he fell with it into the brittle grass.

The tumble awoke a new mode of being in the man. Mad with heat. *Get into the house.*

He jogged up to the front porch and took off his shirt and wrapped it around his arm and swung his elbow hard into the window and the pane shattered and he cleared the remaining glass as best he could and he stormed into the living room like a soldier given orders to kill everyone in sight and he felt the warm air inside and he searched the house for a sink and he did not even notice the dust and mouse feces and spiderwebs and he saw the kitchen gleaming and he stood over the sink and he turned the faucet as if this was the action that his entire life had always been moving toward.

Nothing.

He stepped back, guts rising into his throat. He turned to the rest of the house. Where would water be? He left the kitchen in search of the bathroom, the toilet's tank.

He left the house slaked, head cleared of any history, of any shame or pride. He made his way to the car.

Inside the Subaru, he rolled up the windows and ran the air conditioning and strategized how to get back to the motel, and he did this in a wordless fugue. And then his eyes began to close, and then darkness.

He snapped awake—the world transformed into the failing, purple light of a late summer evening. The car was still blowing cool air. He felt his body, his half dry clothes, as if to make sure he had not died.

And in the air, a smell.

Smoke.

He stepped out into the road, into the heat. He turned around, and in the distance behind the house, the strangest orange glow.

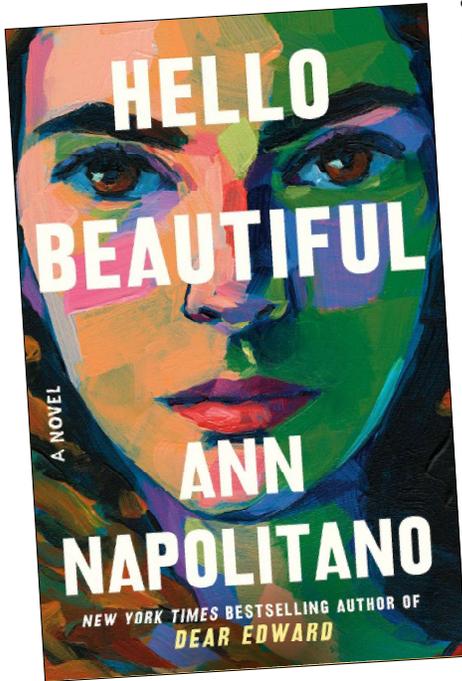
A great wall of fire on the move. However fast such walls spread, he did not know.

Here of all places, a fire.

A fire, less distant than before.

He turned to the horizon where his body knew the river was, and he ran, he ran, he ran. □

New Fiction



Hello Beautiful by Ann Napolitano (*The Dial Press*). Ann Napolitano, a renowned author, explores the depths of love and pain within families and their profound ability to both harm and heal in her poignant and captivating new novel, *Hello Beautiful*. With an epigraph quoting the poetic words of Walt Whitman, Napolitano's expansive literary spirit resonates throughout the book.

Hello Beautiful is an emotional rollercoaster that will move you to tears as you develop a profound attachment to the characters and their destinies. At the heart of the story is William Waters, a troubled soul grappling with emotional wounds. Raised without any recollection of his beloved sister, Caroline, who tragically passed away at the tender age of three, William grows up in an environment where his parents are emotionally paralyzed, incapable or unwilling to establish a genuine connection with their remaining child.

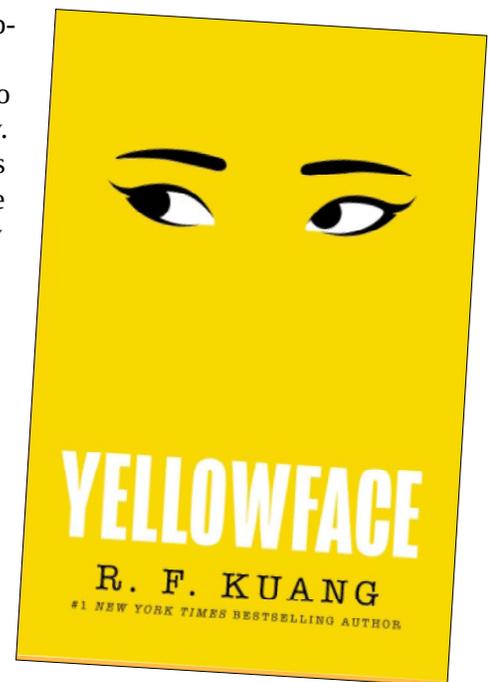
Napolitano skillfully portrays William's downward spiral with poignant precision. Alongside this portrayal, she introduces two contrasting groups who come to his aid: a steadfast team of basketball players led by Kent and Arash, who become his true brothers, and the eccentric Padavano sisters, who ultimately become his chosen family.

The sisters often liken themselves to the four heroines from Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, a comparison that Napolitano emphasizes. However, their unconventional dynamic reminds me more of the idiosyncratic families frequently depicted in Anne Tyler's novels. Nonetheless, Napolitano's voice shines uniquely throughout the narrative. Just as her deeply relatable characters do, she compels us to contemplate the intricate tapestry of familial love, which, despite the presence of grief and loss, can still bind us together. Through her storytelling, she enables us to gain a comprehensive understanding of ourselves and each other. □

Yellowface by R. F. Kuang (*William Morrow*). *Yellowface* presents a compelling and fast-paced narrative, skillfully blending satire, literary thrills, and a touch of unease that occasionally borders on the supernatural. The ruthless and apathetic nature of the publishing industry is mercilessly skewered, resulting in a gratifying reading experience.

The story revolves around June Hayward and Athena Liu, two aspiring authors who were meant to rise together: classmates at Yale and debuting their works simultaneously. However, while Athena becomes a celebrated figure in cross-genre literature, June's writing goes unnoticed, dismissed as stories about ordinary white girls. When June unexpectedly witnesses Athena's death in a bizarre accident, she seizes the opportunity and steals Athena's recently completed masterpiece—a daring novel that uncovers the overlooked contributions of Chinese laborers to the British and French war efforts during World War I. Justifying her actions by arguing that this hidden history deserves to be shared regardless of the storyteller, June decides to edit Athena's work and submit it to her agent as her own. She even allows her new publisher to rebrand her as Juniper Song, complete with an author photo that leaves her ethnic background ambiguous. The novel quickly becomes a bestseller. However, June struggles to escape the shadow of Athena, and mounting evidence threatens to unravel her stolen success.

With its captivating first-person narrative, *Yellowface* tackles themes of diversity, racism, and cultural appropriation within the publishing industry. Moreover, it sheds light on the persistent erasure of Asian-American voices and history by Western white society. R.F. Kuang's timely and sharp novel offers a compelling and easily digestible exploration of these pressing issues. □



Math Anxiety

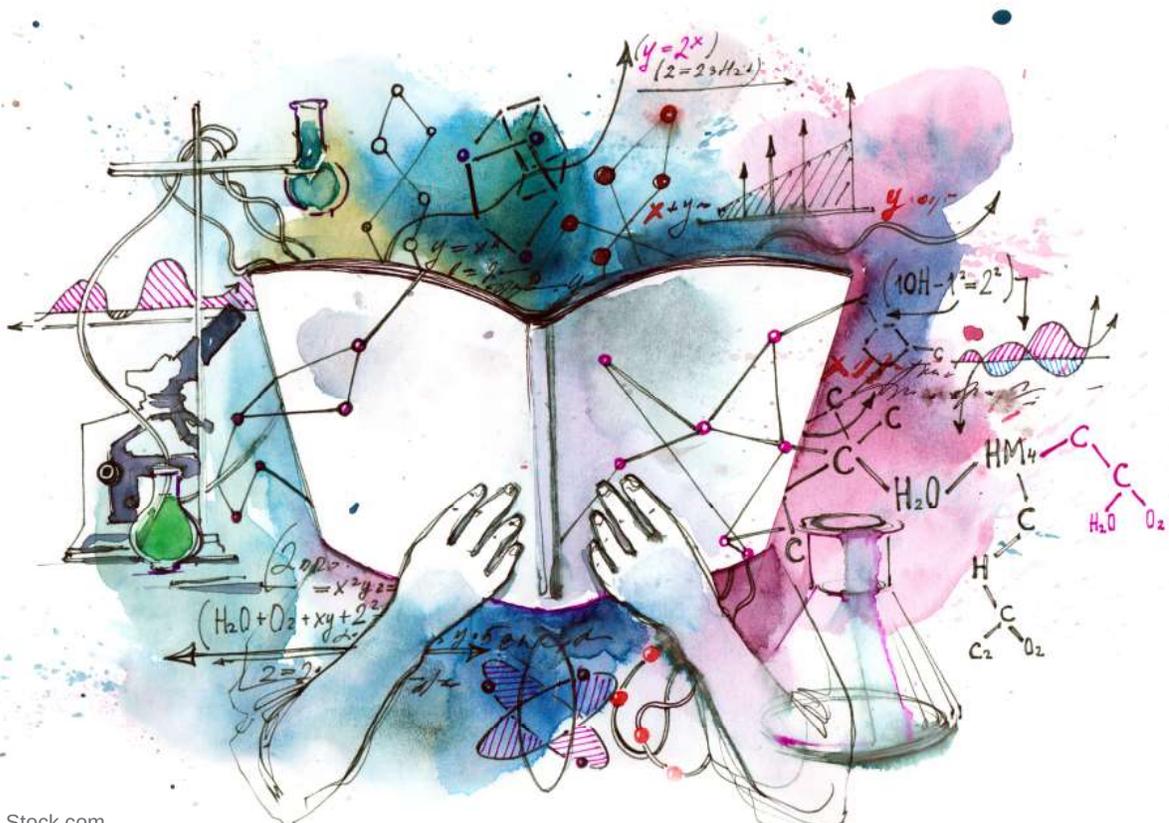
Heimir Steinarsson

I never really was a numbers person,
and didn't get what math was all about.
As I grew older, things did only worsen;
now simple operations freak me out.

Somehow, I can not understand what causes
these figures to behave so funnily.
Thus, every arithmetic question poses
a threat to my imperilled sanity.

But nonetheless, I try my best to master
the basic rules of elemental math.
So far my studies have been a disaster
and I'm not moving forward on my path.

Still, I'm sure that one day I will find
a way to turn into a brilliant mind.





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