

Literature: Snapshots From the Bridge

By Sven Birkerts



Some of the new faces on America's literary scene.(Jason Schmidt)

One of the more interesting things about writing criticism for many years is that from time to time I am called upon to revisit a particular author or development, at which point I usually discover not only how much my tastes and inclinations have changed, but also that my subjects have refused to stay embalmed in the mummy-wrap of what I used to think. This has been borne out most vividly recently, as I have been asked to venture a concise overview assessment of the state of

American literature -- fiction and poetry -- in the new millennium.

Ever the overworked opportunist, I returned first to a reflective survey essay I had written just over a decade ago entitled "The Talent in the Room." The intent of that piece had been very similar -- to spotlight the major trends and talents in the world of literary fiction. My hope was to salvage at least the foundation and frame of the former structure. Alas, as soon as I began reading I saw that it was not to be. Somehow, while I'd had my eye on the foreground action, reviewing this and that writer, the background had quite steadily -- and surprisingly -- shifted.

In that earlier essay, bouncing off polemics by Norman Mailer (his own 1959 essay, "Evaluations -- Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room"), as well as Tom Wolfe's rabble-rousing "Stalking the Billion-Footed Beast: A Literary Manifesto for the New Social Novel," published in Harper's in 1989, I had concluded that contemporary American fiction was in a state of retreat. As more

and more writers found themselves unable to deal convincingly with a radically transformed postmodern electronic society, there was a large-scale movement to a simpler world-picture. Instead of taking on the urban information culture, novelists and short story writers went toward rural and small-town subject matters, taking either minimalist or maximalist approaches.

I considered in this context, among others, Russell Banks, Richard Ford, Ann Tyler, Ann Beattie, William Kennedy, John Updike, Sue Miller, and Joyce Carol Oates, all of them presenting powerful versions of American experience, but none of them addressing -- so I thought -- the subject I then deemed central. There were exceptions, of course, notably Don DeLillo, Thomas Pynchon, Robert Stone, Richard Powers, Paul Auster, Toni Morrison, and Paul West, writers I saw as more attuned in their work to the vibrations of these transformations. But even taking these exceptions into account, my overall assessment was guardedly pessimistic.

Ascent of the New Generation

I am fascinated and heartened by how much has changed in the 10-plus years since I wrote "The Talent in the Room," though the change has come not by way of revolutionary insurgency but more by incremental shifts and displacements. It has been a matter of younger talents coming of age -- sensibilities more schooled in the new, postmodern way of things -- and older writers in many cases ceding their long-held places in the spotlight.

The biggest transformation, I would say, has been the ascendancy of a new generation of highly ambitious writers who are at once panoramic in their impulses and attuned to our collective arrival in a hypercomplex and polyglot info-culture. The best known of these is probably novelist Jonathan Franzen, whose *The Corrections*, a highly articulate and many-stranded story of two generations of the Midwestern Lambert family, rode the 2001 best-seller lists for many months. The author reminded serious readers everywhere that it was possible to tell a page-turning good story while honoring the fractured complexity of life in our post-everything era.

Other highly visible and critically respected members of Franzen's 40-something generation include the prolific polymath Richard

Powers. Powers followed *Plowing the Dark*, his seventh novel, an exploration of the implications of virtuality (the digital stimulation of "reality") with *The Time of Our Singing in 2003*, a mammoth saga of a mixed-race family that fused music, racial politics, and theoretical physics. There is also Jeffrey Eugenides, author of the generational angst-classic *The Virgin Suicides*, whose newest novel, *Middlesex* (2002), combines elaborate historical sequences with the coming-of-age travails of a transsexual. David Foster Wallace remains for many younger readers the standard-bearer of the new ethos of fragmentation and cultural displacement; his leviathan novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) is the benchmark work, what Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* was for readers a few decades back, while the more recent stories of *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* immerse the reader in disturbingly obsessive personalities.

Slightly younger talents include Rick Moody, who writes with serious reach in various genres, including the short story (*Demonology*), the novel (*Purple America*), and the memoir (*The Black Veil*), as well as Colson Whitehead, the young African-American novelist who, after marking his edgily whimsical debut with *The Intuitionist*, a novel about an elevator inspector, joined the maximalist cadre with *John Henry Days*, a broadly conceived satire of present-day race relations in collision with the culture of media boosterism. David Eggers scored a tremendous popular success a few years back with his energetic hybrid novel/memoir *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which fused a personal confessional impulse with the narrative licentiousness of fiction.

A.M. Homes, Joanna Scott, and Helen DeWitt, three women writing determinedly outside the domestic pigeonhole (old stereotypes live on), match their male colleagues in inventiveness and a willingness to take on the zeitgeist, though none has achieved the popular success of Alice Sebold (*The Lovely Bones*), Janet Fitch (*White Oleander*), or Ann Packer (*The Dive From Clausen's Pier*) -- each one, interestingly, a novel that turns on the premise of a traumatic loss.

An Internationalist Perspective

Another conspicuous trend-shift worth remarking on has been the infusion of an internationalist perspective and subject matter into

the literary mainstream. Chinese-born novelist and story-writer Ha Jin, in *Waiting* and, recently, *The Crazy*, has opened the door to narratives from the period of China's Cultural Revolution. Ukrainian-American Askold Melnyczuk, in *Ambassador of the Dead*, makes vivid the surfacing of suppressed World War II horrors in the lives of two families of Ukrainian-Americans, while Sarajevo-born immigrant Aleksandar Hemon, author of the story collection *The Question of Bruno*, in his novel *Nowhere Man* plies between past and present in the life of a young Sarajevo man living in present-day Chicago. Chang-rae Lee, in *A Gesture Life*, subtly dramatizes the life of a Korean-born Japanese man living in America and trying to evade the ghosts of his compromised past. Pulitzer Prize-winner Jhumpa Lahiri, in *Interpreter of Maladies*, and Junot Diaz, in *Drown*, are among several younger writers who use the short story form to study the complex frictions that come with living in the ethnic divide, Indian-American and Dominican-American, respectively.

A similar impulse -- only expressed through reversed perspectives -- is found in novels like Arthur Phillips's *Prague* and Jonathan Safran Foer's best-selling *Everything Is Illuminated*, both of which probe lives in other cultures from the vantage of Americans living and traveling abroad. Where Phillips refracts our recent cultural period through the experiences of a group of American expatriates living abroad -- not in Prague, in fact, but in Budapest (the novel's little joke) -- Foer depicts the encounter of a young American traveler (named Jonathan Safran Foer) with the ancestral past in contemporary Ukraine.

These several developments stand out against what remains a powerful mainstream continuity. The various modes of American realism continue to find strong representation in the works of writers like Richard Ford, William Kennedy, Sue Miller, Ward Just, Andre Dubus III, Peter Matthiessen, and Philip Roth (whose recent trilogy comprising *American Pastoral*, *I Married a Communist*, and *The Human Stain* stands as one of the signal accomplishments of the past decade). No less "real" but stylistically more elaborate variations are presented in works by Annie Proulx and Cormac McCarthy, as well as John Updike, William Vollmann, and others.

Of the making of lists there is no end. At certain points the broader

typologies break down and one starts ticking off the sui generis talents: the more assertively experimental stylists like Robert Coover, David Markson, Mary Robison, and George Saunders; the divergently uncanny storytellers like Paul Auster, Paul West, Mark Slouka, Howard Norman, Charles Baxter, Douglas Bauer, Jonathan Dee, Allen Kurzweil, Alan Lightman, Michael Chabon, Margot Livesey, Maureen Howard, T.C. Boyle, and Ann Patchett; the voice-driven southerners like Padgett Powell, Lewis Nordan, Jill McCorkle, Elizabeth Cox, Lee Smith, Nancy Lemann, Barry Hannah, Donna Tartt, and Ellen Gilchrist. There should be a separate slot for the astonishing magnifications of the ordinary by Nicholson Baker, from his debut novel, *The Mezzanine*, to the recent *A Box of Matches*, which built a whole narrative out of a middle-aged man's early morning musings by his fireplace. Have I forgotten anyone? Dozens, hundreds -- I'm certain. Anyone who ventures to survey must prepare to live with a haunting sense of omission.

Profile: Novelist Jill McCorkle

One of the hallmarks of American literature is a sense of place. Writers from the southern United States in particular -- William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams, to name just three - are well known for conveying their depictions of this unique region.

Jill McCorkle is one of the heirs to that tradition, albeit her work reflects a New South through which interstate highways flow and in which suburbia and transiency have become irreversible realities. But in her five novels and two collections of short stories, McCorkle has maintained and enhanced the oral tradition that is so much a part of southern -- and rural -- culture. She once referred to her style as "the historical meandering method of storytelling."



Jill McCorkle
(Miriam Berkley Photography)

McCorkle, a North Carolina native, burst on the American

literary scene in 1984 at age 26 -- having graduated from college and from a master's degree program in writing -- with two novels, *The Cheer Leader and July 7th*, published simultaneously. McCorkle was one of the fiction writers taken under the wing of her publisher, Algonquin Books, a small, independent publisher of quality fiction and nonfiction books based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. With seven works now in print, she and Algonquin have enjoyed a fruitful relationship over the years.

McCorkle's stories are laced with down-home humor, yet they are rooted in human struggle. "I write about people who are figuring out where they fit in society and how to reach a certain level of acceptance," she once said. "Oftentimes I start out with an idea just because it is funny, but then I like to find the darker part of the story." Paying tribute to her deft comic touch and her keen eye for southern manners, one critic noted that "her vision is also similarly humane, revealing the foibles of her characters but withholding harsh judgments or violent epiphanies."

The southern women she has created in novels such as *Carolina Moon and Tending to Virginia* -- which she considers her most satisfying books -- range from teenagers to the elderly. The way she interweaves their lives suggests her desire to embrace human relationships and extol the continuity of life. While rooted in the South, her writing touches universal themes -- perhaps the reason why her books have been translated into more than a dozen languages.

The most recent collection of stories by McCorkle, who now teaches writing at Harvard University and Bennington College, is *Creatures of Habit*, published in 2001. As one observer put it, the tales represent "what coming home should be but so seldom is -- comforting, clarifying, and irresistible."

The poetry scene is configured by a similar plurality of modes, but what feels like abundance and variety in the world of fiction feels to many poets I've spoken with like a frustrating balkanization. A few years ago, the major division of camps was between the "formalists" and exponents of various kinds of "free" verse. The situation feels somewhat different now, with the split coming more between poets who use language in referential ways -- pointing out at our common world -- and those for whom language is its own self-created realm. The latter include the very visible John Ashbery and his many followers, and poets influenced by Jorie Graham, who puts the dynamic process of perception at the core of her expression. In their near vicinity, we find the poets of the experimental L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E school, including Michael Palmer, Charles Bernstein, and Lyn Hejinian, who in her long poem *Oxota* writes lines such as: "It's the principle of connection not that of causality which saves us from a bad infinity/ The word hunt is not the shadow of an accident."

The more directly referential poets branch out in a number of directions. There are the older inheritors of modernism, like former Poet Laureate Robert Pinsky, Frank Bidart, Louise Glück, Charles Simic, and C.K. Williams.

Alongside them we find a cluster, mainly younger, of poets espousing a somewhat less historically conditioned idiom, including Tom Sleigh, Alan Shapiro, Rosanna Warren, Gail Mazur, and Yusef Komunyakaa on the one hand, and more formally inflected poets like William Logan, Dana Gioia (recently named as head of the National Endowment for the Arts), Brad Leithauser, Glyn Maxwell, Debora Greger, and Mary Jo Salter, on the other.

On other branches we point to more personally declarative poets like Marie Howe, Mark Doty, and Sharon Olds; the benign and lightly surreal Billy Collins, our current Poet Laureate; and the less benign, more somberly funny Stephen Dobyns. A longer survey would find ways to place the work of Thomas Lux and David Lehman, as well as the powerful singular expressions of older, more established poets such as Adrienne Rich, Robert Bly, Donald Hall, Thom Gunn, and David Ferry.

The Serious Reader Remains

Turning from poetry to the big picture of the literary world, it is safe to assert that transformations in the social and economic world have had their impact. In publishing, as in most things, money calls the dance, and the recent fiscal downturn, combined with the ongoing tendency toward corporate conglomeration (with its attendant squeeze on the "bottom line" of profits), has put pressure on small-returns literary projects. Authors have a more difficult time breaking in; editors have to work much harder to persuade their superiors to take on books that don't promise substantial sales. The old expectations, fostered when publishing was the domain of independent houses, are no longer -- the independents have all but vanished.

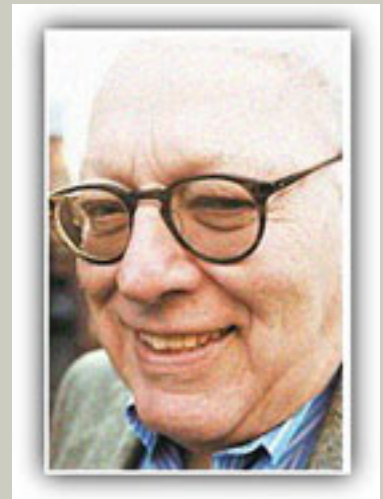
At the same time, the burgeoning electronic culture has made its inroads. While the much-touted electronic book (the handheld device that was to revolutionize reading) never caught on -- indeed, was a major fizzle, confounding pundits everywhere -- there is little question that ever more sophisticated entertainments (video, DVD, and the like) have made inroads into our reading lives, and, of course, we hear regular laments about the shrinking away of seriousness.

On the other hand -- always there's that "other hand" -- worthy books continue to be written, published, promoted, and read, and breakout best-sellers like *The Corrections* and *The Lovely Bones* remind everyone in the business that the avid serious reader has not disappeared. If the broader trend is toward more glitzy entertainments, we must nevertheless remark the steady proliferation of book clubs and reading groups. Dire predictions are risky, and except those that pertained to the coming of the horseless carriage, they usually have been exaggerated.

Sven Birkerts is the author of six books, including *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age* and *My Sky Blue Trades*, a recently published memoir.

A Conversation With Jason Epstein

Over a half-century as an editor and publisher, Jason Epstein has set a standard for publishing in the United States. As founder of Anchor Books, he established quality paperback books as an alternative to the mass marketing of soft-cover volumes. Epstein was editorial director of Random House; co-founded the prestigious literary journal The New York Review of Books; created the Library of America to bring to the market exquisite editions of classic American fiction, nonfiction, and poetry; and pioneered research and experimentation to bring book publishing in line with the computer age. Epstein was the first recipient of the National Book Award for Distinguished Service to American Letters in recognition of his work in "inventing new kinds of publishing and editing."



Jason Epstein
(John Nordell/Christian Science Monitor)

Q: Is this a good time for books in the United States?

A: The nonfiction being published today is as interesting as what we were publishing 20 or 30 years ago, perhaps more so. Good historians, both amateur and professional, have learned how to address general readers, and the interest in first-rate historical writing has expanded accordingly. The same is true for science, where writers have also learned how to speak to non-specialized readers. As far as I can tell, the editors who select and edit these books are highly qualified professionals who know not only how to prepare a manuscript for the printer but how to call books to the attention of readers.

Fiction is another matter, and this I believe reflects a cultural

problem endemic to First World cultures. The current generation of fiction writers has not produced as many world-class talents as one might have hoped. There is no shortage of interesting work, but there are no new Mailers or Roths or Hellers or Doctorows or DeLillos in sight -- writers whose work is obligatory for serious readers. I wonder if the devastating wars of the 20th century help explain this phenomenon. The most interesting new writers are from India, China, Latin America, and even Iceland, and it is reasonable to expect that, from the large Latino and Asian populations in the United States, interesting talent will continue to emerge. The cultural dissonance that these people encounter should give them plenty to write about.

Meanwhile, the proportion of readers in the United States seems to have grown, and I find it always a pleasure to see on the New York City subways ethnically diverse young people reading good books. There is no reason to worry about the future of books in the United States.

Q: What are the challenges today in book publishing and literature, as you see them?

A: On the other hand, there is much to worry about in the current state of the publishing industry, which is suffering from a severe structural crisis -- the result of a highly overcentralized retail marketplace. Unlike the literary marketplace a generation ago, consisting of 4,000 to 5,000 independent booksellers, today's market is dominated by a few chains that require rapid turnover to support their expensive operations and that select their inventory centrally. This severely limits the shelf life of a book, and therefore the range of books available to readers.

Today there are probably no more than 50 or 60 independent bookstores in the United States with inventories of 100,000 or more titles, which helps explain the success of amazon.com and other on-line retailers that are able to maintain extensive selections. However, these operations have not proven profitable and may eventually be impossible to sustain.

The existing supply chain is clearly obsolete and will be replaced eventually by the electronic distribution of digital files printed and bound in the form of library-quality paperbacks at point of delivery. These highly disruptive technologies now exist but cannot be deployed at this time because they will render redundant such traditional publishing functions as centralized printing, physical storage and delivery of inventory, and traditional marketing, along with the functionaries themselves. When these technologies are eventually deployed, the effect will be to make millions of titles widely, cheaply, and permanently available in many languages to readers throughout the world, and will constitute a second Gutenberg revolution, but on a world scale

The economic downturn does not seem to be affecting publishers' lists so far. But profits are down at some conglomerates and likely to fall further with predictable results. [The publishing firm] Bertelsmann, for example, has begun to liquidate certain fixed costs by combining divisions, intending to reduce not only its overheads but perhaps the number of its publications.

Morale in the industry is not high. An encouraging sign, however, is the proliferation of small houses, most of which have set high literary standards for themselves. The day of the conglomerates seems to me to be fading along with that of the chain booksellers whose same-store sales have been lagging for several quarters.

But people will continue to tell stories as they have been doing since the beginning of the human era, and other people will go on reading them. This suggests that the structural crisis that afflicts the publishing industry will sooner or later -- and by one means or another -- be overcome.

The interview with Jason Epstein was conducted by Michael J. Bandler.

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