

EDITORS SELECT

Craig Nova, *All the Dead Yale Men*, Counterpoint, 2013. Nova's new novel is the sequel to his breakthrough book, *The Good Son*, published in 1982. *The Daily Beast* described the new one thusly: "Nova is a master of distressed psychological spaces: A chess match between Frank and 'The Wizard,' a small-time punk who is courting Frank's daughter—much to Frank's extreme displeasure—is more thrilling than most car chases or shootouts. 'Emotional explosions have their own revelations,' Nova writes, 'which aren't so obvious when you are flying through the air in the power of the first blast.'" All true, though Nova's singular achievement in all his many novels is his prose style, his voice, which is his alone, though it echoes any number of esteemed American writers in its heady mix of classical grandeur and the common vernacular. Pick any page and you'll find evidence of it. Here's a bit of description at a funeral, which is also, necessarily, character analysis: "Fifty or so people who cry at the same time is not a comforting sound, but perhaps a necessary one. Pia cried harder than all the rest, so much that I thought she would dissolve, that she would just disappear in the silver streaks that came from her eyes, and when she wiped them away, it seemed that she cried for my father, whom she had liked,

for me, and for everything else, too, having been seduced by a punk, having made a fool of herself, and out of relief, I guess, that even she had a chance to start again." Nova has published a dozen novels, each a pleasure and an illumination to read.

Joan Silber, *Fools*, Norton, 2013. Silber's new book repeats the structure of her most successful work, *Ideas of Heaven: A Ring of Stories*, which was short-listed for the National Book Award when it was published in 2005: Stories that repeat characters, or employ the off-spring of characters, as they range across time, from the early 20th century to more or less the present. *Fools* is not so much a ring of stories, as a staircase of them, because they unfold through history, the last of them being the most contemporary, and we end up at the top step of the here and now. Any number of literary writers have taken to mine history these days and Silber does the early pre-Catholic Worker period of Dorothy Day in the title story and this impulse to drop into lives not lived is a subset of fiction writers' storehouse of materials, since they, allegedly, are creating characters who are not them to begin with. So why not use historical figures to inhabit? Silber's distinction, at least for this reader, is her treatment of female characters. They are not usual at all, gifted for the most part with generosity, espe-

cially to men, anti-stereotypes who are equipped with hard-won wisdom from lives lived both adventurously and introspectively. In the volume's last story, "Buying and Selling," a character we have seen in her youth in an earlier story ("The Hanging Fruit"), Liliane, now reflects, looking back, as a woman of a certain age: "Inequities of wealth erode civility,' her friend Yvette, who was a Marxist, said. To suffer indignities from a man you were crazy about was not unusual, even for Liliane, but to be maltreated by someone you didn't love was degrading. She had expected much more triumph in the arrangement, which, in the end, did not suit her at all." No fooling here.

Kristen Iversen, *Full Body Burden: Growing Up in the Nuclear Shadow of Rocky Flats*, Crown, 2012, Paperback 2013. *Full Body Burden* recounts a disaster long in the making, one that parallels the author's growing up, though its origins precede her birth. And, speaking of origins, this memoir/history, a hybrid form that is not unique, but, in Iversen's hands, one that still retains a rare quality. Iversen needs to unravel the myth of her own upbringing and the myth-making of the Federal Government and DOE in her memoir/history, as she did in her earlier biography (1999) of a famous woman, *Molly Brown*, of unsinkable fame, made famous, though, because of a

great disaster and the hyperbole of fantasists in the press of its subject's time. In *Full Body Burden* it is a case of reverse hyperbole, the toning down, if not the annulling, of actual history. Each reality was, in its era, made suitable for public consumption by outside forces.

It is not easy to write truthful nonfiction about one's growing up, no matter the example of the many memoirs of dysfunctional households that have been published in the last twenty years or so. It takes a certain steely-ness, a steady eye, a particular sort of detachment. There is a scan-able amount of discretion in Iversen's depiction of her family and a measurable amount of distance with which she views her own intimate experience. Happily, the same technique is applied to her parallel chronicle of the history of the Rocky Flats plutonium plant she grew up next to. She is no zealot, or even partisan advocate, in this account; Iversen remains more the detached historian at work. This is not to say there is no heat in her account. In fact, this emotional control makes both the family disintegration and the hazards and mundane mayhem of the production of plutonium and attendant lying and deception (both domestic and national) she describes more powerful and appalling. This isn't emotion recollected in tranquility, but in a benumbed state of mature appraisal hard won.

Robert Rebein, *Dragging Wyatt Earp: A Personal History of Dodge City*, Swallow Press, 2013. *Dragging Wyatt Earp* is not well titled, given that one expects to find a growing up tale, its heart located in the teenage years. But it is much more than that. Rebein is writing more than memoir, though that genre, more or less, constitutes the structure of the book, and the memoir aspect is emphasized in the book's first half, when the author is growing up, literally. But the volume's second half contains as much history, and not just of Dodge City, as it does memoir (and the first half is not without some), which is a specific, but personal, form of journalism, not exactly memoir, exploring both the roots of a number of American institutions and issues, as well as providing interesting examples of their contemporary manifestations.

The book surprises because it is more than the sum of its parts. But, Rebein certainly does not overreach here. His prose is rather modest, though quite affecting at times. What is apparent throughout the essays is the fictional technique of presentation, of letting the writer describe, with a minimal amount of soul searching and analysis. This is not uncommon for a writer who wants to write fiction, which, it is clear, Rebein aspired to when he was younger (the memoir recounts that desire.) *Dragging Wyatt Earp* mixes the staples of memoir, family

upbringing, ambitions thwarted and achieved, along with some fascinating history of the country, done, mainly, in a documentary style. The book is also about masculinity, plain work, the tensions and travails of domestic life. Rebein is not, in the contemporary mode, confessional. In many ways, he determinedly stays on the surface, letting the reader read between the lines, or wonder what the answer is to the human calculus he describes. The pages on his marriage and wife certainly prompt that, leaving questions up in the air as fiction, more often than nonfiction, does regularly.

Courtney McDermott, *How They Spend Their Sundays*, Whitepoint Press, 2013. ND's own Courtney McDermott's first book, set in Lesotho and South Africa, is described as a "story collection [that] unveils a perspective of African life that is both startling and intimate. An Afrikaner woman sleeps with a shotgun because she fears black Africans, an undead garbage man 'saves' lives by taking them, a modern day Cinderella struggles to escape the bitter residual constraints of colonialism. These twenty-two tales embrace graphic realism, energetic bursts of truths that may otherwise go unnoticed, and magic." Nothing false there. *ForeWord Reviews* says, "*How They Spend Their Sundays* is a fresh, taut collection. Born and raised in Iowa, McDermott served as a Peace

Corps volunteer in Lesotho and is adroit at evoking the surroundings, characters, culture, and voice of that faraway country.” A wonderful debut by a fearless and gifted writer.

Holly Thompson, *The Language Inside*, Delacorte Press, 2013. *NDR* contributor Thompson’s second verse novel occupies a relatively new genre. Her first verse novel, *Orchards*, won the APALA Asian/Pacific American Award for YA Literature. *Booklist* writes about the new book, “A number of story lines emerge, but the fluid nature of this novel’s free verse allows these subplots to mesh together like a series of linked poems. Thompson beautifully conveys Emma’s Japanese sensibilities in the structure of the verses. For example, Emma often expresses herself through silence, conveyed through well-placed breaks. Interspersed throughout are poems that Emma finds, which Thompson references in an appendix....the appeal of poetry slips easily into the flow of this story.” Thompson has been a longtime resident of Japan and teaches creative writing at Yokohama City University. She grew up in New England and both Japan and New England are primary settings in the novel. Young adult readers, perhaps not paradoxically, are apparently open to nontraditional narratives.

Mark Brazaitis, *Julia & Rodrigo*, Gival Press, 2013. *NDR* contributor

and winner of the Richard Sullivan Prize for his collection of short stories, *The Incurables*, Brazaitis’s new novel is, as described by Marnie Mueller, an “ambitious, deeply felt, exquisitely written, masterfully structured, and informed by a wide-ranging knowledge of the culture and politics of Guatemala... In many ways as tragic as Romeo and Juliet, his novel follows its own poignant, yet unsentimental story line to an inevitable, sorrowful, and yet hope-filled end.” Gival Press is out of Arlington, Virginia and seems to favor fiction with transnational settings, especially those set in Central America. *Julia & Rodrigo* won Gival’s Novel Award for 2013 and it is well deserved.

Cris Mazza, *Something Wrong with Her*, Jaded Ibis Press, 2013. *NDR* contributor Mazza’s 14th book, a capstone work of sorts (though one certainly hopes for more), insofar as it takes themes from all her earlier books and plumbs their depths in nearly 400 pages of double-columned prose. Plus sidebar boxes, notes, drawings, etc. All published by the adventurous firm of Jaded Ibis, noted publisher of the transgressive and the fancily packaged. Jaded Ibis calls itself Productions, rather than mere publisher, and the volumes it brings out are just that. Mazza’s subtitle, *I Shaped It: The Snowball Swelling into Sexual Dysfunction Frigidity (What*

other word is there?), tells the reader the book's subject, though it does focus on familiar literary territory: unrequited love, romance, the vagaries of social class, Jane Austen out of Lady Gaga. All this is presented as nonfiction and whatever genre it is, it has the undeniable blunt force of honesty. One of the most provocative "memoirs" of the year.

Orlando Ricardo Menes, *Fetish*, University of Nebraska Press, 2013. Notre Dame's own Orlando Menes' new volume of poetry won the Prairie Schooner Book Prize in Poetry. The author and University Distinguished Scholar in Mestizo Cultural Studies, University of Texas at San Antonio, John Phillip Santos, who also has a ND connection, says of it: "Orlando Ricardo Menes's *Fetish* is a rare work of the American Creole Sublime, conjuring visions of his Cuban homeland as a sacred geography of vanquished mestizo dreams, his Florida boyhood a world of transmuting tropical wonder. At once mythic, syncretic, and autobiographical, transported on strains of epiphanic geomancy, Menes's work subtly presents a new vision of América that Martí, Stevens and Walcott would all embrace. You want to whisper in a fever, 'Adelante!'" A remarkable volume that will receive a longer review in a subsequent issue.

Conor O'Callaghan, Editor, *The Wake Forest Series of Irish Poetry, Volume Three*, Wake Forest University Press, 2013. Wake Forest University is one of the foremost publishers of Irish poetry outside of Ireland, both in individual collections and in anthologies, so it is no surprise that their latest anthology gets a very high recommendation. Unlike most anthologies, which tend to assemble many poets with just a smattering of poems by each, O'Callaghan wisely chose just five poets (Colette Bryce, Justin Quinn, John McAuliffe, Maurice Riordan, and Gerard Fanning) with a generous selection (25 poems or more) from all their published books. Of special enjoyment are the extensive interviews that precede each poet's work. One wishes that more anthologists would choose this method of introducing poets through their own voices.

Kathleen Aponick, *Bright Realm*, Turning Point, 2013. Poet Michael Ryan recommends this *NDR* contributor's book with these heartfelt words: "The stories shaped by the poems of *Bright Realm* issue form the real life of a person vulnerable to the loss, grief, and joy that anyone who has deeply loved other people can understand, and through their courage and clarity affirm a persistent hard-won human interconnect- edness."

María Eugenia Vaz Ferreira, *The Island of the Songs*, William F. Blair, Translator, Song Bridge Press, 2013. It is a delight to recommend Blair's translation of the poetry of this Uruguayan poet, a quite unknown contemporary of her compatriot Delmira Agustini and of the Argentine Alfonsina Storni, whose poetry recently appeared in translation in *My Heart Flooded with Water: Selected Poems from Alfonsina Storni*, Orlando Ricardo Menes, Translator, Latin American Literary Review Press, 2009. It is a revelation to find such exquisite poetry (and so ably translated by Blair) by such a passionate voice, one that dares explore homoerotic feelings in a conservative and patriarchal society.

Blas Falconer, *The Foundling Wheel*, Four Way Books, 2012;
Raina J. León, *Canticle of Idols: Poems*, CustomWords, 2008;
Maria Melendez Kelson, *Flexible Bones*, University of Arizona Press, 2010; John Murillo, *Up Jump the Boogie*, Cypher Books, 2010. Deserving of special mention are these four Latino poets who participated this past October in "Latino/a Poetry Now," an event organized by Letras Latinas, a unit of the Institute for Latino Studies at Notre Dame.

Falconer is the recipient of a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts, and a fine lyric poet, indeed. The eminent poet Stanley Plumly writes that "Blas Fal-

coner's landscapes—and the people he places in them—elevate the pastoral to a level where the music has the force of an idea, in a language at once symbolic and probic." León is a young poet who crafts narratives of considerable emotional power.

The widely admired Martín Espada praises León "as a fiery and courageous poet. The poems in this, her first collection, are explosions of pain and transcendence, jagged epiphanies, surreal, haunting, erotic and anguished by turns."

Melendez is well known as a practitioner of eco-poetics, and this her second book of poems deserves mention: The great Alicia Ostriker has this to say: "*Flexible Bones* is a wicked book, flexibly manipulating languages with a satiric tingle, touching the way we live (and are killing ourselves with contaminants) now."

Murillo's poems spin off the "spoken word" in dynamically sonic ways, while at the same maintaining a coherent lyricism. The acclaimed Junot Díaz writes, "Murillo is head-breakingly brilliant."

Jeffrey Pethybridge, *Striven, The Bright Treatise*, Noemi Press, 2013. This amazing, moving elegiac book dedicated to the memory of the author's brother, Tad Pethybridge, uses a wide variety of forms, both traditional and innovative, to confront the brute fact of a fatal leap from San Francisco's Golden Gate

bridge. Only three books published in the last several decades are comparable, book-length elegies by Douglas Dunn for his wife (1985), Hilda Morley's for her husband, the composer Stefan Wolpe (1983), and Mary Jo Bang's more recent volume in memory of her son (2007). As C.D. Wright said of Bang's *Elegy*, Pethybridge's book is a harrowing trip but, given the paradox of art, also exhilarating and beautiful. Rusty Morrison writes that *Striven, The Bright Treatise* uses its formal range to query the vanity of trusting any lyric as a device capable of conveying the enormity of revelation that suicide engenders. Each formal design strives to bring to light more of the irresolvable elements that constitute this crisis of loss, though the poems are, in fact, testament to the possibility of shedding the brightest light on the motivations activating the agency of such striving." This is exactly right. The book is beautifully produced by Noemi Press, and includes a large concretist fold-out representation of the Golden Gate made out of words in which each letter represents one suicide from the bridge and includes the phrases that contextualize the title: *Striven, in the debt-age, its red-hanged air [the lamps will come on soon the lamps will come on soon] "I hate this 'I', this tired agent" he said—striven, the tired age entire, its sign.* This is a brilliant book of poems.

Ciaran Carson, *In the Light Of: After Illuminations by Arthur Rimbaud*, Wake Forest, 2013. It's a strange project that Carson has set himself here—translating Rimbaud's prose poems, meant to have been the result of "a systematic derangement of all the senses," into reasonable rhyming couplets that approximate the classical French alexandrines from which Rimbaud fled howling. It is as if Molliere had returned from the dead to re-inscribe the *enfant terrible* into the form of a rational adult. Still, Carson's versions have a perverse interest. As he says in a brief author's note, "I began to think of the project as a restoration, or renovation, rather than a complete makeover. In any event these versions are not conventional translations. The constraints of rhyme and meter led me to cut, interpolate, and interpret. There are instances where I have added to or taken away from the original. I have sometimes twisted Rimbaud's words. And Rimbaud's words, of course, twisted mine." This description of what he's been up to is reminiscent of Robert Lowell's justification of his procedures in *Imitations*, a book that also included some very compelling versions of Rimbaud. Carson is one of the most interesting and inventive contemporary Irish poets, and anything he does is worth reading. But it's best to read this book as a volume of poems by Carson. For the real Rimbaud in English, go back to

John Ashbury's translation.

Aidan Semmens, ed., *By the North Sea: An Anthology of Suffolk Poetry*, Shearsman Press, 2013. In the year of the Benjamin Britten centenary, and sporting a jacket photograph of Maggie Hambling's Britten memorial, the "Scallop" sculpture on Aldeburgh Beach, and beginning with a preface by the living spirit of place Ronald Blythe, Aidan Semmens has put together a fine regional anthology which includes well-known Suffolk poems from earlier periods like George Crabbe's "Peter Grimes" and Swinburne's poem which gives the book its title, followed by a range of contemporary poets including Angela Leighton, Pauline Stainer, Wendy Mulford, R.F. Langley, Rodney Pybus, Herbert Lomas, Anne Beresford, Michael Hamburger, and the editor. Also included is *NDR's* Editor at Large, John Matthias—truly enough "at large" in this context, but possibly holding his own with the locals, along with another American, Tamar Yoselef, to represent the Yanks in the region who have been coming to Suffolk, and sometimes staying there, since the Second World War.

Christopher Merrill, *Boat*, Tupelo Press, 2013. The prolific Merrill's *Necessities* was noticed in this column in the last issue. Already, there is a new book of poems. Unlike *Necessities*, which is really

a single coherent poem written in prose paragraphs, the new book is a sequence of poems in verse, both free and metered, written here and there during the author's wanderings around the world over the last several decades. As the blurb correctly says, Merrill is a writer and cultural envoy in the tradition of Neruda and Paz, Perse and Milosz. "Composed in war zones and embassies, refugee camps and monasteries, *Boat* tracks questions of memory, body and body politic, faith, morality, and the ways knowledge moves through generations."

Richard Burgin, *Hide Island: A Novella and Nine Stories*, Texas Review Press, 2013. This is Richard Burgin's eighth collection of stories. (*Identity Club* was reviewed at length by James Walton in an earlier issue of *NDR*.) The stories in the new volume are as sinister and unnerving as ever, but there is also a gentleness and generosity to some of them—especially the title piece and "From the Diary of an Invalid"—that may represent a new direction in Burgin's work. Joyce Carol Oats has written that "What Edgar Allan Poe did for the psychotic soul, Richard Burgin does for the deeply neurotic who pass among us disguised as so seemingly 'normal' we may mistake them for ourselves." And the Boston Globe concluded that "Burgin's tales capture the strangeness of a world that is simultaneously frightening

and reassuring, and in the contemporary American short story nothing quite resembles his singular voice.”

