

Norman Lock
Novelist, Playwright, Short Fiction Writer, Poet
Biographical Narrative

In this, my sixtieth year, I was voted one of the twenty top literary artists to watch by one hundred independent publishers, reviewers, bloggers, and agents – this list, in response to *The New Yorker's* own, which covers commercial outlets exclusively. The year before, in 2009, I published my twelfth and thirteenth books: *The King of Sweden* (Ravenna Press) and *Shadowplay* (Ellipsis Press), both novels. I look back on a varied writing career that can be said to have begun at the University of Pennsylvania when Philip Roth invited me to attend his creative writing seminar on the strength of an early story. It was Mr. Roth, who saw to it that I was admitted to Syracuse University with a creative writing fellowship, discovering that I had not the means to attend graduate school otherwise. I was delighted six years later, in 1979, to receive the Aga Kahn Prize, given by *The Paris Review* – the inaugural award having been presented to Mr. Roth twenty years before by Ali Kahn in Paris. (Mine arrived by mail from George Plimpton in New York.) While at Syracuse, I studied with the novelist George Elliott and the poet Philip Booth. (While at Penn, I had also studied the composition of poetry with Daniel Hoffman.)

The years following graduation from Syracuse, with a Master's degree in English literature, until publishing in *The Paris Review* (an achievement I was not to repeat until 1998) saw a callow writer in search of a form and subject. I wrote short stories in a variety of styles, published derivative poetry, and performed in avant-garde spectacles as a founding member of the Philadelphia New Language Action Group. In 1983, my first play had the good fortune of finding a production at the Perry Street Theatre in Greenwich Village. Believing the theatrical form was the one I had been searching for, I wrote dozens of plays during the next fifteen years. In 1987, I celebrated the week of my thirty-seventh birthday in Denver and in Ashland, Oregon, at the premieres of *Favorite Sports of the Martyrs* and *The House of Correction*, respectively. The latter work was subsequently performed in Los Angeles at the Los Angeles Theatre Center in 1988.

Named one of the best new plays of 1988 by the *Los Angeles Times*, as well as 1994 for its Theatre 40 revival, *The House of Correction* was widely produced in the U.S. and Germany and was “arguably the best new play at this year's [the 1996 Edinburgh Theatre] festival” (*The Stage*). Published by Broadway Play Publishing Company, a scene was included in *Duo: Best Scenes for the 90's* (Applause Books). In 1995, *The Contract* premiered in Los Angeles. (That play had been a finalist for the 1991 American Express & The Kennedy Center Fund for New American Plays.) *Mounting Panic* and *The Sinking Houses* received staged readings in Los Angeles and New York, in 1995 and 1996. During the 1990's, I wrote four 60-minute dramas for German radio, including WDR, that country's largest: *Women in Hiding*, *The Shining Man*, *The Primate House*, and *Money, Power & Greed*. A 30-minute drama, *The Body Shop*, was produced by The American Film Institute in 1991 and shown at international film festivals. I worked on the film adaptation of *The House of Correction*, produced in 1997 but never distributed. *Two Plays for Radio* was published in 2006 (Triple Press). *Three Plays* is due in 2011 from Noemi Press. This summer I returned to the dramatic form, completing a new play, *An Accident of Rain*.

Since 1995, I have been preoccupied almost exclusively by the short story, the short-prose

sequence, and the novel. Published book-length works of fiction include ‘*The Book of Supplemental Diagrams*’ for Marco Knauff’s Universe (novella, Ravenna Press, 2003), *A History of the Imagination* (novel, Fiction Collective Two, 2004), *Trio* (Triple Press, 2005), *The Long Rowing Unto Morning* (novella, Ravenna Press, 2006), *Land of the Snow Men* (novella, Calamari Press, 2005, and – in Japanese – Kawade Shobo, 2008), *The King of Sweden* (novel, Ravenna Press, 2009), *Shadowplay* (novel, Ellipsis Press, 2009), and *Grim Tales* (Mud Luscious Press, 2011). Two extended short-prose sequences, *Joseph Cornell’s Operas* and *Émigrés*, were brought out in 2001 by Elimae Books in a limited-edition handmade book. They were subsequently released in 2003 – in Turkish – by Istanbul’s largest publisher as part of its New World Writing series. *Cirque du Calder*, a handmade artist’s book, was presented in 2006 by Rogue Literary Society, with illustrations by Faruk Ulay and an afterword by Gordon Lish. Two experimental novellas will be published in 2011 by Spuyten Duyvil under the title *Pieces for Small Orchestra*.

In the fall of 2008, I conceived a new project – *A Book of Imaginary Colophons: Alphabets of Desire & Sorrow*. Completed in the fall, 2010, the one-hundred-and-ten prose-poems (or short fictions as they are sometimes considered) constituting that work have proven attractive to editors of many of the country’s finest literary publications, such as *The Notre Dame Review*. I received a 2011 poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts on the strength of them.

In summary, during a forty-year writing career, I have published hundreds of short stories, prose-poems, and brief fictions as well as a stage play, two radio plays, four novels, two novellas, and four extended prose sequences – with three additional plays and a new short-fiction collection due in 2011. My work has appeared in England, Canada, Japan, Turkey, Argentina, Luxembourg, Italy, France, Belgium, Holland, Ireland, India, Spain, and the Czech Republic. Plays have been staged or broadcast in Germany, Scotland, England, and South Africa. Work has been translated into German, Italian, Flemish, Spanish, and Catalan. In addition to the 1979 Aga Kahn Prize given by *The Paris Review* and the 2010 literary prose award from The Dactyl Foundation for *Shadowplay*, I received a 1999 prose fellowship from the New Jersey Council on the Arts, a 2009 prose fellowship from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and a 2011 poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts. Until the termination of my job in February, 2010, I had earned my living as a copywriter and editor, having worked thirty-five consecutive years in publishing, advertising, and marketing. Finally, it is not unworthy of mention that I taught creative writing in state and federal correctional institutions, raised two children, and have remained married for thirty-eight years.

SELECTED COMMENTARY ON FICTION PLAYS AND PLAYS

About *Shadowplay*

One of the toughest challenges facing an innovative writer is avoiding the trap of one’s un-conventions.... Not so with Norman Lock, whose work seems to emanate less from any cultivated strategy than from an essential strangeness, an estrangement from easily agreed-upon psychologies, from popular culture, from anything resembling a zeitgeist. It is marked

by an eerie tonality and an intense, unsettled intellectual curiosity—a Lock novel might take place during any time period, anywhere in the world.

— DAWN RAFFEL in *The Brooklyn Rail*

Stories compensate for lives un-lived, and so no one can feel at home in them. They are what Norman Lock, or his avatar Guntur, calls shadows, negative reflections on a backlit screen, comprising, through artistry and brief illumination, ghosts. Lock's tale of the puppet-master Guntur, Candar his beloved, and their journey into death, realizes the nineteenth century vision of romance, what Said renamed "Orientalism," in which everything nearby craves the remote. In place of an omnipotent narrator, a puller of strings, Lock's teller is imprisoned by this darkness, captivated by warriors and princesses no longer, if ever, living. And so death becomes the homeland, a distance from which the voices of these unliving return. To unlock its secrets, to hold that key, neither woman's nor man's, that is Lock's fate.

— R. M. BERRY

Lock's language reflects the fabulous nature of the myth, intricate in description ... full of repeated images that ... resonate deeply within the story.

— *The Quarterly Conversation*

Shadowplay is another of the master locksmith's nested boxes whose evocative, ensorcelling prose will withstand multiple readings....

— *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*

Lock seems to be commenting on the distancing effects of life as a storyteller, the tendency to assess the potential "retell" value of an experience even as it is occurring.... Lock offers fresh insight on that peculiar grief of losing someone who exists only as an idea, only in story.... The danger of stories, Lock implies, is that their very unreality can compound rather than make sense of loss.

— *Rain Taxi*

Lock's *Shadowplay* is a masterful rendering of the life of one story teller, trying desperately to fit within the intricate pattern of tradition, daring to transcend it by embracing it too much, until he is finally becomes a shadow in the story of "The Woman With Blue Hands." Lock's novella is an enchanting ritual of forms whose beauty will linger in the memory for a very long time.

— TORI ALEXANDER, *The Dactyl Foundation*

About *The King of Sweden*

Like his gorgeous *Long Rowing Unto Morning*, *The King of Sweden* centers on a woman who is simply misunderstood by a world where innocents are fooled into a myriad of seductions that lead to the unraveling of the most human of human hearts. It is Lock's great artistry to make such suffering beautiful and necessary and to make out of this language an artifact that forces us to feel the inner turbulence of the characters who inhabit this masterful book.

—PETER MARKUS

This novel's a metaphor and a charm. Its story has the "greyest," most lovely precision. All hail Lock, whose narrative soul sings fairy tales, whose language is glass.

—KATE BERNHEIMER

About *The Long Rowing Unto Morning*

Quietly, simply, elegantly, Norman Lock channels, through his "Plain Jane" narrator, our gorgeous desolation, our longing for connection, both earthly and divine. *The Long Rowing Unto Morning* spirits the reader into richly emotional and primal realms; it's a book to return to again and again.

— DAWN RAFFEL

Norman Lock's *The Long Rowing Unto Morning* captures the life of a wounded and hampered individual whom we normally wouldn't glance at twice, but does so so deftly and so masterfully that by the end we feel that she's someone we've always been close to. Like Eva Figes, Lock is interested in exploring the complexities of memory and perception, in how age and an uncertain arrangement of the mind changes the world.

— BRIAN EVENSON

Lock is interested in one of the most important questions we can encounter: what it means to be in the world. His metaphors of inaccessibility and containment are powerful and often devastating forces throughout the novel.... It is a voice unlike any other.

— *Raven Chronicles*

About *A History of the Imagination*

Everywhere lurk stiletto asides, snappy puns, buried quotations ... the fickle dalliances of this *History* make for a skillful and distinctly unnerving funhouse reflection of our own 'present action.'

— *American Book Review*

Lock has quite successfully woven together the two contradictory impulses of human biology and psychology – the impulse into the future and the yearning to be done with it – in a most remarkable way.... It is possible that Norman Lock in *A History of the Imagination* has created the first important English language debut of the twenty-first century, a book that may in decades to come resonate of our time as *The Waste Land* embodies its own.

— *In Dissent*

The writing is engaging, sly and frequently hilarious, and Lock provides passages of genuine beauty all the more enjoyable for having emerged from farce. Too many writers have lately attempted fiction in a similar vein; call it magical unrealism. Lock is distinguished by success, having written an elaborate whimsy grounded in human emotion and worth sitting still for.

— *Bookslut*

About *'Notes to the Book of Supplemental Diagrams' for Marco Knauff's Universe*

The slender volume is a compact set of lyrical declarations, metaphysical in ambition and sublime in their effects, about the interpenetrations of the seeable and the unseeable, the mechanical and the unearthly, in a universe graced by randomness and the “slippage and instability of essences.” ... Lock’s “Notes” is a book of gnomic and exquisite sentencecraft, and sly wit that never descends into whimsy. It’s a wonderwork in miniature, perplexing infinitude.

— GARY LUTZ

In truth, alack, I, Gordon, am positively nuts for Knauff and nuts for Lock, in whatever guise the waggish Lock (not to mention, Knauff) decides to produce himself. In truth? In truth, Lock writes it, Lish reads it! – which is a damn sight more than Lish will say for Proust.

— GORDON LISH

Like Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus*, these *Notes* are a logical treatise. A treatise on Logos. Thus, also in part a treatise on what must be left out of speaking, even as it strains words.... But this little book is also, and primarily, literary.... Like the conclusion of a successful psychoanalysis, the closing pages of Knauff’s *Notes* offer the reader purgation in the form of a sad yet hopeful acceptance of the necessary sketchiness of human life.

— ANDREW WILSON

About *Land of the Snow Men* (writing as George Belden)

Belden’s [Lock’s] sentences combine the erudition and confidence of the educated man with the emphatic vulnerable tone of a personal diary.... Belden consistently refers to his surroundings as an illusion; the landscape and his perceptions are one and the same, slippery and infinitely variable atmospheres, refusing dominance, univocal interpretation or mediation by reason. He perceives and writes the Antarctic as though an afterworld.

— *American Book Review*

The journal is a record of the impossibility of removing all ambiguity, all simile and metaphor, from the world.... In fact, one of the many remarkable aspects of Belden’s journal is his chronicle of a valiant but failed attempt to realize a philosophy’s precepts so directly in reality.... [Lock] is one of the few writers to succeed in establishing himself in the mainstream of the American literary world without falling into ... “the black hole of American realism.”

— *Café Irreal*

Lock’s strength is to draw the reader in with his verbal ability, no matter what his content may be. His readers don’t turn to his books and stories because of content, but rather because they know that works will always be written with a linguistic power out of reach of all but a few writers.

— *Five Star Literary Stories*

About *Grim Tales* (published in *Trio*)

A wicked little beast, delivered in fine-tuned bursts ... *Grim Tales* [published in *Trio*] is a mythological catalogue of the peculiar, a string of murderous urban myths. ... With a tip of the hat to Russell Edson and the “miniature gothics” of Enrique Anderson Imbert, *Grim Tales* is populated end to end with the magical and the bizarre: shape-shifting, witchery, underwater cities, indoor rain, beds that contain oceans, murderous objects, all manner of disappearances.

— *The Believer*

About *The House of Correction*

House of Correction keeps a tight lock on the audience’s attention ... gradually the shimmer of the words deepens into a more visceral sense of menace. If Ionesco had written an American suspense thriller, it might be something like this.

— *Los Angeles Times*

House of Correction is first, last and always a superior mystery-comedy-thriller ... it is also, and perhaps more significantly, an astonishing specimen of a nearly extinct genre ... a fast-moving, absurdist piece of neo-realistic suspense; it is a tribute to his talent.

— *Los Angeles Times*

This rollercoaster of a play may well turn out to be one of the most significant new plays at this year’s Fringe ... a gripping, individualistic piece.

— *The Stage* (Edinburgh)

Norman Lock’s treatment of the evils of psychotic schizophrenia versus the even more ugly aspects of pretentious armchair liberalism is nothing short of hilarious in this outing.

— *Daily Variety* (LA)

We are kept on the edge of our seats as events move toward a climax beyond expectation ... makes us laugh our way up a mountain of suspense.

— *The Scotsman*

The play remains ingenious in identifying those essential American tenets and dragging them screaming and skewed to their conclusion.

— *The Guardian* (Edinburgh)

Lock’s weapon is words and he uses them well ... like a nightmare that wakes you up shaking, forcing you to reassess your life.

— *LA Life*

This is a delightfully dark, beautifully acted suspense comedy... a script that balances outrageous farce and human tragedy. ... It is Lock’s gift for concocting eccentric characters and devilishly comic situations that propels the play.

— *Downtown News* (Los Angeles)