

EDITORS SELECT

Jaimy Gordon, *Lord of Misrule*, McPherson and Co., 2010. Depending on how one counts, this is *NDR* contributor Jaimy Gordon's fourth novel, truly her most accessible, the one that provides the most clean and well-lighted space for all readers. And now it will have a great number of readers, since it recently won the 2010 National Book Award for Fiction. In our winner-take-all society (which operates in the literary world as fiercely as in the rest of the world) the novel's nomination, by itself, much less its long-shot win, has already transformed Gordon's writing career. Hooray for that! Among the ironies of her book's victory is that the novel had been turned down by a number of presses, both large and small. The current literary period exists in a state of self-imposed ignorance, both inside and outside that world, for those who pretend to be involved in it and those who judge it and attempt to control who is fashionable and who is not. Few of these taste makers know who the real writers are anymore. Readers all know the same names of successful authors, but only a handful of the well informed know who amongst us can really write and who deserve to be read widely now and in the future, but aren't and, most likely, won't. Unfortunately, a real audience only materializes if one of those authors wins a prize. If Gordon's

novel hadn't been nominated for the NBA—much less win—most likely it would have sold around 200 copies. After the nomination the first printing was boosted from 2,000 to nearly 20,000 copies.

Lord of Misrule is set at the Indian Mound Downs, a sad race track for has-beens and future no-accounts. The name of the track alone (if not just the novel's title) presages all the darkness necessary to know and anticipate for the cautionary tale that follows, one full of Gordon's gallery of odd balls, replete with tell-tale names, Medicine Ed, Two-Tie, Deucey, Kidstuff, etc., all talking a high-octane hipster Jazz-Age patois. It's quite a performance. One entirely original. No one writes like Jaimy Gordon. She's one of a kind, a condition that lets her truly stand out in the literary world. And, up to now, a treat for only the discerning few.

Gordon displays a Faulknerian appreciation for the intelligence of her uneducated characters in the *Lord of Misrule*. And it extends to animals, the horses and dogs that come and go about the track. Since they feel, they think. It isn't usually a compliment to say that a novel could easily turn into a movie, especially for a literary novel such as this, but, in this case, that fact speaks to the novel's convincing plotting, the head-long charge of the narration, its satisfying conclusion.

Again, previous to its nomina-

tion for a National Book Award, only a small number of readers would have come upon *Lord of Misrule*. (Though it likely would have been higher than the number that is likely reading this review.) But now that world of limited readership is history. Jaimy Gordon and *Lord of Misrule* have both, happily, arrived.

Corinne Demas, *The Writing Circle*, Voice, 2010. *NDR* contributor and short story and children's book author Demas's second novel takes place on another sort of race track, a writing circle in Western Massachusetts, where a number of writers gallop around the sandy oval of ambition and wished-for success, thirsting for readers and sanity, subduing their own writerly demons and private terrors. Demas knows this world well and her group of authors covers the waterfront: a poet, a historian, a commercial novelist, and other strivers competing in the world of the literary arts. *The Writing Circle* unabashedly lets the uninitiated into the world of the initiated. Publishers like Voice (a division of Hyperion) have created a new niche for literary novels within reach of large female audiences called "Upmarket". And for that intended readership, *The Writing Circle* delivers the goods and, for the rest of us, the initiated, the novel remains a probing and moving story, one that inspires admiration and a few well-deserved wincings, of a world

we, alas, are all too familiar with.

Heidi Jon Schmidt, *The House on Oyster Creek*, NAL Accent, 2010. The novelist and short story writer Schmidt is another literary writer with an admirable track record of fine short stories and a commendable first novel (*The Bride of Catastrophe*) who, like Demas, has been taken up by yet another Upmarket publisher, NAL Accent. Again, like Demas, Schmidt attempts to undermine the commercial intent of the publisher by subversively making her book more literary than her editors may have hoped for. To a tale filled with the bric-a-brac of what was once called "women's" fiction (beautiful houses on the Cape, virile lovers, older secure husbands), but now known as fiction aimed at female audiences, she adds doses of wicked literary potions: irony, cynicism, a generally dark vision beneath the blinding beauty of the surroundings, while still keeping a fast moving story hurtling through a long season at the end of Cape Cod. Social issues of the green sort are made central to the plot and remain the novel's serious underpinnings. But look how she handles the heroine's forbidden romance: "They broke apart, flew back together, Charlotte pressing her face into his sweatshirt, breathing in the smell of woodsmoke. She's been on an endless journey; now she was home. 'Darryl,' she said, rapt. 'Henry...' he

replied. ‘What about Henry?’ Bliss to consciousness: sixty seconds flat.” Schmidt manages a delicate juggling act: making fun of what she’s doing, while she’s doing it so well.

Harry Mark Petrakis, *Cavafy’s Stone and other village tales*, Wicker Park Press, 2010. Petrakis has twice been nominated for an NBA and is the author of a bestseller (*A Dream of Kings*, 1966), which was made into a movie. This collection of short stories is his twenty-fourth book and, in the way of our literary world, has been published by an obscure small press. All the stories are set in the village of Fanaron in mid- to late-20th Century Greece. Petrakis is a true man of letters and this collection of linked stories is a form of oral history—all told to Petrakis by a village priest decades earlier. In totality, they capture a departed, but intact, world, crafted by a master of the short story form.

Lily Hoang, *The Evolutionary Revolution*, Les Figues Press, 2010. ND’s own Lily Hoang’s third book, after her award-winning duo, *Changing* and *Parabola*. It comes with an Introduction, wherein Anna Joy Springer writes that the volume “is a revolt against of the oversimplification of fable and myth.” *The Evolutionary Revolution’s* first sentence is “Her husband never wanted to display their boys like that, but Mama Sylph, she didn’t mind.” Its

last is “Betty yelped in excitement, more certain than ever of sleep.” In-between is plenty of cause for excitement and very little reason to sleep.

Richard Selzer, *Down From Troy: A Doctor Comes of Age*, Excelsior Editions, 2010. SUNY Press has republished a 1991 memoir by Richard Selzer, one of the first modern doctor writers (*Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*), an author more in the tradition of William Carlos Williams than Michael Crichton. It comes with an Afterword by Peter Josyph, which acts as a mini-biography to accompany Selzer’s autobiography, plus photographs of Troy, N.Y., the cynosure of the memoir. Not a bad combination, where and when the author himself is incapable of looking back on his or her own past. Selzer’s memoir begins as a portrait of America in the 1930s and of his doctor father and ends with Selzer, now the older, experienced physician himself, helping an AIDS patient die. Should be required reading for doctors to be and anyone else who contemplates writing a memoir.

Michael Collins and Joseph Lemrow, *Write to Work: A Survival Manual for Academic and Workplace Success*, Corby Books, 2010. It’s not often you find an award-winning contemporary novelist (*Midnight in a Perfect Life*, etc.), one of the finest of his generation (his *The*

Keepers of Truth short listed for the Booker Prize, etc.), co-writing a how-to writing manual for students and others, resulting in a super-charged, but fundamental, composition manual, useful to anyone who encounters it, though aimed at, in the main, first generation college students, but Michael Collins, an ND graduate and *NDR* contributor, continues to have a one-of-a-kind career in academia, as well as in international letters. His co-author, Lemrow, has dedicated his academic life to the teaching of freshman composition and both authors teach at Southwestern Michigan College. If you’re looking for a straightforward and incisive manual for students or friends, this is the one to have.

Julie Sheehan, *Bar Book: Poems and Otherwise*, Norton, 2010. *NDR* published a substantial chunk of this book, both poems and “otherwise.” It is a roller coaster of a read, with highs, lows, and a lot of dizziness to shake off along the way. There’s a learned bar maid, mixed drinks that talk, instructions for making concoctions as potent as the one offered to Tristan, and, mostly in the footnotes, the narrative of a marriage, child-birth, and divorce. It’s a little as if the setting of W.H. Auden’s 1947 “Baroque Eclogue,” *The Age of Anxiety*, had been moved to a trendier bar and translated into

a postmodern idiom that allows disconnects in the manner of Jenny Boully’s prose poems to keep company with sestinas and villanelles. This is a book both for poets and for people who don’t think they like poetry.

Ned Balbo, *The Trials of Edgar Poe and Other Poems*, Story Line Press, 2010. Balbo won the 2005 Ernest Sandeen Poetry Prize with his previous book, *Lives of the Sleepers*. The present volume looks back to *Galileo’s Banquet*, a sequence of poems about Balbo’s difficult attempt to achieve a secure identity once he discovered that the person he thought was his mother was really his aunt and the person he thought was his aunt was his mother. The new book contains poems dedicated to or about his birth mother, the aunt who brought him up, and his father. Oblique autobiography is also present in poems about Poe’s life, horror films, Hitchcock, and related artifacts of popular culture. The book should probably be read alongside Balbo’s fascinating essay called “My Father’s Music,” about adoptive identity and ethnicity, which can be found in the anthology *Our Roots Are Deep with Passion* (Other Press, 2006).

Three of the best Irish women poets have new volumes out in the dis-

tinguished Wake Forest Irish Poetry series: Medbh McGuckian's *My Love Has Fared Inland*, Eilean Ni Chuilleain's *The Sun Fish*, and Vona Groarke's *Spindrift*. As Wake Forest has also just published two related books by Ciaran Carson, *Until Before After* and *On The Night Watch*, we will try to take some measure of the Wake Forest project in a future issue. Meanwhile, FSH has brought out the best Seamus Heaney volume in some years (reviewed in this issue) and Paul Muldoon's brilliant *Maggot*.

Brian Henry, *Wings Without Birds*. Salt, 2010. This is perhaps Henry's most immediately accessible book, very quotidian in its concerns with work, family, friends, and the gripes—bad back, especially—of the middle-aging poet. In the long “Where We Stand Now,” he asks “If I call this poem a journal / does that settle anything? Make / anything less or more clear?” The answer is probably yes. The book also articulates certain anxieties of the writer in that same “now” where we stand: “Rock and roll fucks / with every theory of the avant-garde. Can the avant-garde advance / on a G4 PowerBook?” The answer is probably no. Henry is known for his translations of Slovenian poetry, especially the work of Tomaz Salamun, who is welcomed for an American visit in

the title poem, and who also seems to have a bad back. Henry's most recent translation from the Slovenian is *The Book of Things*, by Ales Steger, BOA Editions, 2010. Although the treatment of “things” is different from that in Neruda's *Elemental Odes*, the poems still bring Neruda to mind—and possibly also Ponge. Steger is clearly a very good poet.

Two Notre Dame graduates have published first books of poetry. Marcela Sulack's *Immigrant*, Black Lawrence Press, 2010, reflects her wide travels and invents a context in which a variety of fruits and vegetables may speak a history of wandering and settlement going back to the Sephardic Jews of Venezuela. Now teaching in Israel, Sulak manages to combine in her work a cosmopolitan sophistication with the earthy essence of Lawrence's *Birds, Beasts, and Flowers*. James Matthew Wilson's *Four Verse Letters*, Franciscan University of Steubenville Press, 2010, consists of four epistolary poems. Wilson addresses his father, mother, and two brothers in smooth rhyming pentameters. Although he is associated with Dana Gioia and the West Chester New Formalists, he is perhaps more of an *old* formalist. These poems have something of the feel of MacNeice's *Autumn Journal*.

Elyse Fenton, *Clamor*. Cleveland State University Poetry Center, 2010. *Clamor* is winner of the Cleveland State First Book Prize, selected by D.A. Powell. It is a highly original volume of war poems, written from the point of view of the lover, and later the wife, of a soldier in Iraq and gaining much of its poignancy from the almost surreal way in which phone calls and visual skype now connect men and women fighting our wars with their families and friends on a daily basis. Although nearly every poem can be thought of as a love poem, the juxtaposition between what the soldier is doing and what his lover/wife is doing, thinking, reading, and fearing eight thousand miles away makes them utterly remarkable. In the very first poem, the soldier-medic describes on the phone inserting a catheter in the penis of a desperately wounded man, while the poet remembers “the way the struck chord begins / to shudder, fierce heat rising into the skin of my own sensate palms. That moment just before we think / the end will never come and then / the moment when it does.” This is a brave, important, and utterly compelling book.

Frequent *NDR* contributor Peter Robinson has published a beautifully produced collaborative book with artist Sally Castle, *English*

Nettles and Other Poems, Two Rivers Press, 2010. The poems and paintings treat various places in and around the English city of Reading, of which Sally Castle is a native and to which Peter Robinson moved in 2007 after a long period of residence in Japan. The poems and watercolors with elements of collage work extremely well together, and the illustrations—one side of a complex dialogue, really—are extremely well produced.

Brian Teare, *Pleasure*, Ahsahta Press, 2010. Brian Teare's style has changed considerably since *NDR* published some of the work later to appear in his first book, *The Room Where I Was Born*. The sexual candor continues as before, but Teare's move back to California has brought with it the deep influence of poets like Robert Duncan, Brenda Hillman, Lyn Hejinian, and Michael Palmer. The poems in this book are perhaps his strongest yet, leaving behind the canon of “middle generation” poets of the Lowell-Berryman-Bishop persuasion for what he calls “a dialectic between autobiography and the languaged page.” Ahsahta, as always, provides very useful information about new books on their website. For Teare, go to <http://ahsahtapress.boisestate.edu>.

Martha Zweig, *Monkey Lightning*, Tupelo Press, 2010. *NDR* published

three of the best poems in Martha Zweig's new book. Zweig's poems are mostly short and full of a verbal energy that would probably explode them if they were any longer. It is all very first-intensity work. Heather McHugh's blurb gets it exactly right: "What do you get when you cross Flannery O'Connor with Gerard Manley Hopkins? Something sprung of rhythm, fierce of feeling, dappled down and doubled over, whistled out of terror and intelligence."

David Green, *The Garden of Love and Other Stories*, The Pen and Anvil Press, 2010. Notre Dame graduate David Green published the "Accidents," one of the stories in this volume, in *NDR*. Nine other stories reward close attention to various fictive worlds and identities. The author of Green's novel, *Atchley*, is certainly recognizable here, but the range of stylistic engagement is more various—from Borges and Calvino to Raymond Carver. Keith Botsford calls Green "an informed, intelligent, and refined writer." The visionary title story alone is worth the price of the book, and "Lao Luo" is a marvelous portrait of China in transition.

