



BOOKS & PIECES MAGAZINE

DECEMBER 2024

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Christopher Johnson

Pawel Markiewicz

Michael Barrington

Livian Bonato

John Grey

Tom Meyer

Jason Abshire

Jill Hedgecock

Featured:

Zachary Hagen

Jennifer Anne Gordon

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INKDROPS: December 2024

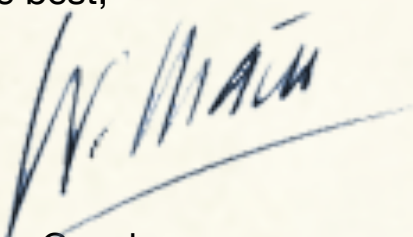
It's hard to believe that we were at the final issue for this year. I'd like to take this opportunity to **thank everybody who has submitted stories, poems, and articles**, because you really make the substance of this publication.

But those of you who have submitted and been rejected, please do not take it personally. There are many reasons why stories are not accepted and not an indication of your ability as a writer.

Unlike many publications, this one is not inundated with advertising. That's not to say that we don't want advertising, but above all, we want a solid publication that offers you a good read and lots to think about. We will be adding ways to help support this publication in the future; however, the best way is to **share it with your friends, family, and other writers** that you know so that they may also submit to us. We're also open to other suggestions. Please email me at editor@BooksNPieces.com and let me know what you think.

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All the best,



William Gensburger
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Facts

Here are some words that are commonly used incorrectly:

- **Terrific:** This word is often used to mean "fantastic" but actually has a negative connotation. It can mean something is very large or inspires fear. 
- **Adverse:** This word means unfavorable or hazardous, but it's often used to mean averse, which means opposed. 
- **Bemused:** This word means confused, but it's often used to mean amused, which means entertained or pleasantly diverted. 
- **Disinterested:** This word means impartial or unbiased, but it's often used to mean uninterested, which means not interested. 
- **A lot and allot:** "A lot" means "many" or "much", but "allot" means to distribute something. 
- **Award and reward:** An award is a prize, while a reward is something given in return for effort, achievement, or hard work. 
- **Everyday and every day:** "Everyday" means commonplace or normal, while "every day" means each day. 
- **Along and a long:** "Along" means moving in a constant direction or in the company of others, while "a long" means of great distance or duration. 
- **Awaken and awoken:** "Awaken" is used to express waking in the present tense, while "awoken" is used to express waking in the past tense. 
- **Total:** "Total" is often used redundantly to add emphasis, but it's not necessary. 

Equinox Musings

A reflection by Matias Travieso-Diaz

*"The first breath of autumn was in the air; a prodigal feeling,
a feeling of wanting, taking, and keeping before it is too late."*

~J.L. Carr

The oppressive heat of the summer had faded away to become a distant memory. As the weather cooled, I could sit on the rattan recliner after a token lunch and face the trees that framed the view from my back porch. To my left, I would watch with amusement how a multitude of small birds fought each other for the seeds I had placed in the feeder.

It was late September, the start of the most beautiful and saddest season. Leaves were beginning to display their extravagant shades of yellow, orange, maroon, and red, preparing to greet the weakening sun a few more times and then tumble down with a sigh, driven by a wind that did not care about their melancholy.

Late September was the time for me to settle accounts, draw a balance on a life that had extended perhaps decades beyond its logical conclusion. Why was I still around when many others, possibly worthier and healthier, had been swept away into oblivion? Did I

deserve to still hang onto life like a desiccated leaf dangling from an increasingly barren branch?

The question of whether I deserved survival presupposed—of course—that there was “someone” keeping score, weighing my plusses and minuses, tallying a balance that would determine whether I could continue to stand or should fall. But it was simplest for me to assume, for now, the role of scorekeeper and revisit later the outside decision-maker issue, once the answer to the basic question had been reached.

To evaluate whether I deserved to still be alive, I would first need to count my wrongs and my shortcomings. I had been self-involved, engrossed in my own universe, paying little attention to the needs or desires of others. Not that I was indifferent; perhaps, only inattentive. I had been narrow-minded and rigid on everything—there was only one correct worldview: mine. Whether in politics, art, religion, or sports, my preferences were all that counted. I was single-minded in the pursuit of my projects but otherwise lazy; I had a good memory for facts and figures but experienced great difficulty in remembering people. I had inflicted no major wrongs on others (that I knew of), and while causing disappointment to many people, I had insulted or outraged relatively few.

I was undistinguished, easy to forget; I had written extensively on a variety of subjects, but if any of my works survived, they would

have to do so on their own merits, not the fame or distinction of their author. And if, as it was likely, all my creations were forgotten after my death, the only evidence of my passage on the Earth would disappear as if I had never existed.

Were there countervailing plusses to pitch against these minuses? Well, I had loved much, with an intensity that lay hidden beneath my placid demeanor. My wife, my daughter, certain past and present members of my family, a handful of friends, and my favorite pets were the ambit of my affections. Outside that circle lay a vast ocean of indifference, encompassing almost all realms of existence on which floated small islands representing places, events, and sensorial experiences that had afforded me significant pleasure.

In addition to loving, I had performed a few deeds that could be said to benefit others. Gifts to charity, participation in pro-bono projects, words of advice or comfort to others who had sought them; nothing of great consequence, actions made notable for their paucity. And I had written many stories, some of which might have brought a bit of enjoyment to their readers.

Seen objectively, the balance was clear: like Peer Gynt's soul, my life could at any moment be melted down with other faulty goods and be forgotten. There was no particular reason why my existence should be prolonged, and I did not merit remembrance after my passing.

My continuing existence was not a reward but a fortuitous set of circumstances, a combination of favorable genes, and the absence of lethal events: no deadly diseases, fatal accidents, man-made or natural disasters. My survival could simply be attributed to luck.

Should I plunge into despair, withdraw even more from the world beyond the retreats that advancing age had imposed already? The most obvious response, suggested by expediency, was “no”: as long as my aches and pains did not become unbearable, as long as I could retain a modicum of dignity, as long as I could continue to admire the colors of the fall, the tastes and sounds of the winter holidays, the magic of the world’s rebirth every spring; as long as my mind continued to function and my body was able to limp along, why give up?

Besides expediency, there was always the possibility, however remote, that an enduring work of merit would emerge from my tired brain. Herman Melville wrote his masterpiece, *Billy Budd*, in the last few years of his life. George Orwell, Mark Twain, and others did the same. Without daring to draw comparisons with such eminent writers, I had produced some reasonably good fiction in the last few years, and who knew what works the future might bring from me if I survived a bit longer.

So, as I watched the birds pick seeds ravenously off the feeder, I concluded that I might as well stick around as long as I reasonably

could. My self-examination had been a valuable exercise; one that I should try to repeat every Equinox, health permitting.

Perhaps a few more autumnal self-examinations remain to be conducted beyond this year's accounting. Who knows what the future will bring? I wish for relatively little pain and a swift end to the show. Whichever way the final curtain falls, I hope it will find me as ready and free from regrets as a mortal creature can be.//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Born in Cuba, Matias Travieso-Diaz migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing. Over one hundred and fifty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of anthologies and magazines, blogs, audiobooks, and podcasts. A first collection of his stories, "The Satchel and Other Terrors," is available on Amazon and other book outlets; additional anthologies of his work are scheduled for publication in 2025. Click [HERE](#) to learn more.



Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/gUgxuAfXUp0?feature=shared>

[HOME](#)

Aunt Maddy

A short story by Christopher Johnson

As Jack Maloney sat in the third row of Miss Hasselbrook's eighth-grade language arts class, he was a boiling cauldron of nervous tics and aimless energy. He wiggled his blue Bic pen back and forth in a kind of frenzy, as if he had caught a small snake between his thumb and his forefinger. Occasionally he stopped wiggling the pen and gnawed on the blue cap, which was pocked by teeth marks. He jiggled his left foot on the linoleum floor as if he were keeping time to a song that only he could hear. He licked his lips until they were raw, and he then dragged a cylinder of Chap-Stick out of his left front pocket to soothe the rawness. He picked at the nail of his forefinger until the skin lining the side of the nail was red and irritated and on the verge of bleeding.

At his desk, he leaned his chin on the flat of his open hand and, with his other hand, scribbled "Thou shalt not" in his notebook. He looked at the scribble and wondered what it was that he was not supposed to be doing. His hair resembled a rust-brown scouring pad,

and his blue eyes were pale and limpid. Legions of freckles sped across his ivory skin and marched up and down his arms.

Of his many fears, the most intense was that Miss Hasselbrook would call on him and demand that he explain the important and everlasting difference between a direct object and an indirect object for the edification of the other scholars in the class. He assiduously avoided making eye contact with her, keeping his eyes trained on the pages of Warriner's English Grammar and Composition. Later in the class, he dreaded that she would utter his name with frosty contempt and tell him to read a paragraph from "To Build a Fire," the short story by Jack London that they were analyzing in class that day.

When school let out, though, Jack leaped on his bicycle—he was free at last! He pumped the pedals furiously, and the wind rushed past his face, tearing open the pores of his skin, blasting through his red hair, sweeping past his pale blue eyes, and releasing all of his anxieties and frustrations. He pedaled madly, furiously, and felt the exhilaration of his muscles working. His nervous tics disappeared, exorcised by the craziness of pumping the pedals and feeling the wind pummel his face. The trees, the houses, the cars all formed a blur. He flew outside himself. He pumped hard on the pedals, almost out of breath, and felt the oxygen rush into his lungs.

After school, he sometimes rode his bicycle to his Aunt Maddy's apartment, which was only two miles from Edgar Lee Masters Junior High School in Elm Park, just outside the city of Chicago. Aunt Maddy was his father's sister. She lived alone. She had never been married, at least so far as Jack knew.

Jack's father was quiet and reserved and introverted and spoke only when it was absolutely necessary. Aunt Maddy was the yin to his father's yang. She exploded into a room like a stick of dynamite. She was tall and lithe and athletic. Her eyes were cobalt blue and magnetic, her skin as smooth as the surface of a diamond. She owned a colorful world of scarves, which she had brought home from her travels to the exotic corners of the planet. She moved gracefully, elegantly. She reminded Jack of Ginger Rogers dancing with Fred Astaire in the musicals from the Thirties that Jack would sometimes watch with Aunt Maddy on the Early Show. She moved as if she were walking on clouds.

Her apartment was a refuge of wonderment and surprise. She was a passionate fan of jazz and popular music, and the walls of her apartment were festooned with photographs—some signed--of Perry Como, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Rosemary Clooney, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Tony Bennett. Every week she watched The Perry Como Show, and sometimes Jack stayed for dinner and watched the show with her. When he arrived at her apartment after school, she

inevitably had baked cookies, and the cookies always took the shape of one of her favorite singers. While he drank hot chocolate and ate a Perry Como cookie, they would chat, and she would put a record on her RCA Hi-Fidelity record player, and in the background, as they munched on cookies, would be playing “Catch a Falling Star” by Mr. Como or “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” by Frank Sinatra.

Aunt Maddy’s apartment was a haven from home, where resided three younger siblings—two sisters and a brother. The younger sister, Elizabeth, was one year old and still in diapers, and while Mother often felt overwhelmed, Father escaped on businesses trips, selling print jobs for the Acorn Printing Corporation in Chicago. The house would tremble with Elizabeth’s crying and Peter’s and Gwen’s shouting and the TV blaring and Mother vacuuming the living room floor because Baby Elizabeth had strewn crackers all over the carpet.

Aunt Maddy’s apartment was an asylum from the chaos. To ride his Schwinn to Aunt Maddy’s on Gladstone Avenue, to find shelter in her one-bedroom apartment with the photographs of those smooth and mellow and exciting singers on the wall--it was nirvana. One afternoon in May, toward the end of school--he would soon graduate from eighth grade--he entered her apartment, and she swept toward him and hugged him, and he could smell the odor of lilacs and cookies as she enwrapped him in her arms and asked him how his

day had been. He said fine, for he had once again escaped being called upon by Miss Hasselbrook.

Aunt Maddy quickly steamed up a beautiful cup of hot chocolate and brought out a plate of cookies, which on this particular day were in the shape of Frank Sinatra—vanilla cookies with Frank’s blazing blue eyes and slicked-back black hair and angular nose and tie loosened at the collar.

Instead of ingesting his after-school snack, though, Jack just stared straight ahead. He cupped his chin into his hand, with his elbow balanced on the kitchen table, and he glowered. He could feel Aunt Maddy’s gaze upon him. He stared, and even though he was thirteen years old and on the verge of going to high school, he felt a diseased worm of a tear in the far corner of his eye. Aunt Maddy, with her keen instincts, knew right away that something was wrong—that some inner turmoil was wringing him dry and preventing him from gobbling down a Frank Sinatra cookie.

She leaned toward him. She put her warm, ancient hand on his heavily freckled arm. She asked, “Jack, honey, what’s wrong?”

He looked at her, struggling to keep the ridiculous tears from emerging. “Aunt Maddy,” he moaned, “I can’t dance.” He glanced away from her, embarrassed.

She looked at him, and her heart went out to him. He knew that she knew that his tears were buried just behind the veil of his eyes.

He continued, “I just can’t dance, no matter how hard I try. I’m just too clumsy! I’m a big dumb clumsy oaf! I’m the worst dancer in the class! It isn’t even close! I dance like a drunken monkey! Other kids laugh at me when I dance! They laugh!”

He looked into Aunt Maddy’s eyes, which were limned with decades of experience and triumph and heartache and wisdom. He looked into her eyes, and the words poured out of him—the words of confession—the words of inadequacy—the words of shame. “We’re taking social dancing in gym class,” he blurted out, “and they’re teaching us all these steps like the fox trot and the waltz and the jitterbug. And I can’t do any of ‘em! The worst thing is, the most horrible thing is, I get so nervous that I just forget all the steps! And the very very worst thing is that today I asked Mary Lou Kramer to dance, and she’s the prettiest most fantastic girl in our class, and she said yes. But I couldn’t remember any of the steps! I stepped all over her toes with my big stupid clodhoppers. I could see that she was laughing at me. I said excuse me and ran off to the boy’s room and almost threw up!”

Jack turned away from Aunt Maddy, his face sodden with shame and humiliation. She put her warm cookie hand over his and squeezed it. Jack turned back toward her. In a warm, reassuring voice, she said, “Well, Jack, there is only one thing to do about your problem. Believe me, your problem is very solvable. There is a

solution. It's a very obvious solution, and it is staring you and me right in the face. And the solution is this—I am going to teach you how to dance! We'll make it easy, and we'll make it fun!”

He felt lifted ever so slightly from the depths of his despair. He felt no longer alone with his pathetic failures. They rolled up the rug in Aunt Maddy's living room, revealing a beautiful wooden floor beneath. Jack reached out to her. It felt strange, even awkward, holding his aunt with his right arm around her sturdy waist and his left hand grasping her right hand. She was a couple inches shorter than he, and he looked over her blue-gray hair and smelled the gardenia odor of her perfume and felt her diamond-smooth skin.

They started with the fox trot. She slowly walked him through the steps, without music—left foot forward, right foot forward, left foot to the left, right foot to the left, left foot backward, right foot backward. He grasped her tightly. She looked at him and said, “Jack, remember, I'm a girl--not a bale of hay. Relax and hold me gently. Like you would a bird's nest.” He loosened his grip.

They practiced slowly, without music, for several minutes. He moved as stiffly as the Tin Man in *The Wizard of Oz*. “Relax, Jack,” Aunt Maddy murmured. “I'm not going to bite you!” He chuckled. She put on “I Left My Heart in San Francisco,” and they started to do the fox trot to the gentle and romantic rhythm of Tony Bennett's singing.

“Feel the music,” she murmured. He listened to the music, started to enter into the music. He could feel his knees relax just a little. Left foot forward, right foot forward, left foot to the left, right foot to the left.

Aunt Maddy felt as light as air. She glided on the wooden floor. She was completely attuned to the music. “Loosen your grip on my hand,” she said. “Remember—you’re not carrying bricks.” He laughed. They fox trotted around the living room. One ballad from the Tony Bennett album blended into another, and Jack felt the timbre and restrained emotion in the singer’s voice. He could feel the music begin to flow into him. He turned off his brain. He never stepped on Aunt Maddy’s toes. The album came to an end, and they rested. He felt just a little bit more capable of doing this. There was a secret—to merge with the music.

They practiced the fox trot for an hour, and he started to understand the dance. They took a break and retreated into Aunt Maddy’s kitchen, and she brought out hot chocolate and more Frank Sinatra cookies. They both munched. “That was a very good start, Jack,” she said. “You listened to the music. You felt the music.”

The dancing had begun to break down his shyness, but still he wore a psychic protective shield. He had no idea why. He took a bite out of his Frank Sinatra cookie. “Jack,” Aunt Maddy said. “I’ve been wondering. Is there anyone you like at school?”

Jack felt embarrassed by Aunt Maddy's directness, by her penetrating and inquisitive stare. He liked Mary Lou Kramer. He had never told anyone this. It was his most deeply held secret. He remembered that one day in class, Mary Lou had brushed past him when they were passing from one classroom to another, and the soft pressure of her sleeve against the sleeve of his shirt had excited him--had confused him. In that moment of brief touching, he had felt transported, embarrassed. "There is," he said, "but I don't want to talk about her."

"I understand," Aunt Maddy said. After a pause, she asked, "Why not?"

"I don't know," he murmured. "I . . . I just don't want to." He had felt a fear when he had brushed against Mary Lou Kramer's sleeve, when she had been near enough for him to talk to. But his mind had frozen as if it had been encased in an iceberg. "I . . . I know she wouldn't like me," he said to Aunt Maddy. He didn't know why he was opening up to his aunt. He had never done so before. He would never have said this to his mother. Aunt Maddy was slyly scraping open his thirteen-year-old soul.

"Why don't you think she would like you?" she asked. He was dying of embarrassment. "How do you feel when you get close to her?"

“I feel dizzy and stupid!” he murmured. “My mind just empties. I don’t know why. My brain becomes as empty as the ocean.”

“Did you ever think to ask her things about herself?” Aunt Maddy asked.

“Like what?”

“Oh, you know—like her favorite TV shows or movies.”

“No.”

“You might try that. People like to be asked about themselves.” Aunt Maddy smiled. “Yes, we human beings like to talk about ourselves.” She paused. “I’m not sure if porcupines feel the same way.”

He laughed. “They don’t have to,” he said. “They just shoot their quills into people to get them to back off.”

For the next month and a half, Jack never worked so hard. There was a spring dance in May. That was their goal, their Holy Grail, their Troy. They had six weeks to get Jack’s clumsy self prepared for the dance, when the young gentlemen would be wearing suits and the young ladies would be wearing resplendent gowns and hair shaped in the most magnificent of ways.

At school, the two Phys. Ed. teachers who taught ballroom dancing introduced their students to the beauties of the waltz. Jack’s feet didn’t even begin to comprehend the waltz. As “The Blue Danube” bounced incongruously off the concrete block walls of the

gymnasium, he stumbled and bumbled with his poor partner. His clodhoppers aimed like missiles at the girl's feet. She rolled her eyes and shook her head. One, two, three; one, two, three. He stumbled through the steps. "The Blue Danube" wafted on forever.

He was once again in despair when he went to Aunt Maddy's for his dance lesson later that week. She asked him what they were learning. He told her, and she exclaimed, "Delightful! I love the waltz!"

Aunt Maddy owned an album of Johann Strauss's waltzes. "You know," she said, "the waltz was scandalous in the nineteenth century because the partners touched each other! They embraced each other! Riots broke out at waltzes! People protested against them! Can you imagine?"

Once again Jack rolled up the living room rug, and Aunt Maddy slowly walked him through the basic waltz step: one two three, one two three. They moved around the bare living room floor, his shoes squeaking against the wood. "Relax," she reminded him in a calm voice. Aunt Maddy never ordered, never commanded. She seduced him into following her direction. "You want to flow with the music."

She put on the "Emperor Waltz." At first, Jack stumbled and bumbled as Aunt Maddy led him through the steps. "Feel the music," she said in a low voice. "Close your eyes. Don't worry about me. Let the music flow through you."

He closed his eyes, and he tried to feel the music. He felt his legs—his entire body—loosen, relax. He started to lead Aunt Maddy, and together, they fell into the stream of the music. They flowed like a smooth and beautiful river, and he felt the “Emperor Waltz” as something tangible that guided his movements. He was barely even aware of Aunt Maddy, of holding her. Dancing with her was like dancing with a soft breeze. They floated around Aunt Maddy’s living room, somehow avoiding her furniture, and he felt swept away by the music, his feet scarcely touching the floor as they glided through the waltz. He felt transported, outside himself, carried away from his shyness, his self-consciousness, his inhibition. The “Emperor Waltz” ended, but the feeling of being part of the river of life continued. The music ended, and both of them applauded.

Once again they retreated to Aunt Maddy’s kitchen. Today she had baked Dean Martin cookies. It was amazing how she had captured the likeness of the singer with his tanned skin, his warm yet slightly ironic smile, his slightly distanced eyes, his midnight-black hair swept back in a near-pompadour. They drank hot chocolate. They munched on Dean Martin.

There was something that Jack had been wanting to ask Aunt Maddy—something personal—something that he had never had the nerve to ask her before—but something he felt that perhaps he could ask her since they had come to know each other during the

dance lessons. “Aunt Maddy,” he started. “Back in the day, when you were young, did you? . . .” He stopped.

She looked at him with a wry, sophisticated smile. “Just spit it out, Jack,” she said. “Just ask me. It’s just words, you know.”

He took a deep breath. He was so curious about her. “Like, I know you live alone and all that. Well, did you always live alone? Was there ever someone that you . . . well, I don’t really know how to ask it.”

She looked at him. “So what you’re trying to ask me is whether I ever had someone in my life.”

“Well, more than that,” he said slowly. “Like, were you ever married or anything like that?”

When he asked that, the mood in the kitchen suddenly changed. She looked at him. She was quiet.

“I’m sorry, Aunt Maddy,” Jack said. “I didn’t mean to . . . to be so nosy. I didn’t mean to ask something that I shouldn’t have.”

“That’s all right, Jack. You were just curious. There’s nothing wrong with that.”

Without a word, Aunt Maddy arose from her chair and walked down the hallway of her apartment to her bedroom. In a few minutes, she returned, carrying a pile of envelopes—yellowed, stained envelopes—bound together with a piece of string. She removed one of the envelopes from the pile and handed it to him. The return address was a town in France. The usual bright color had

disappeared from Aunt Maddy's face. "Those are all that I have left," she said quietly.

Silence fell into the room like a stone. Jack looked down into his lap, and he felt ashamed for having asked her about her private life. His imagination went wild. She had loved a soldier, and he had landed at Normandy on June 6, 1944. But somehow he knew that this was only a guess. He knew that if Aunt Maddy wanted to tell him the whole story, she would tell him. But she didn't. A shadow crossed her eyes. She held the pile of envelopes in her hand. He wondered whether his father—Aunt Maddy's brother—knew what had happened so long ago. Aunt Maddy wore a look of seriousness, of combative loneliness. She crooked a smile. She said, "Jack, I think our lesson is finished for the day."

He arose from his chair. She arose, too, and she took him by the arm and guided him gently to the door. "Until our next dance lesson," she said. He looked at her, and it was as if he were seeing her for the first time—as if he had a new and different understanding of his aunt. She gave him five Dean Martin cookies to take home to give to his mother and father and sisters and brother. He closed the door to her apartment behind him. The small episode had taken him outside himself. He felt a sense of loss for her, without really knowing what had happened to her so long ago.

The date of the spring dance arrived. Jack dressed up in his corduroy sports jacket and black trousers and narrow tie with the purple plastic tie clasp that he had created in shop. He slicked back his flaming red hair with Brylcreem. He stood in front of the mirror, putting each strand of hair exactly in place. The part on the right side of his head was as straight and sharp as a razor. He spread shaving cream on his cheeks and chin and, using his father's safety razor, shaved off the peach fuzz that had started, however shyly, to populate his cheeks and chin. He patted on Old Spice cologne. He cut his fingernails to the quick. Using his father's fingernail scissors, he snipped away two wayward hairs that poked out from the bottom of his left nostril. He straightened his tie. He tightened his belt. He was ready.

His father dropped him off at Edgar Lee Masters Junior High. On the way, he picked at his fingernails. Would he remember the dance steps that he had practiced so painstakingly with Aunt Maddy? Would he break some girl's toes by stomping on them with his clodhoppers? Would he trip while dancing and make his partner fall and fall on top of her and live in everlasting infamy?

He pulled himself out of his father's car and saw his best buddy, Petey Bronkowski, near the entrance to the gymnasium. Petey's face was turned toward the brick wall, and he was bent over. Jack knew he was sneaking a cigarette. "Hey, Bronk!" Jack said.

Petey turned around and stomped out the cigarette. “Hey, Maloney Baloney!” They shook hands in manly fashion.

They walked into the gymnasium. The enormous room swarmed with multi-colored balloons and crepe ribbons that hung like hangman’s nooses from the ceiling. A gargantuan sign read, “Congratulations to the Class of 1961!” It was about a hundred degrees in the gym, and Jack started sweating right away. His armpits soon resembled Niagara Falls. He could barely breathe. He looked down at his feet. His shoes looked like paddles made of iron. He was surely going to break some poor girl’s toes with them. The Niagara Falls of perspiration streamed down his arms. Petey turned to him and said, “ Hey, Baloney, you’re all pale!” Petey peeled off to ask Wendy Winger to dance. Soon they were twirling around the dance floor—twirling like Fred and Ginger.

Jack saw Mary Lou Kramer standing with a group of girls. The enemy camp. Mary Lou’s blonde hair shimmered like a nuclear explosion. Her azure eyes sparkled. Her light orange dress glowed. She stood in a halo of light. Her teeth gleamed with the power of a thousand suns. Jack noticed her fingernails, painted as red as passion fruit. His heart thudded in his chest. He removed his handkerchief from his back pocket and mopped his brow and lips. Sweat rolled like the Mississippi River down his legs. His feet felt gooey.

He took a deep breath and walked toward her—toward the one and only and beautiful Mary Lou Kramer. He felt as stiff as Frankenstein’s monster. He hesitated but then forced himself to march forward. His legs were stiff, his mind awry. He approached her. She looked at him. Her blazing teeth blinded him. “Yes!” she said. He hadn’t even asked her to dance, and she had said, “Yes!” She smiled, and her smile encompassed him.

His body froze. What was the song? “Chances Are.” By the one and only and inimitable Johnny Mathis. Mary Lou raised her right arm, and he raised his left arm and grasped her hand. As he did so, he remembered Aunt Maddy’s words: “I’m a girl--not a bale of hay!”

Then he froze. It was inevitable, unavoidable. Everything that Aunt Maddy had taught him flew like garbage out of his brain. Mary Lou Kramer then did something—something amazing—something miraculous. She leaned toward him. She gave him a smile that burned like a thousand suns. She whispered in his ear: “Push everything out of your brain. Feel the music.”

They were magical words that summoned fairy godmothers. He let his mind go blank. His body took over. Left foot forward, right foot forward, left foot to the left, right foot to the left, left foot back, right foot back. He completed an entire cycle of the fox trot without smashing Mary Lou Kramer’s feet to smithereens. Miraculously, they began to move like lithe geese around the dance

floor. Her hand felt like soft pillows in his hand. Her waist felt as smooth as freshly churned butter. He felt as though he were in a dream.

Mary Lou Kramer and he did not say a word as they glided across the dance floor. Not a word. They did not have to. They were completely in sync with the music and with each other. Mary Lou's presence lifted his body into spirit. While doing the fox trot, they pressed a little closer to each other, drawn together like steel to a magnet. They were in their private little universe. Jack's overactive mind shut off totally. He felt the smoothness of her hand as he held her lightly. They did not need to talk. The music was palpable, like a magic carpet that was transporting them.

Dancing with Mary Lou Kramer--it was Jack's first taste of philosophy. There was something metaphysical in their movements together. Their dancing was synchronized, like the conjunction of the spheres of the solar system. They were at one with the universe. Body and soul had joined and consummated. Their dancing created a moment of satori. Between them, Mary Lou Kramer and Jack were plumbing the depths of existence. The music ended. They stopped and looked at each other. They stared at each other. They had been transported for an hour. Mary Lou Kramer suddenly leaned forward. She kissed Jack lightly, chastely, on the cheek. Her lips

were like butterscotch pudding. Her lips were as light and soft as cotton. Her kiss—it simmered on his cheek.

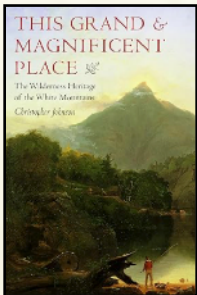
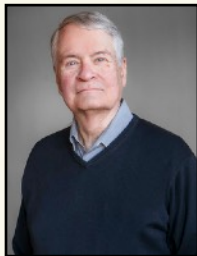
Did Jack ever see Mary Lou Kramer again after the spring dance? It doesn't really matter. In high school, they passed each other in the hall sometimes. He looked at her and felt a kind of beatitude. She smiled back at him and walked on. Their lives had intersected briefly, yet the intersection had been transcendent. They had danced to the edges of the universe, and that was enough. They were like two different solar systems that had come together. He held those moments like a treasure in his heart. Somehow it didn't matter what happened after that. It was an evanescent moment that lasted forever.

Jack went to Aunt Maddy's apartment soon after the spring dance. She served Tony Bennett cookies, and Aunt Maddy and Jack ate them and drank hot chocolate. Jack told her about the dance, but somehow he could not convey to her the feeling of transcendence that he had experienced as he had danced with Mary Lou Kramer. They sat at the kitchen table and munched on Tony Bennett. Aunt Maddy shared in his triumph. She partook of his joy, of his happiness, of the emergence of something in Jack that had lain dormant.

But as they sat there, Jack noticed also the shadow of a cloud in the corner of Aunt Maddy's eyes—the shadow of romance

remembered. He recalled the envelopes that Aunt Maddy had brought out for him to see. She had admitted him into the most sacred corner of her life. No words passed between them. They drank their hot chocolate and ate Tony Bennett cookies. An eloquent silence descended upon the kitchen. At one point, Jack arose to stretch his legs, to take a turn around her apartment. On the way out of the kitchen, he turned back toward Aunt Maddy, who was sitting down. He did a fox trot step to imaginary music, and he did the step as elegantly and effortlessly as he could. Aunt Maddy laughed, and then she applauded.//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Click cover to Buy

Christopher Johnson is a writer based in the Chicago area with a vast body of experience as a merchant seaman, a high school English teacher, a corporate communications writer, a textbook editor, an educational consultant, and a freelance writer. He has published short stories, articles, and essays in *The Progressive*, *Snowy Egret*, *Earth Island Journal*, *Chicago Wilderness*, *American Forests*, *Chicago Life*, *Across the Margin*, *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, *Blue Lake Review*, *The Literary Yard*, *Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Spillwords Press*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Sweet Tree Review*, and other journals and magazines. In 2006, the University of New Hampshire Press published his first book, 'This Grand and Magnificent Place: The Wilderness Heritage of the White Mountains.' His second book, which he co-authored with a prominent New Hampshire forester named David Govatski, was 'Forests for the People: The Story of America's Eastern National Forests,' published by Island Press in 2013.

You can find him at <https://chrisjohnsonwrite.com/>

An Interview with Zachary Hagen

Zachary Hagen is a Minnesota based fantasy author and editor. He lives there with his wife, Claudia, and their dog, Flynn. When he isn't busy writing his next book or working with an editing client, you can often find him walking around his neighborhood or hiking. From a young age he was enthralled with the world of story. From the stories his parents read to him from his blue bedtime story books (if you know, you know) to the first two series that he read, *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, Zachary's tastes continued to develop throughout his years of reading. The influences for his first series, *The Eternal Chronicles*, include Christopher Paolini, J. R. R. Tolkien, C. S. Lewis, and others.

Q: What grade(s) do you teach? How did you get into teaching?

A: Currently, I teach a 6th, 7th, and 8th multigrade classroom in a small, private Christian school. I've wanted or had notions of being a teacher for as long as I can remember, but I did have other ideas at different times in my life. Though, frankly, I could write an entire book about my relationship to the profession of teaching and the field of education, so I'll just leave it at this: After going to the first day of my first real school year, I came home and desperately wanted to repeat everything for my little brother and to teach him everything I learned, and the passion continued from there.

Q: What effect has teaching had on your story writing, if any?

A: I'm acutely aware that my students often seek out my social media and have asked if they can read my books, so that does make me put a self-imposed limit on the content of my books. I want to make sure its age-appropriate for my students because they have at least a passing interest in my work.

Q: How difficult do you find it to complete a novel?

A: Frankly, it depends on life-circumstances quite a bit. The actual process is rather simple if it's broken down into steps, but other things affect that. My teaching schedule varies. I'm currently in school studying to complete my EdD, and I have a baby on the way. The actual writing is easy for me most of the time, but it's everything else that makes it hard.

Q: What are the steps you follow to do so?

A: I begin with identifying the basic concepts, themes, and conflict of the story. Then, I decide on a three or five-act structure. After that, I put in the main beats of the story and fill in intermediary steps on an outline. Then, I'll write a brief summary of each chapter. Then, the writing actually begins, and I can explode the moments I've identified through my outline process.

Q: What is your writing day like? Computer or hand notes? Set writing times and places?

A: I love this question. It assumes so much better of me than is reality. If I get into a groove, I'll establish a daily writing routine, but often, my ADHD and job get in the way.

When I'm being a good writer, I'll usually write in the evenings at my dining room table on my computer and do 20 minute writing sprints until I have completed from 1500 to 3000 words.

Q: After Eternity's Well, at what point did you know that you would continue the series?

A: While I was writing Eternity's Well, actually. I always intended to write a multi-book arc.

Q: What marketing did you do, and what was the most effective thing that you believe helped sales?

A: I have hired someone to do my marketing. It's relatively small until I have the money to do more, and she does excellent social media stuff and uses her connections to get the word out to real people about the books.

Q: What is the worst advice you have received as a writer?

A: To research the market. No one should base what they want to write off of what the market is looking for. Writing to your interests will work out better in the long run.

Q: What attracted you to fantasy versus other genres?

A: The world is more magical than scientific in my view. Deeper truths can be discovered when we break the established rules of reality with our art.

Q: If you could go back and change one thing from your youth to affect your present, what would it be?

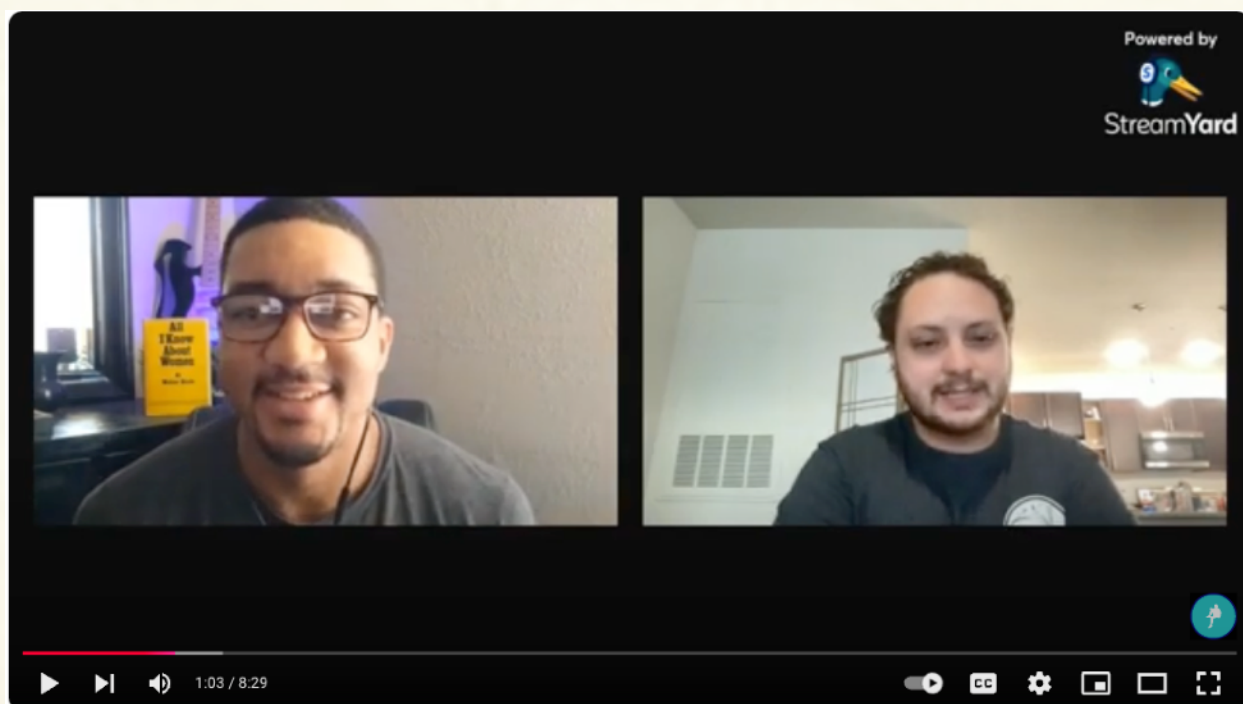
A: My wife and I dated in high school and broke up before getting back together later in college. If I could go back with what I know now, I would have never broken up with her so that we could have had more years together.

Learn more at Zachary Hagan's website zacharyhagenwrites.com

Zachary Hagen's Books:



Zachary Hagen Interview



Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/zOPW-qQBcPI?si=p7w4CpNyVSRlkBvz>

Germany in the Nighttime

A poem by Pawel Markiewicz

1961 – the wall has been built
once sixty-one stars glowed over the native land
the East Germany rife with butterflies sparkled in the night
the Western Germany full of west wood garlands glinted in the evening
the fall of the Berlin Wall was an indulgence
then shooting stars fell down
at the moonlight
the night reveals the policies
with the most amazing dreams
the dream about roses
from 1935
was killed forever
by the murkiness of comets
that never could be blazing fiercely
the night crawled
the German Bundestag was light-filled
by all kinds of lights of the new wizardry
thousands of laws are glistening
at the stars-shine
the myth of Germany
is an ancient legend
from the emperor Otto the Great
the history is a night rainbow
awakened in some dreameries
of a dazzling thinker
Hitler wants to be forgotten
forever and for sempiternity
of a night sorcery

glister – literary: glitter

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Paweł Markiewicz was born 1983 in Siemiatycze in Poland. He is poet who lives in Bielsk Podlaski and writes tender poems, haiku as well as long poems. Paweł has published his poetries in many magazines. He writes in English and German.

My MUSE

A reflection by Michael Barrington

As a teenager in a catholic boys' only boarding school, the highlight of the month occurred when a small group of senior prefects was allowed to enjoy a local town speaker series. Over the space of just a few years, I spoke with Kingsley Amis who wrote more than 20 novels. *Lucky Jim* was his first, followed by *I Like It Here* and *Take A Girl like You*, which Amis read with great humor. I was thrilled and inspired by his style and in-your-face prose but completely shocked at his character's causal approach to sex. It was a revelation. In a college where no sex before marriage was religiously preached, his writing revealed a world that I and my friends had no experience of but secretly hoped existed. It was exciting.

John Braine discussed his *Room At the Top*. One of my more daring friends had secreted a copy into our dorm, and it was doing the rounds in lightning-quick time. I devoured his unadorned use of everyday language, which both shocked and excited me. For a group of young men with raging hormones, it was amazing, revealing, and titillating material! Here was a writer with strong Irish Catholic roots describing male-female relationships that seemed to be so honest, natural, and real, but in a way that would bewilder any priest!

Alan Sillitoe left school at age 14 and never went to college, which made me wonder why my parents were spending so much money on my private education. And it was only while in hospital with tuberculosis that Sillitoe became an avid reader of literature and started to write. He

eventually wrote *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, influenced in part by the stripped-down prose of [Ernest Hemingway](#). As with John Braine's bestseller, it was essentially a social protest, with daring sex scenes and female relationships that were a far cry from *Pride and Prejudice*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Vanity Fair*, and even *Tom Jones*, our staple college literary diet. But when I heard him speak, he had also just published his short story collection, *The Loneliness of the Long-Distance Runner*. I was smitten. Awestruck would be an understatement. I also learned, but didn't know at the time, that reading a work and having it read to you can be a totally different and exhilarating experience. A charming man, he spoke to us (we were a small group of five) as if we were adults and answered our schoolboy questions as if they had been posed by a gaggle of eminent professors.

There was a memorable lecture by the Australian writer, Russel Braddon, his bestselling book, *The Naked Island*. As a Japanese prisoner of war, he was tormented by the fact he couldn't remember how to solve Pythagoras' theorem nor the second movement of the Bruch violin concerto. Ever ready to help, I quickly searched in my pocket for some paper and scribbled down the theorem. When we met for his autograph, I presented it to him.

"Sir," I remember saying politely, "I too want to write, and just in case you haven't had time to catch up with your math, this might jog your memory, but I can't help you with the Bruch."

He looked at it quizzically, smiled, shook my hand, said thank you, carefully folded and placed the paper in his inside jacket pocket, then signed my autograph book.

Years later, I happened to hear him being interviewed by the BBC, and he recounted this incident of when he met with a precocious or, as he put it, ‘a snotty-nosed schoolboy who wanted to be a writer!’

But in high school, I also discovered Edna O’Brien. I was on the shortlist to read the only clandestine copy of *The Country Girls* that was buzzing through the senior study hall. Wow! It was mind-blowing.

As an established writer myself, I realized years ago how O’Brien’s writing has influenced mine. Initially, I was simply attracted to her style, her voice, her word selection, and her “tell it as it is” attitude, but I was unaware of her own influences. Educated in the classics, I had read Dickens, Walter Scott, Jane Austen, and all of Shakespeare’s plays by the time I was seventeen. I have always felt that I related to an earlier period as a writer. Just as she was greatly influenced by Hemingway and especially Scott Fitzgerald, I, in turn, discovered those writers through her. They resonated with me the first time I read them.

O’Brien was my muse. For years, I carried around a copy of her short stories, *Lantern Slides*. I wanted to write like her. She stated she would never write her autobiography and yet also said that, “Any book that is any good must be autobiographical.” In the latter stages of her life, she broke her own resistance and gave us another unmistakable read. “We all leave one another,” she said. “We die, we change— it’s mostly change—we outgrow our best friends, but even if I do leave you, I will have passed on to you something of myself; you will be a different person because of knowing me; it’s inescapable.” And that’s the feeling I came away with after reading her *Country Girl*.

Her first novel, *The Country Girls* which she wrote in three weeks, was instantly acclaimed in the UK and US but was banned and denounced by

Catholic bishops and priests in Ireland, some even resorting to publicly burning copies—I was captivated by her style and honesty of expression. Her biography has much of that feeling but also the tiredness of a writer who has seen and done it all.

I found the earlier part of the book to be more appealing and, in many ways, more self-disclosing. She writes affectionately of her childhood, but her entry into the world of publishing, books and writers came with marrying the novelist Ernest Gebler in her early twenties in Dublin. He realized O'Brien's talent and was paralyzed with jealousy and bitterness. She gave him two sons, but the publication and international success of her first novel spelled the end of her marriage.

The second part of the book read for me more like sections from a journal and, although interesting, lacked the simplicity and freshness of the early years. In the 1970s, she was known for dinner parties whose guests included Princess Margaret hosted in her six-bedroom house on London's Carlyle Square. Paul McCartney sees her home. Marlon Brando walks her home. ("We sat in the kitchen, where he drank milk, and I drank wine.") She asks Jack Nicholson to see her home. Richard Burton rings the doorbell. Jackie Onassis is invited in. Prepped by Sean Connery, she drops acid with R. D. Laing, who was her psychiatrist. She attracted numerous famous studs and makes some bedroom confessions, revealing a one-night stand with Robert Mitchum.

Country Girl is filled with many telling moments as O'Brien shares with us eight decades filled with honesty and vulnerability: unable to swim, unable to drive, the regrettable choices made, unreciprocated love, and, always a passion for words and literature. I am envious of her prose and

feelings for the right word; it is always exquisite and makes it an excellent read.

Throughout all her writings and among her contemporaries, few so concretely and poetically challenged Ireland's religious, sexual, and gender boundaries. Few wrote so fiercely, so sensually about loneliness, rebellion, desire, and persecution.

She published more than 20 novels, eight collections of short stories, eight non-fiction and four children's books. She challenged Ireland's religious, sexual, and gender boundaries by tackling issues of loneliness, sex, rebellion, and persecution. She had style, a command of language, and an incredibly fertile imagination. "Thinking is the enemy of feeling, and feeling...is the true language of the novel," she said. "The emotions of love, hatred, desire or despair are the real, and the task of the writer is to access those emotions." And she was my muse.

(Edna O'Brien passed away on July 27, 2024, aged 93.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:



Michael Barrington, is an international writer specializing in historical novels: *Let the Peacock Sing*, *The Ethiopian Affair*, *Becoming Anya*, *The Baron of Bengal Street*, *No Room for Heroes* and *Passage to Murder*. *Magic at Stonehenge*, is short stories collection. *Take a Priest Like You* is a memoir. He also blogs on his website: www.mbwriter.net.

A Game of Whac-A-Mole

An editorial by Emil Rem



Yahya Sinwar was born in Khan Yunis refugee camp in 1962 to a family who fled from Ashkelon during the 1948 Palestine War. At the age of 27, Sinwar was given four life sentences by Israel for the killing of “collaborators.” He spent 22 years in prison before being released in a prisoner exchange. Sinwar was believed to have been the architect behind the October 7th, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel. He was killed in Rafah—10km from where he was born and grew up—on October 16th, 2024 in retaliation.

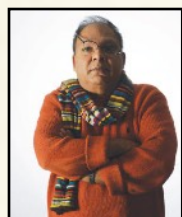
There are millions like him festering in Gaza.

What do you expect from someone with Sinwar’s history? What do you expect from the millions of kids surviving Gaza with no hope, no prospects, and now with no homes and family?

Each time Israel disposes of one Hamas leader, another one springs up to replace him.

By playing this deadly game of Whac-A-Mole, Netanyahu and his rightwing confederates—just as fanatical as Sinwar and Hamas—have opened a can of millions of worms set out to gnaw the heart out of their nation for generations to come.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Emil Rem, an eccentric accountant becomes a writer of eccentric characters, in exotic locales—each chapter taking us on a trip into his

fascinating, twisted world. His latest book *The Vanished Gardens of Cordova* is available on Amazon and Kindle.

[PUBLISHER NOTE: The opinion expressed above is that of the author and not a reflection of the position taken by B&P Magazine. We welcome ALL viewpoints and opinions without endorsing them. If you wish to rebut Mr. Rem's editorial, you are welcome to do so through our SUBMIT tab on the website.]



An Immersive Experience in the 20th Century, 'The Cloth Villa'

A Review by Lívian Bonato

The Cloth Villa is a work by Anne Jacobs set in the 1900s. The protagonist is Marie, a young orphan who, after a difficult childhood, manages to secure a job in the lavish mansion of the Cloth Villa, owned by the Melzers, a powerful family in the German textile industry.

It's impossible not to get immersed in this historical setting, filled with well-developed characters, domestic conflicts, and family secrets. Anne excels in her descriptions of clothing, environments, and food, creating a profoundly sensory work where you feel part of the scene, abandoning all other tasks just to discover what Kate, John's rebellious daughter who forms a deep bond with Marie, will do next, much to the envy and displeasure of the other maids. You'll also wonder how the forbidden romances will unfold and what lies ahead for Marie's uncertain fate.

Marie strikes the perfect balance of irreverence and boldness to entertain modern readers while still maintaining the modesty and servitude expected of a lower-class woman of that time without exaggerating or losing historical context.

I confess that the story gripped me from the start, particularly because of the fluid writing and the organic unfolding of events. The only negative point is having to deal with Elisabeth, Kate's apathetic sister, who constantly complains about everything around her and hatches schemes

to harm others in the house. Her bad temper weighs down chapters that drag on longer than necessary, making her a somewhat redundant character. However, the author deserves praise for how well Elisabeth is developed, allowing us to understand the reasons behind her bitterness. And as art imitates life, we must agree that annoying characters are a necessary evil in an immersive story.

The Cloth Villa is the first in a series of four books, ending on a perfect note of “I want more,” with several plotlines left open for future developments, concluding with three weddings, shocking revelations, and an impending war.

I definitely recommend the book, though its length might deter less dedicated readers. Just open the first page, and thank me later.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Lívian Bonato Moraes is a Brazilian writer known for her evocative and synesthetic prose, as well as her deep articles on themes ranging from politics to spirituality. Her specialties include book reviews, activist articles, poetry, and experimental fiction. She is featured in several literary anthologies, including New Beats, Microcontos, Chegamos (Editora Persona), Lua Gibosa do Bosque da Solidão (Triumpus), and the 2nd Edition of Esparama magazine.

Some of her writings can be found at: thrillers7.wordpress.com

[Editor's note: The Cloth Villa is in Spanish, unlike many of Anne Jacobs other books that are available in English. You can find them all [HERE](#).]

Five Poems

by John Grey

Purely Random

A flaming eye of the creator shoots a spear of fire into the chaos.

Heaven and earth are zapped into place.

A very special spark ignites some lumps of clay into humanity.

Imagine that as you lie in bed, reading the newspaper
as best you can, what with one arm attached to an endless drip,

oxygen force-feeding your lungs

and a monitor behind your right ear

converting your life into beeps.

Some accidents acquire such impossible dimensions. A car drifting over the
center lane, a meteor zooming through space. It's all part of the same

randomness though of course, it's no help.

The priest has been by

for your daily dose of eternity.

He's as useless as the pills that the nurses

pop into your drowsy mouth.

Or the doctor

as he peruses your chart,

knows as well as you do

that your molecules are done for.

Forget medicine.

To perpetuate life,

minuscule triggers float in the air,

are sprinkled across the earth's surface

or are finely circulated in the belly of dark water.

They're not fussy.

They're not you.

A Young Girl Dancing In The Rain

The sun's warmth is caught in rain's crossfire.
An innocence blossoms
like a flower
lapping up the falling liquid,
holding on
with gentle floating petals,
every now and then
pinioning on one foot
and tasting.
Mother nature doesn't
achieve its expected results.
It drove some in
but this one stayed.
Her big eyes keep pace
with the trickle down her cheeks.
Clouds lift
and a drying smile shines through
The swaying bridge,
the leaden barges of the river,
and a young girl
throwing off her shoes
and dancing -
like a beat writer
coming upon an unexpected story,
I cover this for poetry.

The Drugs!

She misses being sick
because of those drugs the doctor prescribed.
They took her out of how bad she felt,
and then barely paused on regular
before they shot her out into
the stratosphere like a cannonball,
where she could brighten and prosper
in the clouds that hugged the stars.

Rumor has it she was near death
before she roared back beyond life,
into the realm of chemicals

that reconvene the senses
in some far corner of the universe,
for spa treatment, rave party
and thrill-a-minute tour of the milky way.

She says she never felt so good
as when she never felt so bad.
Now she's back to normal.
She's slowly adjusting to it.
Too bad there is no cure.

My Territory

Whatever's flying could be bird or bat.
Or an insect. Or a ghost bearing a phantom candle.
I'm stuck in the same spot like a limpet.
On a cobblestone street, I reach down for
half of a water-stained letter and read on.

An exhausted female, not so young.
A man with flat feet and hopeless.
They reach out for each other through me.
But their message lodges in my duodenum
and there it stays.

This is nothing that is not in my nature.
I am terrestrial. I don't move from my latitude.
On this spot, amid these weeds, I am Lord.
So, if you want me, come into my house.
Or my castle. Share these weeds with me.

Whatever's flying could be the good sister.
Or the fellowship of man. Or a rumor.
Or a memory. Effecto secuto.
I am here filling my cups. Or smashing
a wall with my fist. Waxing and waning.

There are cracks in the pavement of course.
But not large enough for me to fall into.
And there is bitterness. And spikes through
some body parts. Apoplexy without apology.
And beer cans to be emptied and crushed.

Come see me, the guy with his ass in the chair,

his feet up on the table. I'm am a sporting gentlemen
if crushing ants can be considered a sport.
I don't value myself as much as recognize my situation.
And there are sins, heavy enough to keep me grounded.

From Yesteryear

You retain your eyes
quaking in white sun
as a honey-colored butterfly,
wind under wing,
quivers on a purple petal.

You savor your childhood
in a flit from bud to bud,
a memory landscape
recreated in the now,
with the addition of goldenrods
and distant mountains.

From your veranda,
you overhear many images
speaking at once,
from swallow swoop
to half dreams of fading light.

Your day is a burnishing of
converging times, fragrant
and nostalgic, long ago and
within reach, a flagrant case
of reverse myopia.

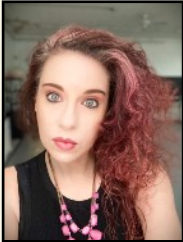
ABOUT THE POET



John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident, recently published in New World Writing, North Dakota Quarterly and Tenth Muse. Latest books: *Between Two Fires*, *Covert* and *Memory Outside The Head* are available through Amazon. Work upcoming in Haight-Ashbury Literary Journal, Birmingham Arts Journal, La Presa and Shot Glass Journal.

An Interview with Award-Winning Author

Jennifer Anne Gordon



Jennifer Anne Gordon is an American author known for her Gothic horror novels, focusing on themes such as grief, the supernatural, and the human psyche. Her professional activities extend beyond writing to include podcast hosting and the creation of mixed-media artwork.

Q: Tells us about being a popular host of the Vox Vomitus podcast.

Vox Vomitus is probably the most fun I have each week. My co-host, Allison Martine, and I talk with top and trending writers about what went right, and what may have gone very wrong in the writing cave. When we started the show a little over three years ago I never imagined the people we would meet and be able to call friends. I also never imagined that thousands of people would tune in each week to see us be so silly.

I think the key to our charm as a podcast is that Allison and I are huge fans of our guests, and we are both avid readers. We always read the book of each guest, and it really allows us to get a feel for the guests as writers and just as people. It also allows us to find fun little things in many of the books and then we come to the interview in costume, or with props, or special food or drinks. The guests love it.

Q: As a writer, why is it important to join organizations like Mystery Writers of America and the Horror Writers Association?

I think it's really important to always be surrounded with other writers at various stages of their career. There is something to learn from everyone in your genre, and people outside your genre.

I know for me, joining the HWA was important because I always wanted to be involved with the Stoker Awards in some way...voting, being on a jury to help select some of the work.

I joined MWA after I got involved with the New England Crime Bake Convention (I am the chairperson for Agents and Editors and also am on the diversity committee.

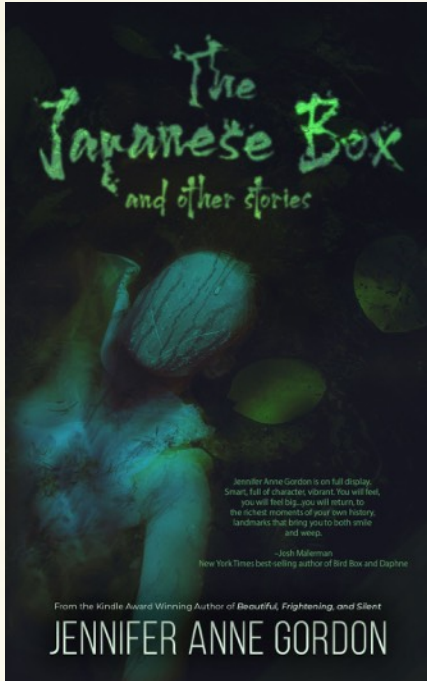
I feel like these organizations as well as my podcast allow me to give back to the writing community, and help to give people opportunities and just be an overall good literary citizen.



Q: Your latest release, *The Japanese Box and Other Stories*, is a new collection that you finished. Can you give us, readers, more details about it?

The Japanese Box and Other Stories is a short collection of literary horror that uses elements of memoir, creative non-fiction, and poetry to explore stories of deep trauma and psychological suspense.

Q: What themes will readers find in *The Japanese Box and Other Stories* collection?



Click cover to buy: <https://amzn.to/3CUuj7o>

The Japanese Box deals with identity, and how your early family life can shape that. At its core it is a coming-of-age story, following a woman's life from the age 10 into her 40's, during this time you realize she is being haunted by her invisible twin.

The story The Lithium Moon, deals with mental illness, pregnancy, a failing marriage, artistic block, and lots and lots of full moons.

Simulacrum is a dark comedic tale about a toxic college relationship between a narcissist and a sociopath.

And finally, the poem "What Stage of Grief is it?" Deals with grief of the living, the dead, and the idea of who you are and who you could have been.

Q: Is *Pretty/Ugly* your first novel?

Pretty/Ugly was the last novel I released in 2021. It won the Helicon Award for Best Horror Novel of 2022, as well as the Reader's Choice for Best Novel 2022 from the Kindle Awards. My first novel was the award winning gothic ghost story Beautiful, Frightening, and Silent (2020). It won Best Horror Novel of 2020 for The Kindle Book Awards.

Q: How would you describe your writing style?

I would describe my overall style as literary, lyrical, poetic, and visceral. I like to combine horror themes and images with reality and psychological fiction.

Q: What is it like being a featured essayist? How did you get started in this role?

I really enjoy writing personal work and exploring creative nonfiction. I think as an author (or any artist) it is important for readers to know you as a person and not just through your work. I started working on personal essays and creative nonfiction while taking grief writing, and memoir classes.

Q: Other than writing your own stories, novels, and essays you also serve on a jury for the Stroker Awards and as the Agents and Editors chair of the New England Crime Bake Committee. How did you get selected for these roles? How do these roles help influence your own writing?

I don't think they influence my writing per se, though of course reading in general does influence my work but probably in a subliminal way. I am an avid reader, so even without sitting on a jury I tend to read close to 100 novels a year plus short stories etc.

I was selected for a couple of juries for the Stokers over the past couple years, and I am not sure how they select people, I know I applied for specific categories and was very pleased.

I was asked to be the Agents and Editors Committee Chair by my literary agent Paula Munier. She was the former chairperson, and she liked my energy and thought it would be a good fit—and in this business when your agent asks you to do something, you do it.

Q: What advice would you give to aspiring writers who submit their works to judging panels and contests? What are the most common mistakes you have seen serving as a jury member?

Honestly with the juries I have been on I am already seeing work that out there in the world in a professional manner, so I can't really give advice based on what I have seen. I would give the advice to always make sure you are nice and polite and honest and true to your word. Be respectful and humble. This goes for being on social media or at in person conventions. Bad behavior is always noticed.

Q: What other projects are you currently working on at the moment?

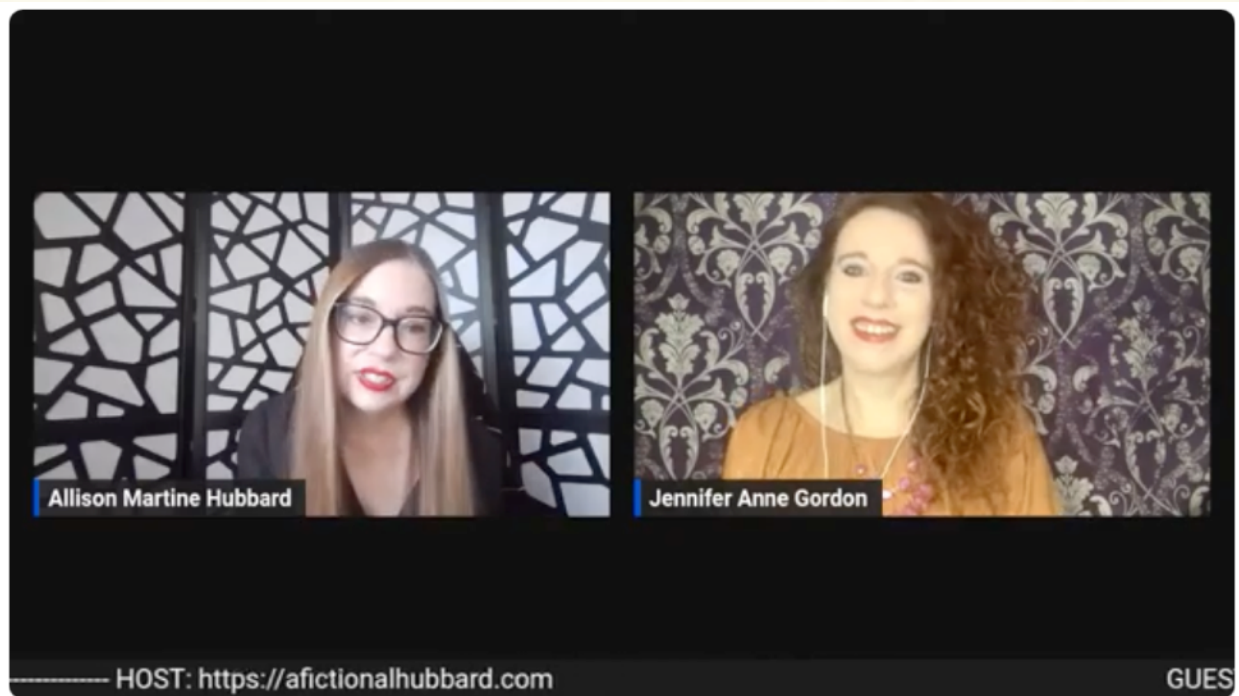
I have a novel that is currently making the rounds out on Submission, and I can't really talk too much about that. I also have a short story coming out in October in an anthology published by Parlor Ghost Publishing, as well as a few essays being released in Diane Zinna's upcoming book "Letting Grief Speak: Writing Prompts for Life After Loss."

I am also working on a couple of new stories as well as a new novel.

Q: Where can readers find you and your books online?

Books are available on Amazon and Barnes and Noble, but if readers would like a signed copy of anything, they can order from my local Indie bookstore, Gibson's Bookstore. They do offer shipping.

Find all of Jennifer's social media information available on her website <http://www.JenniferAnneGordon.com> or on Amazon [HERE](#).



VOX VOMITUS with THE JAPANESE BOX author JENNIFER ANNE GORDON

Click to watch: <https://www.youtube.com/live/Z7WkNU155R0?feature=shared>



Jennifer Anne Gordon on the Modern Romantic Podcast

Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/AJCY6kP7NEU?feature=shared>

Premarital

A short story by Tom Meyer

I.

*T*he first time she brought up marriage, he thought she'd been joking.

"Marriage?" he'd asked. "But we've barely been together for four years; we haven't even lived together for two!"

"Actually, last month was our two-year roomieversary," she'd countered.

"You see!" he'd nearly shouted. "Practically still in the honeymoon phase!"

"I didn't say we actually needed to get married. I just said I thought we should start discussing it."

"Okay, I hear you. But just think, if we get married now, we'll miss out on years of premarital sex!"

And she'd laughed.

II.

The second time she brought up marriage, she thought *he'd* been joking.

"...what?" She'd stumbled.

Surely, she'd misheard. Or maybe he had. All she'd asked was if they could discuss marriage in the next month or two.

“I said, we can’t miss out on all that great premarital sex,” he’d repeated.

She’d stared back at him.

“That’s what you said last time. Like, verbatim.”

“And I stand by it,” he’d replied proudly. “I love coming home to you and asking if you’re up for a little premarital. Honestly, it doesn’t even matter if you say yes or not; what I really look forward to is getting to call it premarital. It’s one of those little things that keeps me going.”

And it was true.

Nearly every day, he’d burst through the door brimming with excitement at the possibility of calling it premarital. On nights when she was working late, he’d whisper no premarital for me tonight as he crawled into bed alone. And when they’d booked a lavish Punta Cana trip, he’d even titled the planning spreadsheet Premarital in Punta.

“You don’t even like the sex?” she’d asked incredulously.

“That’s not what I said at all. I just mean... you’ve got to admit, it’s a great bit. Calling it premarital, I mean.”

“Yeah, I guess,” she’d responded.

III.

When they started couples counseling, the therapist had thought they were both joking.

“I appreciate that this can be uncomfortable, and that humor can help break the ice, but let’s leave the jokes at the door,” the therapist had said. “What’s the real reason you’re hesitant to take the next step?”

“I just told you,” he’d said. “I can’t bear the thought of no longer being able to ask her for a little premarital. It would destroy me.”

“And, do you feel the same way?” the therapist had asked.

“I mean, obviously I don’t,” she’d replied. “I genuinely still can’t tell if he’s fucking with me.”

“Right,” the therapist had said. “I think there’s something else going on here.”

And the therapist had stared at him. He’d looked around the room frantically, desperate to find another reason. What if he said there was another woman? No, they wouldn’t believe that. Maybe another man would be more believable? But no, he was supposed to be honest here.

“I just...,” he’d stammered. “I just think we’d be sacrificing such a major part of our happiness for something so silly.”

“You know,” the therapist had said, “you could very easily still refer to your intercourse as premarital sex even after marriage. If it’s just a joke, you’d like to keep going, there’s nothing stopping you.”

“No,” he’d said somberly. “That wouldn’t be honest. The bit relies on honesty.”

IV.

After she’d moved out, he’d kept the joke going on his own.

“Welp, tonight woulda been a great night for a little premarital,” he’d say to the walls.

“Hey boys, day 12 with no premarital,” he’d texted the group chat. “I don’t know how monks do it!”

Once when he’d brought a pair of particularly luscious cantaloupes home from the grocery store, he’d tried to make the joke to them. “You

keep looking at me like that and we might just need to have a little premarital!” But it had fallen flat.

It just didn’t work alone. So after a little over three weeks, he’d texted her. She agreed to meet, agreed that this time apart had been clarifying.

V.

So now, with just hours until he’ll see her, he sits at the computer, asking internet strangers what to do.

How could he get her back without sacrificing that one thing he loved so much? How could he make her see how much the bit meant to him, without making her feel less than?

And from the depths of his favorite men’s forum, user wifeguy024 offers up the answer he’d been waiting for, the one that had—in hindsight—been staring him right in the face.

Extramarital.//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Tom Meyer is based in Washington, D.C. and originally from the Chicago area. In addition to writing, Tom works in communications for a climate nonprofit.

Time Heals Nothing

A short story by Jason Abshire

It had been six years since they last felt each other's touch. What they had so heartily constructed collapsed, destroying life with them both in it. The aftermath condemned them to their separate hells.

Jim met Renee near the end of his extended college years. It happened the way it always does—a chance meeting followed by an arranged second, and the rest was history. Their interest in each other quickly blossomed into love. Before the mortarboards were even tossed, the quintessential couple wed. Their new life together included camping, fishing, hikes, and Friday night dates that culminated in a storybook life that resulted in a child—and a turtle. But that life was gone. Jim was no longer the love—drunk fool who, almost a decade ago, stole the first kiss after sharing a slice of pizza on the wooden bench in front of her dorm.

He must have reached for his phone a hundred times but found the bottle an easier grab. Yet every drink took more than it gave, leaving him hollow. Renee was consumed by her darkness. In it, she wandered, hoping for light, but none could be found. In this space, they both insulated themselves from affection and resisted help until friends became like life together—just a memory. Their intimacy faltered, mistakes were made, hurtful things were said, and they became broken people. Their friends,

too, suffered; some chose sides, some disappeared, but one by one, they all faded into the past.

As he turned into the drive, he saw Renee watching him through the screen door. She looked more like her own mother now than the mother of his child. Whether by design or not, she was wearing the same outfit she'd worn when he stole that first kiss. He could see her frailty; her dress sagged off her frame, and her once dark brown hair was pulled back, messy and graying. Idling into the drive, he was careful not to hit the overgrown planter holding dead azaleas—now obscured by tall grass. He came to a stop and parked. Checking for his phone, keys, backpack, and a card, he exited the car, stumbling slightly over a deflated plastic ball hidden among leaves piled on the sidewalk.

“Why did he come in that suit?” she asked herself. It was only the second time she'd seen him in it. Six years and thirty pounds ago, he filled it out nicely. Now, it looked a size too large and as though he'd slept in it. It was tattered, with a tear at the cuff and her tear stains from the last time she'd seen him wear it. His uneasy approach gave her time to notice the card in his hand and the Double Windsor hanging low at his neck—the same suit, the same tie, the same shoes, but a different man.

Renee opened the door slightly, watching closely as he approached, wincing when he nearly lost his footing. He looked at her with a fleeting, weak smile and brushed his pant leg nervously. He stood straight, regaining composure. She remembered him, the “Jim,” who was confident and free-spirited and who was able to command her full attention. Memories of the once-fine man that captivated her flickered briefly, but

she sighed as her vision cleared, and the weight of their meeting brought her back.

Before he could lift his arm to hand her the card, she rushed to him, letting the door slam shut. She pressed her whole body against his, squeezing his emaciated frame tightly with his arms pinned at his side, limiting him to only a loose embrace at her hips. Awkwardly, he stood against her, cheek to cheek, dead to her touch. For a moment, she eliminated their distance and made them one.

She could tell he'd been drinking—his hands trembled as they found the small of her back. She was right—both about his drinking and the weight that was crushing them both. It was painfully clear that this hauntingly tepid figure had replaced the man she once loved. Renee took Jim's hand, escorting him into a brooding silence, with the exception of the ceiling fan that "ticked" at every spin. He jumped as the door slammed shut behind him, closing his eyes as he remembered the countless times it had slammed before, followed by the sounds of life. The reclaimed silence was overwhelming.

Looking around, he saw the backyard was somewhat disheveled—the pool was now covered and fenced.

"New fence," he mumbled, though his words seemed to "boom" off the now-bare walls. He could see she was irked by his comment.

"Better late than never. It's a good thing, safety, you know?" He added, wishing he'd kept quiet.

Renee paused, silent, then pointed down the crayon-stained hallway past the empty terrarium. "His bathroom is clean if you need to use it, and there are fresh sheets in the guest room. I'll have dinner ready shortly."

Following her gaze, he saw the one open door. Wanting nothing more than a pleasant visit, he stood still until the tension subsided. *Tick, tick, tick*, filled the air. She gathered herself and departed, and he lumbered down the hall to the bedroom.

He tossed the card and his backpack on the chair by the guest bed, lay down, and stared out the window at the tire swing still hanging on the bare Sycamore—a tree that once dropped leaves endlessly and was the bane of his existence. It no longer seemed adversarial. Now, it held memories and a faded heart with initials carved inside. He closed his eyes.

Awakened by the familiar sounds and smells of dinner, he sat up, brushed the wrinkles from his suit, and tightened the Windsor knot. Silently, he made his way to the kitchen table and pulled out one of the three chairs to sit. Before he was settled, she set their plates with care.

“It’s been a while since I’ve had pork chops and mashed potatoes. It smells great. Thank you.”

“I remembered you liked it.”

“I did. I mean, I do.”

He picked up his fork, paused as he looked at the little white lump of potatoes, and remembered how much of a chore dinner used to be. It had been a long time since he sat at that table and fed himself first. He lifted the fork to his mouth, watching a portion escape to the floor.

Renee grimaced, reaching to grab it as he apologized, “Sorry about that.”

“It’s just some potato,” she replied as she leaned heavily to pick it up.

“It is. I guess you’re right,” he muttered with indifference.

Excited by the dialogue, Renee finished her wine and walked her hand across the table to touch his. He withdrew, reestablishing the distance he maintained between them. Fond memories flooded her thoughts as she remembered dinners filled with laughter or sometimes ending in romance. *How could they be the same people who once lived in awe of each other?* she asked herself as she poked at her serving with her fork. She had once imagined a future with more children, a completed house addition, and new experiences covering the walls and filling her memory.

“I guess I’m finished. I’ll get these in the dishwasher and call it a day. Do you need anything more?” She asked as though she wasn’t crippled by his rejection.

“I’m good. It was good. Thank you.”

Jim watched her from behind as she situated the dishes, separating the plates from the cups and so on, and he finished his wine. This was a chore they shared in times past, but an attempt now felt foreign. He had become a stranger in what he once called *home*. He could see more that was missing than what was there.

They both retired to separate rooms. Jim lay alone in the guest bed, revisiting his thoughts from the day, but the prospect of tomorrow haunted his night. Renee, too, struggled. Tossing and sweating, she thought again of the life they had, realizing there was little chance and rekindling their love. Now, it was only a familiar stranger that occupied the guest room.

The night passed and there was no rest for either of them. They rose with the sun, grateful the night was over. He lay in bed as his head pounded and took a nip from his flask to make the morning bearable—and then another for good measure. Renee had already made it to the kitchen and readied their meal.

“Eggs and bacon okay?” she called out, knowing the smell would turn his alcohol-soaked belly.

“Yeah,” he offered back quietly and carefully to breathe only through his mouth for fear of becoming ill.

They exchanged a few more subtle pleasantries before sitting down across from each other for breakfast. He thanked her for the food, fighting the urge to give them up while gnawing at the greasy bacon with insincerity. She had steeled herself with resolve, serving spite “over easy.”

As she turned toward him, she noticed him sneaking the flask back into his pocket. Her hardened resolve turned into apathy. She quickly regretted her treatment of him and deemed it harsh and unfair. With Jim choking down his last bit of eggs as a courtesy and paying no attention, she wiped tears from her eyes, hoping her streaked mascara would not give her away. When she glanced back at him, she noticed the ‘thousand-yard stare’ in his eyes, focused far in the past, not at her, and definitely not at that moment. He reset it with a blink and checked his watch, tapping it with his finger.

She cleared the table while he strolled to the back door and surveyed the yard. His flask found its way to his mouth again. Tucking it back into his pocket, he pointed out the window and started to speak.

“Do you remem—”

“Don’t,” she interrupted, slamming the utensils down into the carriage.

“Yeah. I’m sorry.”

No more was said, and the damn fan was off. The abysmal silence reclaimed the room. He exited and walked outside to wait on the front porch—pulling the ceiling fan chain as he passed.

They loaded into his sedan and left their once-happy home in silence. He took the passenger seat, resting his head against the window, while she adjusted the driver's seat as they started to move. Between the empty rum bottles and the blanket and pillow, she couldn't decide if the car functioned as a bar or bedroom; it reeked of his misery. His stench covered everything.

The crawl out of town brought them past their old daycare, the grocery store, the park, and the restaurant where he proposed. Avoiding even the chance of conversation, Jim fidgeted with the radio, pretending not to find a station, and immediately turned it back off. Renee, eyes forward, made some last-minute hair and make-up adjustments. By then, only rows of pines lined the right-of-way and their home and the town were in the rearview.

After thirty minutes of seemingly endless pines and more icy silence, Renee pulled into a parking area and exited the car. She walked around toward the front, gazing down the gravel road that stretched beyond the horizon, and asked, "What did you do with the card?"

"It's on the chair in the guest room."

"In the chair?"

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you bring it with us?"

"I don't know why I bought it at all."

She understood. And just as he reached for his flask, he noticed her watching and slipped it back into his pocket.

"Are you ready?" she asked while now seated on the hood.

He scanned the horizon, and, looking down the road, asked, "Do you know where that road goes?"

“I don’t. This is as far as I’ve ever been.”

“Don’t you wonder what’s over that hill?” Jim inquired as he signed an arc in the air with his hand.

“I’ve thought about it but never went. We talked about going, remember? There’s probably nothing there, just more road.”

“Yeah, we should have tried it. It’s probably pointless now. I’m ready to go.”

They followed the little winding path to the back of the glen and arrived at a familiar spot she had visited many times before; this was only Jim’s second visit. They shared yet another silence, though this one felt different. As they approached, he could hear her snuffle as she kept her eyes forward, advancing with purpose while Jim stumbled up the path beside her. Their feet ground into the gravel, offering the only relief from the thickness of the air.

He wrung his hands, one against the other, and through her haze of tears, she noticed. Saving what little strength she had left, she offered what she could muster to Jim. She reached out and, fumbling, took his hand; this time, he didn’t pull away. Their fingers interlocked and palms met. The familiarity of his grip brought her needed comfort. This was the hand that had first touched her body, the hand that slipped a ring on her finger, the hand that cradled their newborn’s fragile head. It was also the hand that had waved goodbye and, for the last six years, had only held a bottle.

Finally feeling safe, she gave way to her tears and collapsed to her knees, nearly pulling Jim down with her. Summoning what strength he had left, he reached down, grasping her arm, helped her off the ground, and pulled her body into him, locking them together like two puzzle pieces.

She welcomed the firmness of his embrace. Nearly fighting the urge to go limp in his arms, she squeezed him back as tightly as ever. His hands crossed over each other at the small of her back, and she buried her head into his chest, adding fresh tear stains to his lapel. With Renee tucked safely in his space, his trembling subsided; even the alcohol that had poisoned him seemed to surrender to this sobering journey.

Her tears continued to soak his jacket, and with her head buried, she pounded her fist against his chest and howled in anguish, fighting to stand as her knees kept attempting to give way. He stared at the marble stone before them. There they stood, holding all they had left in the world while looking down at all they had lost.

While resting his chin softly atop her head, feeling her chest rise and fall against his, he brought his lips to her forehead and kissed it ever so lightly, and with his tears now falling onto hers, he looked down at the headstone and stumbled over the words, “I should have brought his birthday card. It had eight little turtles on it. Damn, he loved turtles.”//

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Jason Abshire is a writer and graduate of Louisiana State University—in the field of anthropology. Currently, he resides in Corpus Christi, Texas. His writing endeavors are varied, spanning from drab technical to short stories. When the pen is not in his hand, you might find him with a fly rod, jogging in traffic, manning a helm, or serenading a crowd with a favorite tune on his Martin guitar. You can contact him on Facebook (Jay Abshire) or view his portfolio at www.theabshirestudio.com.

The Lost City of the Monkey God, by Douglas Preston Review by Jill Hedgecock

“The Lost City of the Monkey God” (**Grand Central Publishing; Illustrated edition, 2017, paperback, 336 pages, \$11.23**) by Douglas Preston chronicles the true events surrounding several expeditions into the Mosquitia mountains of Honduras in search of a fabled lost city. His compelling prose creates the intense experience of exploring a dangerous, impenetrable jungle potentially riddled with drug lords that had never undergone scientific study.

The book includes a comprehensive history of the search for the legendary civilization commonly known as La Ciudad Blanca, the White City. Preston describes the early explorers, including one unscrupulous man who pulled off a lucrative hoax for years. It took the modern breakthrough technology of LIDAR to uncover a massive hidden archeological site buried in the overgrown forest in a remote valley sheltered by mountains.

The logistics of flying into this hostile environment required permits, security personnel, and expert pilots. Once they arrived, adverse weather, poisonous snakes, and insect hazards plagued the expedition. The extensiveness of the lost city unfolded as the exploration went deeper into the forest. One of the most amazing finds was a buried cache of valuable artifacts.

After the core team returned to civilization, many discovered they had contracted an aggressive parasitic disease, called mucocutaneous leishmaniasis, which is an often incurable and sometimes lethal affliction. Preston returns for a second trip to view the excavation of the cache of ornate clay containers. The book tackles questions about why the ancient people who lived there left seemingly overnight and how they might have survived the illnesses that plagued the explorers.

“The Lost City of the Monkey God” was named A New York Times Notable Book of 2017, a #1 New York Times and #1 Wall Street Journal bestseller, a Best Book of 2017 from the Boston Globe and an Amazon Best Book of January 2017. Fans of “The Lost City of Z” by David Grann, Erik Larson’s books and true survival books like Jon Krakauer’s “Into Thin Air” will likely enjoy this book.

Douglas Preston is the author of over forty books, both fiction and nonfiction. Thirty-two of his books have been New York Times bestsellers. Although he is best known for his thrillers in collaboration with Lincoln Child (including the Agent Pendergast series), his solo novel, Jennie, about a chimpanzee was made into a Disney movie. His nonfiction book, “The Monster of Florence”, was made into a television series for Apple TV. He taught nonfiction writing at Princeton University. Preston has been published in “The New Yorker”, “National Geographic,” and “Smithsonian” magazines. He is the recipient of numerous writing awards including a shared Edgar Award. From 2019 to 2023, he served as president of the Authors Guild, the nation's oldest and largest association of authors and journalists.

ABOUT THE REVIEWER



Jill Hedgecock is a local author of a Doberman trilogy series: “Between Shadow’s Eyes” (Book 1) and “From Shadow’s Perspective” (Book 2) and “In Shadow’s Reflection”. (Book 3). Her books are available on amazon.com. www.JillHedgecock.com



Click to watch: <https://youtu.be/KEB9vwyCgkM?feature=shared>

A close-up photograph of a small, fluffy tabby kitten with large, bright green eyes. The kitten is sitting on a stack of books, looking directly at the camera with a curious expression. Its fur is a mix of orange, brown, and white stripes. The background is slightly blurred, showing more books on shelves.

Wishing our
readers a very
HAPPY CHRISTMAS
and a **HEALTHY** and
PROSPEROUS
NEW YEAR!

Thank you for your
continued support.