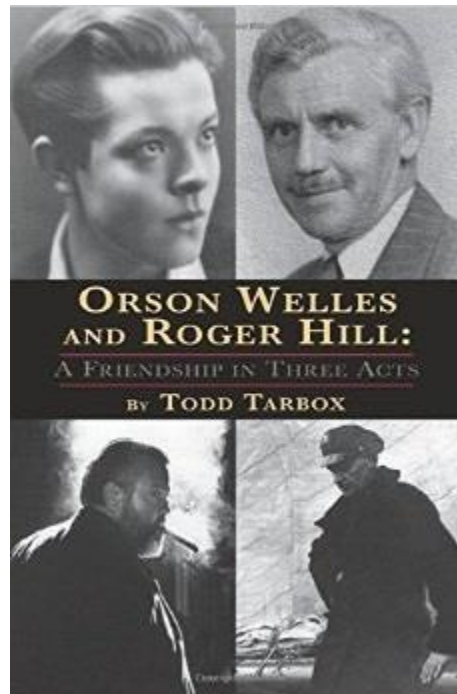


Interview with Todd Tarbox, author of *Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts*



David: I can't tell you how delighted I was to discover *Orson Welles and Roger Hill: A Friendship in Three Acts*. You had me at...ahem...Hill and O. It's mentioned in Patrick McGilligan's astute *Young Orson* biography, which is quite an honor. Unlike the transcript-style *This is Orson Welles* and *My Lunches With Orson*, your book is presented in dramatic form, featuring engrossing phone calls between Welles and your grandfather, Roger "Skipper" Hill, and elevating their private discussions into art. Why did you decide to do the book this way, and how did you manage to, as you say, "tighten and, on occasion, rearrange their exchanges?" This format decision set the stage – ahem – for the planned production of a play adaptation. Did you have a future play in mind from the beginning?

Todd: Thank you for your generous appraisal of my book, which chronicles the remarkable six-decade relationship that began in 1927, when Orson enrolled at the Todd Seminary for Boys, a private boarding school in Woodstock, Illinois, where Roger Hill, was a faculty member and soon to become the headmaster.

The truth is that I'm not responsible for, as you say, "elevating their private discussions into art." The "art" emanates from their dazzling minds and adroit tongues. To add texture to their discussions, I wove pertinent flashbacks, incorporating snippets from their letters, newspaper articles, plays and speeches. Often their conversations would lead down myriad paths with not infrequent digressions (fascinating digressions, I might add) that often led away from the central subject(s) they were discussing. My tightening involved removing a number of these asides, perhaps to be included in a second play one day. My infrequent – I emphasize infrequent – rearrangement of their exchanges occurred when a topic, such as Orson's years at Todd, was discussed during several telephone conversations.

Yes, from the first moment my grandfather shared with me his telephone calls and voluminous correspondence with Orson over the years, I was convinced their unique relationship would translate well onto the stage and screen.

David: This remarkable relationship began at the excellent Todd School for Boys, which, according to Simon Callow, "provided the hothouse in which Orson Welles's exotic talents bloomed." By the time Skipper became headmaster, Todd was an eclectic wellspring of "creative creators," as you put it, and Skipper himself described the school as "nutty" and "unique," adjectives that also apply to Welles. Hascy Tarbox, your father, and Skipper's son-in-law, rather insightfully observed that Todd provided the zealous individualist with "unquestioned approval by the authority." Beyond being an accomplished author, educator and genealogical relative to Skipper Hill, you've also had the privilege of attending Todd.

Please share some of your recollections of that time and place. And please tell us what you think of the magnitude of Todd for the youth who would become Orson Welles.

Todd: I attended Todd from first through fourth grade. The school was closed in 1954, and my family moved to Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The school's philosophy was based on the premise that every youngster is born a creator. The challenge for each student, with the assistance of the faculty, was to develop creative talents and discover how to apply them in and out of the classroom.

This quest was vastly enhanced by providing every Todd boy with dozens of creative, intellectual and athletic avenues to explore. The school was involved in making dramatic and comic films, as well as documentaries and travelogues. Even before Orson arrived on campus, the school was involved in the theater. As a result of Orson's influence, Todd built a sound studio and a number of the student-written-and-directed radio programs were aired over FM stations throughout the Midwest. Athletics was another high priority at Todd. The typical student played several sports, and, given the relatively small student body, there were few bench warmers. Developing an active mind and body were twin touchstones at Todd.

My father, who enrolled at Todd several years after Orson and later joined the faculty, wrote of the school:

Pleasure was blended with responsibility...Skipper tried to put a mature, interesting and exciting face on whatever ventures the kid pursued. It worked because an awful lot of youngsters who graduated from this place named their first-born son Todd. Todd was a wonderful blend of self-directed, creative programs and a rather hard-nosed academic curriculum...Todd was an extraordinary place. It was fifty to seventy-five years ahead of itself as far as educational philosophy...The secret of life that was espoused at Todd was to do something that you wanted to do. And just about every guy who went to Todd has wound up doing just about what he wanted to do. The Todd School for Boys was an incredible moment in time.

What made the Todd School for Boys such an inviting and invigorating place and moment in time was due in large measure to Skipper. Emerson observed wisely that "An Institution is the lengthened shadow of one man." Though the school closed its doors in 1954, Skipper's shadow remains vivid for those who had the great fortune of living within his umbra.

One could argue that the Todd School was the only period in Orson's life where he enjoyed sustained and unqualified success and security. How important was Todd and the Hills to Orson the boy and man? Both were essential in encouraging him to develop and demonstrate his myriad gifts to ever expanding audiences. Todd and the Hills allowed him unfettered creative freedom permitting him to successfully soar in so many directions. Orson's prelapsarian and prolific years at Todd came to an end after five years, but the memory this halcyon time and place remained green for the rest of his life. Most important, the wellspring of his joy at Todd, my grandparents, never left him. They became his devoted foster parents who provided him no small degree of emotional ballast and joy throughout his life.

David: A lovely excerpt from your book:

Roger: "I'm a Goddamn bluffer and the only talent I ever had was that people, many of whom were brighter than I, liked me."

Orson: "It's because you're brighter than you think you are...[Y]ou formed the idea that the cute way to get around in the world was to underplay yourself..."

Next to Todd, Skipper is probably the most essential factor in the evolution of Welles. Though 20 years his senior, Skipper maintained an enviable youthfulness and was, according to Hascy, "the adolescent's adolescent." While you've admitted that Welles was destined for excellence, you believe that his "real existence would have been greatly diminished" if the two had never met. Whether it was unconditional encouragement, exalting in a mutual love of Shakespeare or providing finances, Skipper was Welles' main tailwind. It does seem that Welles was guilty of benign exploitation of his mentor and other loved ones in his life, including his other surrogate father, Maurice "Dadda" Bernstein, thanks to his adeptness at affection manipulation. Barbara Leaming believed that Welles "played on the rivalry between his mentors" and even caricatured the triangle in *Bright Lucifer*. Was there an actual rivalry between Skipper and Dadda? Do you think that your grandfather gets the lionization he deserves? Also, with Skipper comes his wife, the remarkable Hortense. What can you share about her?

Todd: There was absolutely no rivalry between my grandfather and Maurice Bernstein. Early in their relationship, when Dr. Bernstein enrolled Orson in the fall of 1927 at Todd, they respected one another, personally and professionally, and over the years that Orson attended Todd their respect grew into friendship. They both appreciated Orson's unique mind and

spirit, desiring that the young “genius” make the most of his creative talents. Upon the death of Orson’s father, Richard Welles, fifteen-year-old Orson asked my grandfather to be his guardian. Skipper shared with me that he responded: “To do so would break Dadda’s heart. He has known and adored you since you were an infant. You must choose Dadda.” Which Orson did. However, over the years that followed, selecting Dr. Bernstein proved to be somewhat problematic for Orson.

My grandfather and Dr. Bernstein provided guidance and affection to young Orson. Bernstein’s was often conditional and overbearing, while my grandfather’s support was unconditional and easygoing. In *This is Orson Welles* Orson tells Peter Bogdanovich: “I’d say the biggest influence was Roger Hill. He’s still a great, valued friend...I can’t imagine life without him, and I go 10 years without seeing him, but it doesn’t seem like ten years, because I think of him all the time. He was a great direct influence in my life – the biggest by all odds. I wanted to be like him. Everything he thought, I wanted to think, and that wasn’t true of Dr. Bernstein.”

My charismatic grandfather was never in want of being lionized. He possessed the mind of a serious scholar and the heart of a sprightly child, and he was adored by Todd students and faculty for more than four decades. My grandmother, Hortense was as intelligent and spry as her husband. They enjoyed sixty-six years of marriage until my grandmother died in 1982 at the age of 87. At Hortense’s memorial Orson eulogized:

Of everyone I’ve known, she was the most truly passionate. Yes, passionate in every good meaning of a word I choose with care. Other great and good souls may be described as warm or warm-hearted. That’s too tepid sounding for Hortense. Warm is a word for comfort and consolation. The word for her was Heat. Fire. The very element itself. She has gone away and left a black hole in our universe. And yet to mourn is to remember. That shining, vivid, marvelously living presence is back with us again and our hearts are stabbed with happiness. For just to think of her can never be anything but an occasion for joy.

David: Skipper’s conscientious wisdom certainly shaped Orson’s approach to artistic collaboration for the better. Hascy’s words at Skipper’s 1990 memorial are paramount: “You were one of the chosen if you were fortunate enough to have worked with him. For those who did, he bequeathed the greatest gift one man can bestow upon another, the capacity to make you feel important...” That rings like what Welles-protégé Gary Graver said about Welles in his memoir: “[Y]ou always felt as though you were a collaborator, no matter how small your job might have been.” However, a contrary Hascy quotation about Orson’s precocious directorial power over a Todd production of *Twelfth Night* appears in your book: “[H]e left absolutely no latitude, no tolerance for self-expression.” Yes, Welles denied collectivist moviemaking and extolled directorial dictatorship, but the obstinate auteur also could be an embraceive, even flattering collaborator. In his *Marilyn* biography Norman Mailer says that facts “always attract polar facts,” so were both Hascy and Graver correct?

Todd: Possibly so. Orson became surer of himself as a director and actor on the stage and on radio in New York in the 1930s and early 1940s. Observe this exchange between Orson and Skipper:

Orson: There is an actor I know who doesn’t think much of me, who goes on for three pages saying, “I’ve never heard Orson Welles raise his voice or say any unkind thing to an actor in my life.”

Roger: Well, that’s a little overdoing it.

Orson: No, it’s true.

Roger: Really?

Orson: Yes, you’re thinking of my directing the Todd boys. I do all my mean talk to the people behind the camera. Anybody who has to perform in front of the public is treated with great deference. I take it out on poor assistant directors, and usually for the benefit of the actors, to show them what they could be getting.

David: Hascy Tarbox has been presented as a negative rival to Orson Welles, even by Hascy himself (in a sense): “I think that I hold the record for being the longest burr under Orson’s saddle.” Callow called him Welles’ “arch-enemy,” Learning claimed that Welles was adamantly against her talking to him, and Welles referred to him as “that bastard.” Denying Orson-envy, Hascy believed that the envy was Orson’s, perhaps for Hascy’s remaining at the Edenic Todd School, which he guessed “was the only security that Orson ever had”. A Renaissance man in his own right (he was a rather talented painter, for one), Hascy needn’t have been envious, and this is validated by your praise of him in the book:

Like Orson, my father’s creativity knew no bounds. He could do anything with his head and hands: paint, sculpt, write, act, direct, build anything. Like Candide, he spent a considerable amount of time on life’s small stage tending his garden wisely and devotedly.

It seems that your father, like Welles, has been enigmatized by history's combers, and I feel that he doesn't belong among the real and perceived villains surrounding Welles. Please provide a clearer picture of the *real* Hascy Tarbox.

Todd: My father strode the world with grace, wit, confidence and intelligence. With an artist's eye, he gleaned and recorded much during his seventy-three years. Dad lived a life that was rollicking and reflective, as well as perceptive and articulate – be the medium paint, clay, wood or words. His letters, many illustrated with his clever sketches, effervesce with a vigorous toast to life. He created in myriad mediums, but, in the final analysis, *he* was his greatest creation.

After looking at an exhibit of Dad's paintings, the naturalist and writer, Roger Caras, said of my father's work: "The big difference between Mr. Tarbox and the bulk of the material I see is that Mr. Tarbox is really good. He has something to say about our natural world that people need to see and read! He is a designer, certainly, and he is an illustrator as well, but, not to put either of those fine skills down, he adds a dimension of excitement to his work that makes it art of a different kind. There is some magic here." Dad was truly a magical presence.

David: Far from being weak for adapting other writers' material, Welles excelled at innovation, savant-like theatricality and meticulous editing. He even made Shakespeare his own, and his blunders (including the jumbled puzzle *Mr. Arkadin*) still dazzle. His work also has been and is incomprehensible to many people. For instance, Skipper observed that "*The Magnificent Ambersons* was just too dark and troubling for a public that wanted to be entertained and not enlightened," which jibes with Charles Higham's take on the same film: "[F]or intellectuals not dominated by a need to identify at a cinema performance, the film works beautifully; for the common run of people, it works far less well." In a discussion about *The Trial*, Welles justified his work's designed difficulty: "[Y]ou are supposed to have a very unpleasant time." He also said that his "films are as black as the black hole." In other words, Welles' basically melancholic, fragmentary and surrealistic cinema isn't Capra or Spielberg. How do *you* rate his filmography, and what might be the most profound benefits of their legacy?

Todd: What is most laudable in life and in art: quantity or quality? I opt for the latter. Leonardo da Vinci – one of the greatest minds in recorded history, a gifted scientist, engineer, mathematician, inventor, architect, writer, sculptor and painter – was the consummate embodiment of the "Renaissance man." His *Last Supper*, *Mona Lisa* and *Vitruvian Man* are a testament to his genius. Is he any less a genius because fewer than twenty of his paintings are known to exist?

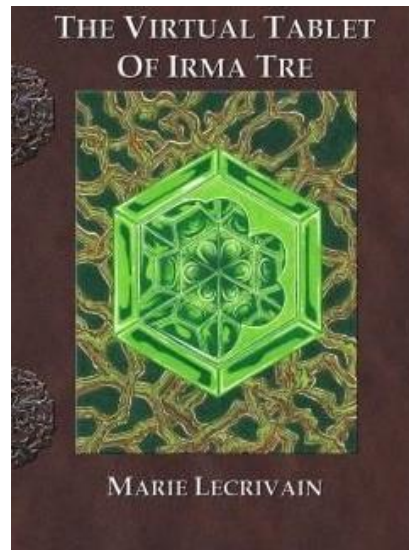
Johannes Vermeer, one of the most lauded painters of the Dutch Golden Age, left the world only 34 paintings, while many of his contemporaries were far more prolific painters and whose work is far less memorable. Should the paucity of his painting damn him? Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was the best-selling novelist of the 19th century. Has history damned her because none of her other books achieved such universal approbation?

Curiously, many who look at Orson's work as a director admit his genius that is unarguably evident in *Citizen Kane*, but are quick to disparage him for never (in their minds) approaching the quality of his first film. Had Orson only written, directed and acted in *Kane*, his contribution to filmography would be considerable. Welles left the world cinematic quality, not quantity. Had he not been such a maverick or had he adequate financing, who knows how many more memorable films he would have left the world? A feckless imponderable, that. Orson's provocative, profound, and kaleidoscopic "ribbon of dreams" is his enduring legacy.

David: Welles believed that an artist's product should speak louder than his or her own life, and he hated that "people today scrutinize an artist's personality, crowing over his mistakes, his human failings" instead of his or her work. This is why he expressed relief that the dearth of knowledge of Shakespeare and Cervantes liberates their work from befuddlement. Regardless, deciphering artists' Rosebuds is in our nature, and, ironically, Orson's art and Orson (who was both Kane and Quinlan, both Lear and Falstaff) seem indivisible, so I ask: How do you sum up the man? And what do you think about the importance or non-importance of the relation between art and artist?

Todd: Summing up Orson, Marlene Dietrich reflected eloquently: "When I talk to him, I feel like a tree that has been watered. You should cross yourself when you say his name." High praise, richly deserved. It seems to me that art and the artist are one. They are inseparable.

Review of Marie Lecrivain's *The Virtual Tablet of Irma Tre* (Edgar & Lenore's Publishing House, 2014)



I can spiel about many subjects somewhat handily, but alchemy is one that ultimately escapes me, or, rather, that I haven't chased very far. The subject is never far away, however. One can't be a fan of William Blake's *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, or dig anything by comics-writer Alan Moore, Jacob Boehme, Eckhart (not actor Aaron), H.P. Lovecraft, Friedrich Schiller and Hermetically-seasoned Swedenborg without encountering alchemy. Also, lovers of Nietzsche can't deny that his call for transfiguration, transvaluation and annihilation/re-creation of the Self involves the alchemical processes of *solve* and *coagula*: disintegration and reintegration, filling in the void of deconstruction with a better synthesis lest nihilism toss us into an existential trash heap. As Schiller wrote in *On the Aesthetic Education of Man*: "Like the chemist, the philosopher finds combination only through dissolution, and the work of spontaneous Nature only through the torture of Art."

OK, maybe I *can* spiel on the subject with some vim, but I defer to author Marie Lecrivain as an abler enthusiast – or, rather, an in-the-know practitioner. Frankly, I haven't the patience nor finesse to attempt a coherent book involving alchemy and such. (I'm much more apt to say "The philosopher's stoned" than seek the Philosopher's Stone.) However, my shortcomings on the matter aren't what make me respect *The Virtual Tablet of Irma Tre*. It's the fact that the book is smart and insightful, and it's as simultaneously simple and deep as ABC – literally: the poem titles are in alphabetical order (which must've been a feat in itself). I like when an author's particular style is applied to abstract ideas and grand universals, so I'm pleased that the book imparts Lecrivain's own brand of the esoteric.

As I understand it, alchemy is essentially about finding and enhancing the Self, which is truly the final frontier, a dwarf of oceans. The Self business requires one to go beyond where science can go. It's about progress – and art. "Alchemy is evolution," Lecrivain writes in a brief preface. For her "[t]he Universe is an ongoing experiment in alchemy," and "everything [she does] is alchemy, including writing poetry." This is benign poison against nihilism. There is a goal, a dialectical flow, a bright future, though all is cyclical and repetitive, as symbolized by the Ouroboros, the dragon/snake swallowing its own tail. (In typical thoroughness Lecrivain covers the letters O and U with poems entitled "Oroboros" and "Uroboros.") A clip from "Trituration":

*Remember: All of this has happened before,
and will again. It won't lessen the pain,
but it will put a smile on your face.*

And in "Distillation":

*...This is the time to
focus on what, where, and who you become on*

*your next turn of the wheel, the centrifuge of
incarnation that separates the karmic detritus of
your past and future selves.*

This reminds me of Nietzsche's endorsement of (probably not belief in) "eternal recurrence of the same" and finding joy in *everything* that happens in a lifetime as if there are endless exact reiterations of it. However, that notion doesn't allow for karma's variability, prioritizes necessity over what he sometimes called mendacious idealism and rejects the possibility of a world-beyond (*Hinterwelten*). Lecrivain seems to appreciate both the given and the transcendent, and she celebrates the orchestration of existents, without the Nietzschean hierarchy of rule of the best. "We're all grapes on the cosmic vine" goes a line in a poem called "Wine." Just as unlikely, diminutive Hobbits determined the fate of Tolkein's Middle-earth, even the smallest of earthly things is worthy and can enhance the universe, as shown in "Stone":

*Whether it be a boulder
on which to build our kingdom
or a pebble skipped across
the streams of time...
Even the cobblestones
have a great destiny.*

Great destiny isn't easy to accept, however. The Self is hard-won. As the closing caption in Marvel's *Amazing Fantasy* #15 (featuring the origin of Spider-Man) says, "[w]ith great power there must also come – great responsibility." Speaking of comics, I'm reminded of something Alan Moore said:

[Y]ou can almost understand the desire to simply wipe out that awareness [of being a Self], because it's too much of a responsibility to actually possess such a thing as a soul, such a precious thing. What if you break it? What if you lose it? Mightn't it be best to anesthetize it, to deaden it, to destroy it, to not have to live with the pain of struggling towards it and trying to keep it pure?

Moore's words, in turn, remind me of "Iron," one of my favorite pieces in *The Virtual Tablet of Irma Tre*:

*In the blood of the spine, there's a soul that
never breaks, whose blade never
rusts. Fortified with intent, it's the weapon of your
soul. Use it carefully, with no
objections and never in anger. If you follow these
instructions to the letter, then
no one dares cross you in times of war or peace –
unless you're a fool.*

This unbreakable soul, this rust-proof sword seems to be what Lecrivain refers to in "Liquor Hepatis": a wound-healing "unblemished fire of truth." More from the poem:

*You begin to see
at the soul's atomic level,
the small and vast miracle of change
that happens without and within.*

Transformation is sometimes traumatic, making the resulting pleasure that much better, the horizons that much wider, as expressed in "Cinnabar":

*You and I smash
Against the walls of our souls...
Exhausted and empty,
we carefully place*

*curious fingers into the cracks
of our fissured selves,
with tender appreciation
for new dimensions.*

And in “Vitriol” (another of my favorites):

*We never thank the ones who murder us...
We never appreciate the death of love...
until one day
we awaken, tearless
and excited, for the first time
in years. We rush to the mirror
and find a new face there to greet us...*

The quest for the Philosopher’s Stone, the Ultimate Substance or the Self (the Great Work), what Alan Watts might call It, tends to be a trial-by-crucible that reaches denouement only after an Ingmar-Bergman-caliber spiritual mangling or even a “Hulking out,” as many fellow comic-book dorks might put it. (The cathartic, enlightened Self is likened to an erupting and annihilating Vesuvius in an *Irma Tre* piece called “Retort.”) However, though we may have to endure destruction and heartbreak in order to awaken to understanding and a renewed self, sometimes re-creation requires simply reaching out and bringing the poles of the spectrum together, tapping in to the moment’s music. In “Quintessence”:

*...The connection
established, your voices ascend in song,
a sweet trio attuned to the vibration
of the Cosmos. There’s no need to prolong
the ecstasy from above or below;
from this perfect union will new life flow.*

“Xanthosis/Yellow Phase” (the title cleverly covering the letters X and Y) continues the theme of reconciled polarities:

*Intellectual/Intuitive
Rational/Mutable
Fearful/Courageous
Stubborn/Acquiescent
Logic/Passion
Peace/War
Word/Will
Compromise
Conjunction
Inspiration
Poet –*

With that closing word we come back to Lecrivain’s claim about the alchemical nature of writing poetry, and, while I’m typing this, I realize that “compromise” and “conjunction” render “reconciled polarities” inaccurate. Perhaps, as Schiller would have it, polarities can never *not* be polarities. They can be made to hold hands but only stand politely side by side. In other words, to borrow from Schiller again, and to riff off of what Lecrivain seems to be saying, it’s not a matter of blurring opposites but one of harmonizing them – or, better yet, to quote Schiller directly this time, “the absolute including of all.” He saw one’s blindness to human dignity as the reason one is antagonistic to others, since she/he sees her/his own lowly self in others rather than seeing others, who should be treated with dignity, in himself.

If a soul takes so much to be realized, how priceless it must be. If Lecrivain is correct in saying the alchemical process is evolutionary, then it’s not an automatic, consciousness-from-accident, impersonal evolution. Anyone who really considers prehistoric cave paintings can see that the keenness of those early humans has been quite underestimated. How complex

and persistent are human minds! Every individual (whether a boulder-person or pebble-person) has a chance to effect major changes in her- or himself and the world – and beyond. As an outspoken anti-utopian I usually wince at most reformatory/progressive spiels, but I dig the idea of tending our own gardens: refining ourselves and promoting healthy metaphysical harvests so that positive things can happen on at least a local scale, perhaps creating an aggregate “awakening” to cosmic glory. *The Virtual Tablet of Irma Tre* has stirred and reinvigorated my thoughts on this stuff. For that I’m grateful.

I’ve addressed some of my favorite parts, but honorable mentions are due to “Egg,” “Hermaphrodite,” and “Fixation,” which contains this brilliant, enviable line: “Soon,/you’ll be asleep,/and when you awake,/you’ll always be a *sleep*.” A poem called “Geber” also caught my eye since I’m familiar some Geber and False-Geber. The best line in the poem: “He’s the pharmacist/who regales you/with tales of what happens/to the unwary who mix/SSRIs with chardonnay.” And “King” features an arousing pre-coupling of the King, “a man among men” with a crowned “rooster-shaped pompadour,” and an expectant Pre-Raphaelite-wet-dream Queen. She “manifests beyond the pale:/a vision in virginal blue negligee,” and “[h]is staff is at the ready.” (Is it getting hot in this review, or is it just me?)

The Virtual Tablet of Irma Tre may be the best of what I’ve read of Lecrivain’s work. She has an enviable knack for being able to produce quality books in a wide subject range pretty regularly. This latest work inspired me to take a fresh look at magic, alchemy, shamanism and other rich but very misunderstood – even maligned – stuff. Lecrivain celebrates it all via transformative poetry, a craft she loves, a craft *of* love, a (forgive me)...*lovecraft*?

Film review of *Phone Booth* (2003)

Directed by Joel Schumaker

Starring Collin Farrell, Forest Whitaker, Katie Holmes, Radha Mitchell, Kiefer Sutherland

Rated R

Length 80 minutes

Summary

Stu Shepard (Farrell) is a media consultant whose bark is worse than his bite. Basing his business on lies and subterfuge, he even lacks scruples in regard to his marriage. Stu is working on graduating one of his cuter clients, Pam (Holmes) into mistress status. (She doesn't know he's married.)

After calling Pam from the usual payphone (so her number is not detected on his cell phone), Stu picks up the phone again when it rings. On the other end is a patient-voiced man who turns out to be the voice of fate. Soon Stu realizes that the voice belongs to an off-kilter sniper who seeks to force confession of deceit and lust out of him and deliver an execution bullet as just punishment. Stu cannot leave the phone booth, tell the crowd or the surrounding police what is really happening to him, and he cannot fast-talk his way out of this fatal deal.

Review

Stu is cocky, dishonest, glib and brimming with pretense and propped appearances. Barely disguising his Bronx upbringing, Stu seems to have convinced himself that he can convince others that he has everything "together." Farrell fills the role perfectly within the film's first few moments.

From the moment Stu enters the phone booth the stage is set: the film takes place only here till the end. This is where he will be prodded and manipulated and taunted by a conscience-like voice. As tension mounts, the prisoner begins to crack under his plight's weight. He must appease this maniac to avoid getting shot. But appeasement is futile. The voice wants *confession*.

The film thrilled me with its perfect tension and convincing pace, its sense of disorder and moral importance. The shit hits the fan for a man not only blinded by his own ambition and conceit (which is old plot hat) but also for his dishonesty in marriage and love. Another film that portrayed the poison of wanton infidelity well was Adrian Lyne's *Unfaithful*, starring Richard Gere and Diane Lane, unlike the infidelity-praising situation in Clint Eastwood's *Bridges of Madison County*.

Stu is not wholly ruined by his excesses and lies. Somewhat early in his ordeal he starts to realize his folly, quite apart from the impending doom upon him. His realization is genuine; it takes on a life of its own. Despite the voice's threats and excruciating demands, Stu learns that his confession and repentance are crucial for his *soul's* redemption aside from his body's safety, regardless if he survives or loses his life in that phone booth. When Stu accepts this, so does the viewer. Farrell managed an amazing, moving performance in this particular development that marks him as a formidable actor. Reckoning visits the protag and salvation is won. And the accurate prospect of a lunatic being needed to defend fidelity and honor is a sober comment on our times and confused culture.

What better endorsement can I offer but to make my own confession: *Phone Booth* made me weep – and it continues to have such an effect each time I watch it. Especially when Stu breaks down, looks right at his bewildered wife in the witnessing crowd of onlookers and police, and says, "I've been dressing up as something I'm not for so long, I'm so afraid you won't like what's underneath. But here I am...just flesh and blood...and weakness."

Film review of *Max* (2002)

Directed by Menno Meyjes

Starring John Cusack, Noah Taylor, Molly Parker, Ulrich Thomsen

Rated R

Length 108 minutes

Summary

Max Rothman, a one-armed, Jewish art dealer in 1918 Germany, meets a disheveled, disgruntled, desperate artist named Adolf Hitler. Max lost his right arm in WWI and returned to immediately resume his art appreciation, promotion, and sale. Passionate, insightful, opinionated and kind, Max is a wellspring of culture in a country sapped of its identity, pride and, seemingly, its future.

Obscure and homeless, Hitler contacts Max and requests his aid in finding exposure for his work. Max urges the narrow-minded man to "go deeper" with his creativity, to loosen his drab realism and mine his more "voluptuous" energy. The film follows the day-to-day life and interaction of these two polarized characters. Hitler falls into the budding anti-Semitic crowd that eventually becomes the National Socialists, while Max advises him to avoid such foolishness and pursue his art.

The film's trailer slogan is officially "Art, Politics, Power", but I say it should be "what might have been," as it is repeated a few times in the film. Young Hitler has a choice before him: choose art and creation or bitter politics and destruction.

Review

At the reopening of his art gallery (set in an old ironwork), Max tells his mistress that he needs to see her again and she remarks, "Where's the future in it?" Max says, "I've seen the future...There's no future in the future." *Max* is full of such unwitting, ominous statements. Another example: Max's friend is rudely received by Hitler and consults Max.

"What's his name?"

"Hitler."

"Never heard of him."

"You will."

Chilling, indeed, yet the previous quote is much more thematic and important: "There is no future in the future." Along with "what might have been", this is a telling statement in regard to the advent of Nazism and Germany's subsequent brainwashing.

Cusack masterfully plays Max, the ever-curious, ever-passionate artist who must accept his own lack of painting ability due to his missing right arm. Max is progressive and modern, yet he is an anachronism in disgruntled, depressed Germany. The War Guilt Clause in the Treaty of Versailles has castrated the military men and offended the citizenry, including German Jews. Max is beyond politics, disillusioned by the War, eager to seek and foster and celebrate "newness" instead of regret and vengeance.

Noah Taylor fills Hitler's role frighteningly plausibly. Weary, pining for past war glory, unsung and unsuccessful, 30-year-old Hitler considers *himself* to be progressive and modern. He seeks a "cultural revolution" in art and dreams of escaping Israel's "God of guilt," gradually shaping his spite for the Jews. But he also expresses belief in a powerful State: "I don't believe in anti-Semitism," he says to fellow barracks residents. "The Semitic question is far too important to be left to the individual. It ought to be in the domain of the government, like public health or sewage." These opinions are appreciated and exploited by military proponents of National Socialism, seeing in Hitler a gift for oratory and hysterical simplification of seminal ideas that later sent European Jewry to the death camps.

As Hitler fumbles for help from Max, Max reiterates his advice to direct frustrated energy fully into art, to find his own "authentic voice." Hitler's current work contains no verve, no deepness. Hitler must dig deeper. And after that, according to Max, "deeper still!" Though Hitler needs Max's expertise and networking, the two are always at odds, disciples of different Ways. Hitler's staunch intolerance for caffeine, meat, cigarettes, hanky-panky and alcohol is in constant tension with Max's excessive smoking, preference for strong coffee, taste in art and erotic infidelity, for example. Max is always flipping open his lighter and smoking another cigarette as Hitler winces and frowns. The smoke is a visible, wordless affront, a free and invasive essence that Max boldly displays and shares, making no apologies.

I was perturbed by Max's unfaithfulness to his beautiful wife, but the film is depicting a man in love with love and sensation and good feelings. Max Rothman is very much like Oskar Schindler, as depicted in *Schindler's List*: suave, cultured, cool, attractive and prone to straying from monogamy. Max has money to spend, friends, variable interests and optimism, while Hitler has nothing. Hitler, in his shabby state, cannot even attract one girl. Again and again *Max* contrasts the men's stations in life: Max's refined home and family opposed to Hitler's street tramping and makeshift art studio in a filthy barn.

Many clever allusions and elements throughout the film come to mind as useful and illustrative. The fact that Max is missing his *right* arm and sustains his *left*, Max's assessment of Hitler as a Futurist, Hitler's recurring resistance to politics and even anti-Semitic oratory (consisting mainly of bitching about the Versailles Treaty, the privileged rich and being "stabbed in the back"), Max solemnly regretting the loss of his arm while attempting to draw a perfect circle with his remaining limb while Hitler attacks his canvas and stabs it repeatedly with his brush before collapsing to the floor, Hitler calling the caging of birds "inhuman" and referring to some people as "guttersnipes" (the same insult Churchill used for *him* in reality). Perhaps the most poignant device is a sign held up for an audience to ponder after Max and friends conclude an anti-war performance (in which a fake arm holding a paintbrush is blown off Max): "WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN."

What might have been indeed. Though the film takes many fictional liberties to tell the tale, its premise is cogent. If a multitude of circumstance had been otherwise, if Max's encouragement had steered young Hitler successfully toward art excellence, if Max had not lost his arm. If, if, if, might, might, might. However, Hitler tells Max that he has finally found his "authentic voice": "Go deeper, you said. Well, I went deep. I am the new artist, practicing the new art." That art is propaganda, rage and hatred. "Politics is the new art," Hitler boasts smugly.

Near the film's end, Meyjes alternates focus between a searing, hateful speech to a packed auditorium and a whispery Jewish Blessings of Peace. While Hitler leads the room in an outraged chant of "Blood Jew," Max admires his father as they quietly speak their prayers.

We all know what the real Hitler chose. *Max* plays with truth-based fictions perhaps to make another attempt at understanding *what might have* contributed to the man's descent into brutality. It also – thankfully – presents Hitler as a *human being* with human pain and resentment and dreams, Hannah Arendt's "banality of evil." History has molded Hitler into a cartoon demon, which the complexity of such a development. There are glimmers of niceness about the portrayed Adolf, but they are lost as he staggers into his destiny – for what at first? Want of money and support by the military? Anger at personal failure? An intensified scapegoating against Jews? Disappointment at his impeded art?

Also, I wonder why Germany later accepted the Nazis. Can things get so bad and hopeless that normal folks can be lulled into such a regime? Certainly. Then and now and from now on. If Hitler hadn't been available, another useful figurehead would have been coached. An anecdote mentioned at a meal with Max's family is illustrative. Max tells of a woman who deliberately swallowed a tapeworm so she could lose weight. This, of course, repulses his father. But it struck me as something potentially symbolic. Might a people knowingly swallow a dangerous thing because that thing seems worth the risk to change a current affliction or depressing state?

Since I must conceal the film's conclusion so as not to spoil it for folks who have yet to watch, I'll close with a final example of Hitler unfortunately missing Max's insightful instruction:

Max: "We all shit the same, scream the same, and die the same."
Adolf (scowling): "There's no need for vulgarity, Rothman."

Film review of *The Chronicles of Riddick* (2004)

Directed by David Twohy

Starring Vin Diesel, Thandie Newton, Colm Feore, Judi Dench, Alexa Davalos, Nick Chinlund

Rated PG-13

Length 159

Summary

26th Century. Riddick (Diesel), a wanted criminal and ruffian, has been hiding from bounty hunters for five years (since his adventures with a shipwrecked crew and ferocious monsters in *Pitch Black*). After turning the tables on a sleazy merc named Toombs (Chinlund), Riddick flies to Helios Prime, a planet under siege by an imperial force known as the Necromongers, to seek a former friend who might have leaked his refuge to the mercs. He learns that he might be solely instrumental in opposing the powerful Necromongers who are led by the almost invincible, half-dead Lord Marshal (Feore). The Necromongers go from planet to planet, offering total conversion to their way or total demise. The Necromonger's heaven, the Underverse, is promised. Riddick's uniqueness is due to his origin as a Furyon, an almost extinct race prophesied to produce the one who could defeat Lord Marshal.

Although reluctant to dive into this galactic conflict, Riddick acts on an inner spark of justice. Recaptured by Toombs, he is incarcerated on a sun-scorched, prison planet called Crematoria - where the surface temperature shoots to 700 degrees Fahrenheit at sunrise. Of course, the circular, tiered prison is waaaaay underground, guarded by slimy, crooked goons. Riddick allows his imprisonment because he knows a former friend from *Pitch Black*, Kyra (name changed from Jack), is kept there. Kyra has become hardened by prison life and has learned to kick ass. Meanwhile, Dame Vaako (Newton) entices Vaako, Lord Marshal's right-hand man, to seize rule when Lord Marshal is weakened. After a series of insane situations, comic-book-like violence, and cliff hangers, Riddick makes it back to Necromonger-occupied Helios Prime to finally deal with Lord Marshal.

Review

"Accept the Night, and the friendly Dark..." - Dionysos, The Bacchae

Eleanor Gillespie of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* said of *The Chronicles of Riddick*: "Riddick-ulous. Vin Diesel and director David Twohy should be ashamed of themselves." Although I like how she stated her disgust, I must disagree. I found *Riddick* to be quite entertaining, dazzling and clever in some spots. Just when I thought the film would be a blockbuster stinker, it took a second breath and sprinted to a satisfying (albeit predictable) conclusion. Well, an open-ended conclusion.

I disliked Twohy's *Pitch Black*, which I found somewhat shallow and dull, despite the interesting Riddick character. *Chronicles* alludes to *Pitch Black* and clunky exposition provides a connection for those who seek continuity but the film stands on its own.

Riddick, aside from possessing great strength, fighting prowess, baritone-voiced charm and being an unpredictable crosspatch of a person, has the extraordinary ability to see clearly in the dark (hence his success during the month-long night in *Pitch Black*). Riddick also is an outcast, a bull-headed loner who can be as unscrupulous as he is deadly, a status that earns him the overused classification of "antihero."

Granted, Riddick's criminal repertoire is a lot to overlook, but we've cheered for the Godfather and Tony Soprano, countless conmen and mobsters, the Wild Bunch, and Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. Riddick is a familiar heroic composite, possessing the resourceful endurance of Odysseus and the brutality of Conan the Barbarian. He also embodies messianic importance: evasion of the massacre of his people as a child, prophesied to be the one man to save the universe, one who conquers death itself.

Riddick's special sight and his impure dealings link the character to darkness, which is his natural environment, his comfort zone. When Riddick slides the goggles off his eyes, the audience can safely bet he's about to take action and turn the tables on his enemy. So we hope for – cheer for – light's failure during crucial scenes. And, of course, astute viewers will be reminded of three key mythic mythfolk: Apollo, Artemis and Dionysos. The film's besieged and occupied planet is called Helios Prime; and the sun-dominated prison planet, Crematoria, is infamous for its deadly sunrise. Helios obviously comes from the same name of the Greek sun-god who descends from Hyperion. Another name familiar with sun/light is Apollo (often confused with Helios), whose surname is Phoebus ("brilliant").

Sister to Apollo is Artemis, the moon goddess. A huntress, she also is the goddess of wild things. Riddick *is*, undoubtedly, a wild thing. He remarkably tames a ferocious beast in the Crematoria prison, explaining that "it's an animal thing," for example. Later myth connected Artemis to Hecate, goddess of darkness and the underworld. Like Riddick, her allegiance to good or evil is ambiguous. These aspects also apply to wily Dionysos, who can be both kind and ruthless, identifies mainly with darkness and is the god who suffers. According to myth, Dionysos defied death by resurrecting and braving the underworld to rescue his mother. Riddick, likewise, deliberately descends into Crematoria's subterranean hell to free a former friend. He also resists Lord Marshal's ability to tear souls from bodies.

Another redeeming aspect of *Chronicles* was the noble depiction of people maintaining their various religious faiths. "There will many theological references, even if I am agnostic," director Twohy said before the film premiered. "Religion has a very important role in the history of the mankind, and also in the way people are built." When faced with the Necromongers' Inquisition-type ultimatum, folks stand firm and reject diluting their respective faiths into a rather meaningless conglomerate. The Necromongers' appeal? Different religions *cause* perpetual conflict! Why not surrender to a peaceful way?

Though an outsider, though one who most likely couldn't care less about such matters, Riddick becomes a violent thorn in the Necromonger side. Like Frank Miller's Batman, he chooses to oppose the homogeneous order instead of sacrificing the rocks and rolls resulting from freedom.

Many fight scenes are confusingly edited, sometimes obscured by rapid flashes. At first I disliked this method, but I finally decided that this mimicked a comic-book format, simulating the selective blows and parries shown in sequential frames. The special effects satisfied me without overwhelming me. The early attack on Helios Prime is spectacularly frightening, and the Necromonger martial methods are quite weird, even Lynchian. Also, the set designs and art direction are splendidly sinister and rich, sharing the old world/new world mixture that seems to fit science fiction so well.

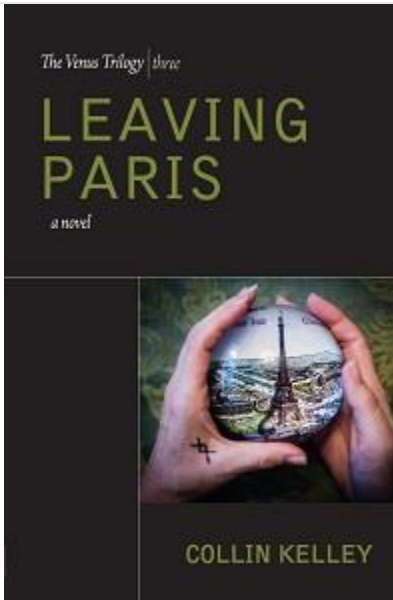
The actors? I've loved Vin Diesel since *Saving Private Ryan* and *Boiler Room*, and his repeated testimony about his humble beginnings and lifelong love for acting, along with his recorded enthusiasm for the Riddick character, impresses me. Colm Feore as Lord Marshal bothered me because I couldn't shake his Linoge role in Stephen King's underrated *Storm of the Century*. Thandie Newton, as Dame Vaako, is stately and sexy. Alexa Davalos is full of piss and vinegar, but her role is ultimately gratuitous. Another flimsy, unnecessary role is Judi Dench's Aereon the Elemental. How is Dench in the role? Well, she's...Judi Dench.

With delightful echoes of *Dune*, *The Road Warrior*, *Mad Max: Beyond Thunderdome*, *Star Wars*, *Star Trek*, *Macbeth*, *Julius Caesar* and *Conan the Barbarian*, *Chronicles* delivers a cool treat for sci-fi fans. Sure, some clunky scripting and boring cliches pop up, but the film surprisingly entertained me, even ringing that mythic bell I'm such a darn sucker for.

Want another tidbit to help you risk your ticket fare to see *The Chronicles of Riddick*? Consider a scene between Riddick and an antagonistic inmate at Crematoria. Challenged by the inmate, Riddick holds up a tin teacup and calmly says, "I can kill you with my teacup." The inmate mockingly asks, "What?" And Riddick says, "I said, I can kill you with my teacup."

Do you think Riddick can? Do you think he does?

David Herrle reviews LEAVING PARIS by Collin Kelley



published by [Sibling Rivalry Press](#), 2016
learn more about the Venus trilogy [here](#)

Tenacious and prolific as ever, Collin Kelley has successfully deviated from his usual poetry output and produced the final novel in his Venus trilogy: *Leaving Paris*, my favorite installment of the three. This time Collin's Francophilism is fever-pitched. His preference of the City of Lights to probably anywhere in the U.S.A. seems more overt than in the preceding books, and his disillusionment, particularly with the South, sticks out like a sore Eiffel Tower. Perhaps what lovable protagonist Martin Page says to colleague and friend Julie Lacombe during a Memphis stop on his U.S. book tour sums up this basic cynicism: "You're the most un-Southern Southerner I've ever met...America is always going to be a disappointment."

Over the course of the three Venus novels, Collin's plotting has become more and more cinematic, blending espionage/political intrigue with romantic drama, as well as some chutzpah-fueled magical realism. Really, literary genres compete somewhat in *Leaving Paris*, seeming to fluctuate from chapter to chapter at times. Normally this would be problematic, but Collin has managed to handle the mixture and the transitions pretty well. The overall cinematic quality of the Venus trilogy does show Collin's pop-cultural cache, most notably with big winks to Richard Linklater's *Before* film trilogy in parts dealing with the question of "What could have been?"

It's 2005, about 10 years after the original book, and the ever-acerbic (and menopausal) Diane Jacobs struggles with both marital dissolution and caretaking her deteriorating father over in America, while over in Paris grande dame Irene Laureux runs the Editions Resolvere publishing house along with heir-apparent Martin, whose plans for production expansion include e-books, which must be intended to be amusingly quaint to current-day readers. ("Who wants to read books on a tiny screen?" asks Euan McEvoy, one of Martin's seemingly countless ex-boyfriends. I joke, I joke.) Also, Martin's romantic relationship with Christian Kigali has strengthened, and Christian worries for his father, Olivier, who is a Muslim convert (making his son's name ironic) and a man with a serious secret life.

Looming behind such personal incidentals is the primary political situation in France, which involves tension between the right-wing Front National, spearheaded by the conniving and bitter Michel Arnaud, and unrest in Montfermeil, an immigrant-heavy banlieue. Arnaud seems resolved to rout out ethnic and religious undesirables at all costs, but his machinations face investigative threats and the Shakespearean inevitability of "the truth will

out.” Of course, Irene, Martin and Christian become embroiled in what explodes from this societal powder keg.

Unless I’m remembering the other books inaccurately, it seems that Collin has really intensified the psychic link between the ever-odd and likable Irene Laureux, who, incidentally, speaks the two funniest lines in the entire book: “Gay men love me. I can bend them to my will.” The mystical episodes also have become more...mystical. Besides Irene’s and Martin’s mutual visions and intimate extrasensory connection, there’s a sort of time travel involving “the Wood Between the Worlds” (a direct nod to C.S. Lewis’ *The Magician’s Nephew*), “the other side of the mirror,” Einsteinian “quantum entanglement.” To put it more plainly (ahem), it relates to a phenomenon sparked by the rising of planet Venus, during which the Australian Yolngu tribe perform a ceremony called Barnumbirr so that communication with deceased relatives can be achieved. As one character puts it, “time is constantly folding and unfolding, like a wave crashing in on itself.”

During an episode of this warping of time and space, former-lover Paul, like Dante’s Virgil, guides Martin through what seems to be 17th-century Versailles and delivers him to a high-school boyfriend named Peter Daris, who shows Martin that “different choices” could have kept them together, to the point of aging happily as a married couple with a daughter. Then, as if ending a domino fall from lover to lover, Martin encounters David McClaren, the sexually conflicted and highly reluctant former love interest of Martin’s back in *Conquering Venus*.

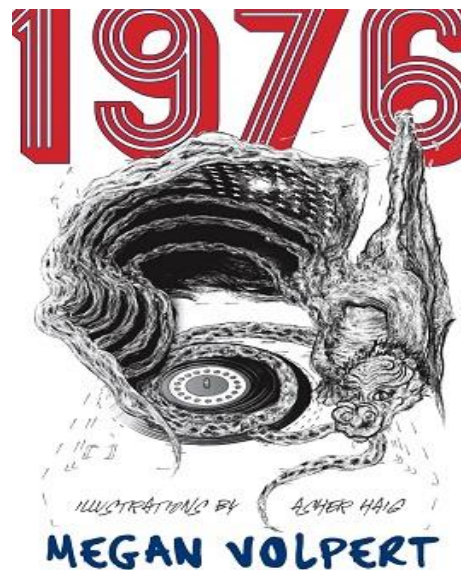
Nowadays David is in even deeper sexual denial and, worse, married to a woman and utterly exploding from repression. (A quite disturbing scene involving a homophobic “redneck,” an intoxicated David and David’s belt illustrates this perfectly.) An interactive vision of Martin and David as a happy couple shows “the way it was supposed to be,” to use David’s tempting words. Apparently, Martin has a real choice to make. What about his boyfriend Christian? Could alteration of his past course be much-needed salvation for tormented David? What is the true purpose of this magical in-between place (or non-place)?

Collin’s ability to construct three weighty novels on the foundation of the comparatively simpler ideas of *Conquering Venus* is impressive. He cared enough about his characters and their potential to carry them over several years and through a lot of extraordinary circumstances, to say the least. He excels at threading together different plotlines and maintaining readers’ care for them. Even dastardly Arnaud, whose role could understandably be snubbed as a ho-hum caricature of an ultra-conservative fanatic (not much unlike David’s disapproving father, the “right-wing freak” and, of course, a gun lover), is a welcome familiar as far as dramatic conflict and sociopolitical-intrigue stories’ need for relentless Inspector Javerts are concerned.

In plotting *Leaving Paris* Collin wasn’t even finished with Irene’s murdered husband, Jean-Louis, nor his fateful lover, Frederick Dubois, who was the object of pursuit in the second Venus book, *Remain in Light*. Fans of the Venus books will be pleased to find that not only does the mystery surrounding the death of Jean-Louis back in the late 1960s factor yet again, gaining more contextual importance, but something surprising is revealed about the true identity of “gangster” Andre Sarde. Even Julie Lacombe, who was mentioned at the beginning of this review, has more to her than meets the eye. Put it this way: *Leaving Paris* is the archenemy of loose ends.

(This thing is one of the zanier, more digressive and no-holds-barred exchanges I've ever conducted. Megan and I have this kind of fun every time we interview together.)

Interview with Megan Volpert, author of *1976* (Sibling Rivalry Press, 2016)



David: Superior to the irritable-bowel 1960s, the tacky 1980s and the truly barf-worthy 1990s, the 1970s is, to me, a culturally brilliant decade (if not just for *Columbo* and Pink Floyd), so I quite welcomed a book on the era. From *1976*'s prologue:

My bag is more about induction, analytics. You pour in the facts and the gumbo gets to simmering pretty quickly. So I'm not worried that these paragraphs will contain too many I-statements for a treatise on a time when I did not even exist. It can't be a retrospective. It's a retrospeculative.

In a way that can be taken as poking fun at your own egotism, Gore Vidal's 1876 novel is evoked: "You have to have real cojones to title your book with just the year, to harpoon your personal human flag into the still-moving beast of time and claim your interpretation of that freeze-frame as the ultimate word on the subject." Is this evocation self-deprecatory? What about that time before your time fascinates you? How does retrospeculative differ from restrospective?

Megan: Yes, the Vidal comparison is self-deprecatory on my head and straight deprecatory on his head. This whole book project actually began as a kind of joke. Books that are simply titled after the year that they are about tend to be huge hits in the marketplace. To care about that is, in the minds of many writers and readers, to cut against the current of authenticity that essayists are generally expected to maintain. But I've always had a fondness for Vidal's minute hypocrisies, the showiness and almost character-acting implicit in much of his writing voice. Plus, his books end up next to mine on shelves a lot, so there is an odd spatial connection that has always drawn me.

The time before my time doesn't necessarily fascinate me. I try to be forward-looking, but history interests me as far as the art of telling its story. When history is not written by the victors, it's written by the rebels. As a teenager, I was keen on some mix of Dave Barry and Howard Zinn. As a young adult, I got into Thompson and Wolfe and gonzo journalism generally, beginning to see my own present as the history of the future. I can't really go head-on with factual writing; that doesn't interest me as a writerly pursuit. As a reader, I invest tons of time in straightforward non-fiction, like I'm a big fan of Rick Perlstein. But as a writer I enjoy that more speculative territory, recording snapshots of my own life in the stream of time as if at some future point it will have mattered alongside bands and elections and other things that are more self-evidently powerful in their moment than I am. I insert myself – unmasked, full of ambition toward better futures. Like Vidal, I aim to hold it down mainly just by demonstrating I have the big balls to do so. Or more like Fran Lebowitz.

David: Your favorite movie is Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (the 1990s' *American Graffiti*), which is conveniently set in 1976. Though I prefer *SubUrbia*, his more psychoanalytical overnight saga (which elevates both Parker Posey's and Nicky Katt's roles), I think *Dazed* immortalizes an era as deftly as Cameron Crowe's *Almost Famous*, and I like how it favors

character over plot, as Linklater prefers. Your play-by-play annotation of the movie is quite remarkable, and I share your adulation of Parker Posey: “Kneel before the sound of every ultra-hot cheerleader queen you have ever met, whose first words are, ‘Wake up, bitch!’” Please spiel about the movie, Linklater, high-school – and the almighty Parker Posey.

Megan: I liked *SubUrbia*, but actually I don’t think of it as part of Linklater’s oeuvre because he didn’t write it; he directed it and it’s based on that play by Eric Bogosian. *School of Rock*, which I also loved, also seems categorically different from movies that Linklater wrote. Both those movies have great soundtracks though. There is so much Sonic Youth on the *SubUrbia* soundtrack. The “spiritual sequel” to *Dazed and Confused* came out a few month ago, and I’ve written about that [here](#).

My favorite Parker Posey movie is *House of Yes*. I’m working on an essay about that, for a book project with performance artist Craig Gingrich-Philbrook. The book is about why we have aborted certain ideas for shows over the years. When I was at LSU, I wanted to do a freaky black box adaptation of *House of Yes* and it didn’t pan out for many reasons. I actually dislike the scripts for many things Posey has been in, but I respect her overall commitment to mainly making independent films and when she nails it, she nails it. Nicky Katt hasn’t gotten as much traction, which I think is a shame. He’s always a great villain; there’s something in his face that says so and I admire anyone who gives off their own weird vibe so effortlessly.

David: Scorsese’s *Taxi Driver*, a film that’s emblematic of a nihilistic strain in 1970s cinema (countered by teleological *Star Wars*), also premiered in your pet year, and your observation that Travis Bickle “stands out by choice” is apt. Slavoj Zizek thinks Bickle, in [pulling the trigger on himself](#) literally and figuratively after the brothel massacre (a scene you highlight in the book), acts out the Lacanian mirror stage, signifying his basic realization that he also is part of the city’s scum. However, despite his hypocrisy and racism, isn’t Travis somewhat admirable in trying to “rescue” Iris? And isn’t he sympathetic in that he, like Shakespeare’s Lear, piteously can’t relate to females, and in his being a confused societal casualty exploited by the world’s Palatines? Are this film and the decade quintessentially linked? And have you seen this generation’s *Taxi Driver*: [Nightcrawler](#)?

Megan: Bonus point for Zizek reference. I instantly approved of my niece’s boyfriend based solely on the fact that he could talk to me about Zizek for ten minutes. Actually, I have a theory that Zizek is not one guy, but a collective of a dozen or so people all writing under the one pseudonym. He publishes on too many subjects too much too widely too quickly – and hey, for *me* to say that is really saying something because I’m a nightmare of proliferation according to anybody who ever went to grad school with me.

I haven’t seen *Nightcrawler*. My watch list is even more out of control than my listen list, and the listen list current has eighty-seven bullets on it. But your questions about my seeming lack of sympathy for Travis Bickle are pretty leading. You tipped me off with the scare quotes around “rescue.” I want to ask: what is rescue? To save someone from harm? To “save” is a tricky deliverable to evaluate; I know that as a high school teacher. I prefer something closer to *tikkun olam*, the idea that good deeds repair the world. Bickle himself does not appear to be invested in any notion of repair, even of the chauvinistic white knight variety. Also, I think it would do far more harm than good if we were to extend sympathy to everyone we might classify as “piteously can’t relate to females.” But *Taxi Driver* is part of the nihilistic strain in 1970s movies, as you say, and I have an endless sympathy for that as a human predicament.

David: Even Rush and their [2112](#) album get retrospeculated. Rush used to be my favorite band long ago – but *no* songs about sex? WTF? Their former Ayn Rand association being considered an unforgivable sin does bug me, and, though the uptight, prickly prig would snub me as a shoe-gazing decadent, I think Rand herself is often misestimated and the popular total denial of her worth as a philosophical writer sucks. (There *is* honey among the bees.) Regardless, not only was Neil Peart’s interest really Objectivism-lite, but a lot of Rush songs contradict Objectivist tenets. Despite your basic disdain for Rand, you give credit where you think it’s due in this passage about *2112*’s birth:

The band had released far too many concept tracks and nothing approaching commercial blockbuster viability, but they convinced [Mercury Records] to give them one last chance. Rather than deliver the mainstream album they had promised, Rush decided to double down on the things they loved and somehow it all gelled together perfectly in the nick of time. Thusly, 2112 was born through a basic unwillingness to follow the instructions of corporate overlords. It is the same feeling that threads throughout Ayn Rand’s work and in particular adheres closely to the plot of Anthem.

For me, Rush’s prime was from [Permanent Waves](#) to [Roll the Bones](#), so I don’t really like *2112*, but your analysis of the album is great. Why do you consider it to be “Rush’s greatest work?” And why do you think Peart is “a self-righteous jackass?”

Megan: *Roll the Bones* is a great album, and “Roll the Bones” is unquestionably more stable, more timeless philosophical

ground than any of the lyrics on *2112*. But *Roll the Bones* didn't come out in 1976, so you see my problem. If I'm going to make substantial meaning out of every major album in any given year, there's going to be a lot of bullshit transitions imparting a certain profundity to those subjects. I like the way *2112* hangs together as a concept and a complete story. I like that it's so clearly adapted from a short novel and that it so substantially rewrites the ending of that novel. I don't think it's "Rush's greatest work," but I sure did say that in the book. Now you're on to me – again. As well you already know, it's never safe to assume that my entire narration is reliable, even where it hangs its hat on the factual or actual. A fat historical analysis like *1976* requires a certain quantity of pompous lead-ins, of which the Rush pronouncement is indeed one. I'm like Odysseus; tie me up, because I'll say anything when the sirens are in striking distance.

David: Aside from being an iconic percussionist, Neil Peart is a motorcycle enthusiast and author of some thoughtful motorcycle travelogues, which provides me with this kickass segue to one of the book's lovely motorcycle passages, which rings like something out of Hunter S. Thompson's *Hell's Angels*:

The aerometry, the experience of air pressure when riding a motorcycle is the thing about the experience that makes it unlike any other thing you can do. We forget that we live constantly submerged in atoms, because most of those particles are invisible. When I'm driving a bike, those tiny pieces gather themselves into a wall, and I can tell the difference between forty and eighty by the amount of force that ghost substance applies to my breastplate.

Your exuberance for being "the lucky bastard sitting on that iron horse" (as you put it in *Only Ride*) is almost infectious enough to convince me to helmet up. Please tell us how you decided to break your youthful promise to your mother and hit the slab as a "flesh and steel android creature."

Megan: Thank you! Yes, I very much enjoy Peart's thoughts on motorcycles. He beats the pants off Robert Pirsig, though that's a low bar to set. When I was growing up in Chicago, public transportation was enough. In Baton Rouge, I just mooched rides everywhere for a couple of years. Once I settled in Atlanta, where public transport sucks and most people move more slowly than I want to, some form of wheels became a necessity. Picking a bike over a car was super easy; my early negative experiences with cars appear in *1976* also. Breaking the promise to my mother that I'd never drive a bike was just gravy. Hey, promises to one's parents are made to be broken. That's evolution. Like it is for Peart, the motorcycle has long been my best stab at religion.

David: ZZ Top gets great praise in *1976*. I love that those tres hombres can jam about "tube snakes" and "pearl necklaces," and then belt out something as tender as "Rough Boy." Those guys are certainly dyed-in-the-beard horndogs, "just cars and pussy," as you put it, and such straightforwardness is appreciated:

Whatever his personal political convictions, Billy Gibbons sticks to the script at a ZZ Top show. It's just cars and pussy...if it's any more serious than that, then shut the hell up. I went to fucking graduate school, you know, so I do comprehend completely how the personal is necessarily also the political, but I just do not believe that rock and roll must be personal. Sometimes the tighter you rock, the emptier you get, and with a full head like mine, sometimes that's a blessing.

Right on! I love Jello Biafra, The Clash, the Minutemen and Midnight Oil, but I prefer politics-free music, cringing with Johnny Ramone at Joey Ramone's politicism and cheering Kurt Cobain's stated hope "to come across more personal than political." What do you mean by "the personal is necessarily also the political?" (Isn't dictatorship the ultimate personal politics?) How did you come to love ZZ Top?

Megan: Johnny Ramone voted for Nixon and was a lifelong NRA supporter. Nirvana played many benefit concerts that supported fundraising and local ballot initiatives against rape and homophobia. Kurt Cobain's humanitarian politics were constantly on display, as well as his more ambivalent anti-corporate stance. "Cars and pussy" is a matter of distancing. I'm sure Billy Gibbons has a lot of deep thoughts on numerous subjects. But the key phrase from the passage you excerpt is really "sticks to the script." Political bands, a la Tom Morello, just for example, have one kind of script. Apolitical bands have a different script. This goes back to what I said about Gore Vidal earlier; there's a kind of acting involved, whether you want to keep to alleged lowly topics like hotrods or you want to talk about alleged elevated topics like an AIDS epidemic.

I don't remember how I came to love ZZ Top. I was born in 1981, so probably I first encountered them through MTV's music videos. Also, not to let your parenthetical question slip by: this is rhetorical sleight of hand accomplished by a small change in syntax. I don't know what the hell "personal politics" is. I guess if one person only cares about himself and that person is in charge, for example Donald Trump, that's a personal politics that is also a dictatorship. But I said, "the personal is necessarily the political," which simply means that the things I do every day have a wider impact on the world that I should perhaps take time to consider. For example, if as a teacher I decide I am bored with teaching subject-verb agreement every

year and I want to stop teaching it, then in a generation, there will be several hundred fewer people who achieve subject-verb agreement. There might be consequences if subject-verb agreement is no longer a thing, so I should think about how my selfish avoidance of the topic may have wider negative results.

David: Billy Gibbons was two-hand tapping on the guitar strings before Eddie Van Halen popularized it, which reminds me to ask: Do you dig Van Halen, ZZ Top's fellow cock-rockers? If so: Roth or Hagar? (I swing both ways.)

Megan: Under no circumstances would I put Van Halen in the same category as ZZ Top. The three guys that signed ZZ Top's first recording contract in 1970 are the same three guys who have toured continuously as ZZ Top for nearly forty years. I don't care whatsoever about Roth versus Hagar; the whole feud is ruinous and sets a bad example for younger bands. Eddie Van Halen is a very talented guitarist, but Billy Gibbons just smokes him. I prefer blues and slide, sorry. Gene Simmons of KISS actually produced Van Halen's demo in 1976, so I had the chance to talk about the band extensively, but I passed.

David: A fascinating passage in *1976* reveals an unflattering assessment of Marilyn Monroe:

The other day, I found myself embroiled in an argument with my father-in-law concerning the intellectual abilities of Marilyn Monroe. He said she was above average in the smarts department and I said she probably wasn't. At first, his main warrant for this absurd claim was that we should take a look at her husband because Arthur Miller wouldn't marry a dummy.

Though I'm a Garbolator rather than a Monroe-bot, I think both underestimation and overestimation of Marilyn are bad. Sure, Saul Bellow said she "conduct[ed] herself like a philosopher," but undermining terms such as "childlike sex goddess" (Gloria Steinem), "child-girl" (Norman Mailer), "beautiful child" (Capote) and even "baby whore" (Pauline Kael) have been dominant since her demise. Not that Marilyn was a deferred Atwood or Streep, but I trust Sarah Churchwell when she calls her "a greater Gatsby" and pierces the Dumb Blonde perception: "The biggest myth is that she was dumb. The second is that she was fragile. The third is that she couldn't act." Contrarily, you perceptively ask: "[I]f she was the total package and couldn't maintain, what chance do the rest of us schmucks have?" This happens to echo Steinem on Marilyn: "How dare she be just as vulnerable and unconfident as I felt?" Basically, Marilyn offends you for not taking advantage of her advantage:

So if I give her the benefit of the doubt, I'm trapped with a version of history where a woman who was empowered by both her body and her mind could've had all the success of which she dreamed so ambitiously, but instead allowed herself to be subjugated to the position of sex symbol until coping with the emptiness inside herself required so many drugs that she torched her own rise to stardom and died in the weakest way at the least opportune moment...I'd rather believe she was a little too dumb to handle it and she just lost control over her own trajectory. I don't want to believe that Marilyn Monroe was a picture of the consummate professional, full of intellect and common sense, who nevertheless cracked.

Might *both* "greater Gatsby" and Dumb Blonde be true? As for Marilyn's (questionable) suicide, Sexton and Plath also killed themselves, so were *they* "too dumb" to deal?

Megan: I really like Churchwell's metatextual projects, and though I ultimately didn't read most of her book on Marilyn Monroe, the way she went at the subject – the nature of apocrypha itself – was very inspirational to me when I was waist-deep in Warhol research. Monroe died long before I was born, so all I ever have to work with will be under or overestimation, even out of the mouths of people who did actually know her. But I enjoy the second-handedness of most information, the way it mutates over time. We're left with a kind of Pascal's wager, where I prefer to gamble that she was sort of dumb so that I don't live in fear of the implications for myself. Because I'm not dumb.

Nor do I think Plath or Sexton were dumb. I admire Sexton's work particularly. You might argue that they were rather too smart to deal, not too dumb. That's a perk of being a writer instead of an actor: you're writing your own history in your own words. There is a cornucopia of archival material for both writers to convey with constancy and consistency how they felt about life, whereas there is comparatively little material directly out of Monroe's own mouth, and she is not as articulate as those two writers. The chapter on Monroe doesn't argue that you'd simply have to be dumb to kill yourself. There are some suicides that I would condone, though they tend to be more in the line of euthanization for physical pain than solely for emotional suffering, for example Hunter Thompson's suicide.

David: In Making Tracks Debbie Harry said that she “always thought [she] was Marilyn Monroe’s kid.” Even dubbed the “punk Marilyn” (Mick Rock saw more Marilyn than punk), Debbie brought “the whole Hollywood/Marilyn sensibility to [rock],” according to Chris Stein (the Lindsay Buckingham to her Stevie Nicks), and she wanted to be “a mysterious figure that’ll never be able to be truly defined,” echoing Marilyn’s stated desire “to stay just in the fantasy of Everyman.” 1976 presents a fundamental contrast between Marilyn and Debbie: the latter is “in charge of herself” and “campily capitaliz[ing] on her own sex appeal to drive [Blondie’s] image into record sales,” has “actual brains” and excels at puckish duping of fawning males. Later in life Debbie stated the obvious: “Certainly, 50% of my success is based on my looks, maybe more, and that’s a bitter pill to swallow.” Well, *duh*. As Janet Radcliffe Richards wrote, “Beauty is not a matter of what you *are*, it is a matter of what you *look* like.” Might physical beauty be its own sort of genius, as Wilde said? Isn’t love of foxiness more than acumen understandable?

Megan: I’ve wanted to talk about Monroe and Harry side by side since the Warhol book, where I could not find a way to do it to my own satisfaction. So much of that chapter of 1976 is a kind of deleted scene from that other project. In fact, the surplus of thoughts and residual understandings I had during that Warhol project in some sense made 1976 easy pickings among all the other years I could have chosen. It’s no secret that I’m working on a book about Bruce Springsteen right now, and in many ways these books are three of a kind, though they are in no way a proper trilogy.

But you asked me about physical beauty. Warhol, having none himself, sought ceaselessly to collect and then reproduce the foxiness he found in others. Where 1976 openly discusses physical beauty, it’s often as an absence, for example in the chapter on Richard Avedon’s political portraits. I understand that many people think of Springsteen as super hot, but I’m not one of them, and most of those people would likely agree with me anyway that his unusual voice has an ugliness that is the real seat of his rise to celebrity. It’s easy to agree with Wilde because physical beauty on a natural level can be a straightforwardly evolutionary prospect. I also admire people working in fashion, photography, or other arts fields where one is expected to be gorgeous, for the upkeep that maintaining gorgeousness obviously requires – foxiness as a kind of acumen. It’s a skill set, and I do love drag queens. But then eating disorders, expensive cosmetic surgery, and so on. I get through life mainly by displaying acumen, but I’d be foolish and not very feminist to disapprove of Debbie Harry’s good looks or how she used them.

David: Finally we come to the genius Lester Bangs: the virtuoso of disgust, rock ‘n’ roll’s John Ruskin. 1976 brings up his controversial Blondie book, which Chris Stein called simultaneous “condemnation and affection” and you describe as an “angry misogynist rant.” Here’s your stab at Bangs’ underlying psychology:

It was supposed to be an authorized biography, but ended up like an ex-boyfriend’s crazed public service announcement about the bitch that dumped him...He was jilted to discover that [Debbie Harry] was her own boss, and in misconstruing the emotive capacities of her singing as earnest and serious, he was shamed by the sudden realization that she had a tricky sense of humor...He fell for the joke! She was therefore smarter than him and he was threatened.

But Bangs was too smart to fear smart women. Rather, he perceived a vampiric, blues-anemic Blondie, coldly embodied in the glib, irony-clad lead vocalist so unlike “flesh and blood” Patti Smith. This statement of yours really strikes me: “Debbie Harry is smiling at you, only for you to understand a moment later that she’s actually laughing at you.” Well, isn’t that akin to Roger Waters, hot in his hypocrite-socialist narcissism, spitting at his own fan? A superior mind deserves respect, but someone *laughing* at you? Fuck that. Besides, Bangs hated *everything* that was out at the time (Rod Stewart also got skewered) – and he was smarter than Debbie. Isn’t divergent but well-written criticism just fun to read? Shouldn’t celebrities’ hearts be harder than glass to endure sharp-penned Lesters? And doesn’t affection often verge on condemnation?

Megan: I love this question because, I swear to you, every person I’ve ever met who’s even heard of Lester Bangs instantly talks to me from the perspective of being a Bangs apologist. Look, I think he wrote many excellent essays (especially on Lou Reed and Patti Smith) and I even agree with some of his more marginal negative reviews. But he was also such an unthinking asshole who could be put on tilt pretty easily and often unproductively, and then there’s the drugs. Yes, divergent but well-written criticism is super fun to read. And yes, I believe that affection not only often but *always* verges on condemnation. If those two things are untrue, a lot of what I’ve published is going into the trash bin and even my hypocrisy has limits. There’s a chapter in 1976 where I expound on this belief concerning my opinion of Raymond Carver. These are cautionary tales to me personally; 1976 takes no position on whether Harry herself should have been sad, flattered or pissed about Bangs’ book. For most people, Lester Bangs just didn’t make it onto the reading list. I may be taking him down a peg in the book, but hey, he made the cut. Even Van Halen didn’t make the cut.

David: Debbie Harry once likened her persona to “a wizard’s screen,” and, thanks to Toto, we know to question such screens. In your work you wax ironic but seem to omit metaphysical/emotional blues, let alone existential terror, and, related

to Rush avoiding songs about sex, I don't think you've ever spied about, say, playing on your phrase about ZZ Top, motorcycles and pussy. Your libido-perking gush on Joan Jett is a whet that could've been wetter: "She was a fucking cherry bomb of kid. Hello, daddy! Tons of girls, perhaps all girls, feel these feels. We run around in the dark, human and wild, the same as boys." Call me perv, but I want to feel more of those feels. Do you consciously avoid sexual confessionals, or is Melville's Ishmael right that "wonderfullest things are ever the unmentionable?" Might a future book reveal a Pascalian shiver at indifferent outer space, spill some tears, skinnydip?

Megan: The book emits existential laughter, not terror. I am a human at peace with the human predicament. But I do think *1976* is very blues-based; it's a deliberate echo of the gonzo free-styling and the uppity hippie indignation of days of yore, regularly shot through with the anthemic power chords of youthful rebellion. Did you read the letter to my last surviving grandparent in there? Did you read the three pages devoted to Halston's cologne? The passage about peeing in public? I know you loved the motorcycling parts. That is all some very poignant shit, is it not? The sex is in there, but the explicit stuff you're after has long faded from my writing.

Here's an exclusive: I've never skinny dipped and I don't feel like I missed out on anything. It can't be better than doing seventy on a bike with a monsoon pelting your chest. Yes, I do occasionally spill tears (see that letter to my grandpa in the November chapter), though not as often as most people think I should. I cry more often at car commercials than I do at funerals, because one might be art and the other is just death. When I look at outer space, I don't see indifference; I see infinity and possibility. Look, I do consciously avoid what you're calling sexual confessionals, because I make a living as a public school teacher and there is a ridiculous amount of stuff that passes for "moral turpitude" these days. My readership includes some teenagers now, so I go easy on the drug references, too. Have you noticed me even cutting way back on the cursing? Although that is a major fucking bummer. I have also been in a monogamous marriage to my lovely wife, Mindy, for more than a decade – which is to say that our sex life or my fantasy life is no one's business anymore but Mindy's.

To return to a previous topic, the focal point of my foxiness is acumen. As a writer and a person, I have been out of the closet as a queer for nearly twenty years. My very existence as such is a public service and one that I am gleefully honored to provide. I don't think you're a perv; I just think you're being a particular type of man at this moment. More on this on your Joan Jett question immediately following...

David: Continuing with cherry bomb Joan Jett, here's quite a provocative line from the book: "Asking a girl to play guitar is a lot like asking a horse to talk." More gold:

To be a girl on the boys' stage, to be playing their instruments and making their noises, and to do it with the same technical proficiency and charisma with which they do it, is vulgar... Asking a girl to play guitar is a lot like asking a horse to talk... Maybe Planet of the Apes is a better metaphor, because the horse that could talk was still confined to his stable, whereas the girl who could play guitar was free, independent. Something can only be vulgar if it is also at least somewhat mesmerizing, and inside that feeling of enthrallment is a quick little drop-off into a pit of willing subjection. The damn dirty apes are running the show. Joan Jett is a king.

You also point out the dearth of recognized female guitar giants and cite Jett's inclusion on *Rolling Stone's* male-majority Top 100 Guitarists list. Why is guitar godhood so testicular? Is it just a fish/bicycle situation? Also, if you had your own rock band, what would be its name?

Megan: I'm super glad you quoted this whole passage and not just the line, because the line alone is likely going down in history as one of the most offensive things I'll ever write. Guitar godhood is not the only thing that's so testicular. Fish do not ride bicycles; there is no reason a woman can't play guitar as well as a man. A lot of life is male-majority best-of lists. In 1977, the Runaways released the *Live in Japan* album, and there's a track on there that I think about all the time: "I Wanna Be Where the Boys Are." The song was written for them by their manager, Kim Fowley, and his seventeen years younger girlfriend, Roni Lee. Lee also performed the song in another more short-lived Fowley band, Venus and the Razorblades. Joan Jett is one of the few women who are (now) where they boys are. She's an inspiration. I want to get into that space, coasting on enough borrowed privilege to pull the next one up. This is related to Zizek's musings on *Antigone*, right? Just knock on the door they told you to knock on, and claim what they tell you is yours if you claim it.

When I parrot some of the most antifeminist rhetoric about her, it's because I'm in search of strategies for defeating it. There's an irony embedded in there. In many places throughout *1976*, I'm doing an at times sickeningly convincing impression of what I called in the December chapter the language of the "standard American male." *1976* is really my effort to "communicate like a man." Hilarious, right? There have been mixed receptions to this concept. Some people are misreading the book and assuming I really do harbor the objectionable sentiments of the standard American male. Most people are reading it as a more nuanced type of butch dyke machismo and crediting me with largely the same ugly opinions

but from a somewhat more feminist place. That's alright by me. More people are figuring out the joke now; I hope I haven't spoiled it by explaining it. Maybe I will send a copy to Zizek, or the collective masquerading as Zizek, and ask for an essay examining to what extent *1976* constitutes a proper pastiche.

David: From the Ramones section of *1976*:

The Ramones did not evolve, ever. They personally grew old and gray and sick and cantankerous, but did not condone or experiment with adulthood in the image they presented to their rabid public... This continuous performance of the Ramones as a coadunation of grizzled teenage soul is so unimpeachable, so thoroughly curated, so perfectly glossy, that I even feel a little bad discussing it in the past tense.

There's a thread of sameness for sure, but their trademark lowbrow songs seem obligatory (brand rather than band) by, say, *Halfway to Sanity* or *Brain Drain*, and certainly by *Mondo Bizarro*, which includes the world-torn, affecting "Poison Heart." *Joey's* vocals certainly evolved over the years, and his deeper, denser voice seemed to coincide with increased lyrical gravity. Your thoughts?

Megan: Obligatory, brand before band, archaic... look at your word choice. You agree with me. The Ramones did not evolve, ever.

David: "If I'm being honest, Tom Petty saved my life." That's how you start your digressive spiel on Tom Petty and George Harrison (with particular focus on Petty's debut album and Harrison's *Thirty Three & 1/3*), which also appears as an essay (with slight differences) in *PopMatters*: "Tom Petty and George Harrison Were Two Sides of the Same Bicentennial Coin." You also discuss your gastrointestinal curse of ulcerative colitis (an affliction Marilyn Monroe probably had, very coincidentally). How do Tom, George and GI disease go together, and how was your life saved by that lead Heartbreaker?

Megan: Tom and George were the best of pals. I have many more words on both of them, but of course had to stay focused on the two albums they happen to have launched in '76. I've got more than one Tom Petty book proposal rejection under my belt, in fact. I think of Tom and George as my personal spirit guides. One of the greatest and longest challenges of my life will be living with ulcerative colitis. There are times when it causes me unimaginable physical pain – the GI tract has its own nervous system, so when I say the pain is unimaginable, I mean it quite literally. I have an exceedingly high pain threshold, and sometimes the pain still just topples me. It's completely incapacitating, even blinding (again, literally).

During prolonged bouts with this type of pain, I have sometimes considered suicide. My wife, bless her, has pulled me out of that. On the brief occasions where Mindy has not been able to snap me out of it, the music of Tom Petty has been my salvation. That's it, no fun story to tell, just a statement of faith. Something in that music speaks to me like no other music can, and for that I'm eternally grateful to him and the Heartbreakers. I suppose I could explain it more vividly or emotively, but I find it more valuable to detach from this type of suffering when I'm not directly experiencing it. Otherwise, as they say in Baton Rouge, it haunts you down.

David: *1976* is jam-packed with coincidental historical timelines and lightning-quick political analyses that star a vast cast of pols: George Wallace, Jerry Brown, Nixon, Kissinger, Gerald Ford, Carter. In one of my favorite passages, you write "Lord knows all roads through politics lead to a Kennedy," a riff on an earlier golden line: "Sometimes I get mad about the fact that all roads lead to a Kennedy." Fuck, if *that* ain't the truth! You also admirably admire the admirable Ron Kovic, perhaps America's most popular wounded warrior and author of *1976's Born on the Fourth of July*. Why/how have Kovic and his autobiography affected you? What do you think of Oliver Stone's film adaptation? In general, how the hell did you research and cohere all of the historical/political stuff in the book?

Megan: Before we talk about Kovic, I have to give credit where it is due as far as that thought on the Kennedys. That is my really obvious salute to Eileen Myles. My favorite book of hers will always be *Not Me*. It opens with "An American Poem," which is for me personally one of the greatest poems ever written. In it, she asserts that she is a Kennedy and then asks whether we shouldn't all be Kennedys. Just go read the poem. Every line of it feels attached to my personal missions in life, and I just wanted to put a little ghost of Eileen into this book. We have to propagate our species.

OK, Ron Kovic. I haven't seen the movie, except in pieces in the background in the living room as a kid. Some of my friends are librarians, and so for a long while now, based on the things they have told me, I've wanted to write the history of one copy of one book. I just like thinking about a book bouncing from hand to hand, house to house, human to human. There's

an element of chance, but an opportunity for unusual synchronicities, and we make meaning out of the life we're living regardless of how deliberately we're living it. Kovic's book is a memoir, so I figured if I could inject myself as I'd been doing with all the other artifacts of '76, to do a history of a copy of the book would add a third layer of complexity and also keep the book as a whole more grounded in the lives of regular citizens. So I specifically sought out a used library copy with the seller's assurance that the library stamps were still on the inside pocket. I had not ever read the book before, and I would say the process of researching the town history of this one copy's origin affected me more deeply than Kovic's own narrative. I've thought about phoning up those people who checked out this particular copy and asking what *they* felt about reading it. As for the totality of the book, my research strategy had grown pretty robust thanks to the work I did on the Warhol book. That was a similar matter of basically: gather a reading list, make a spreadsheet, break it into assignment chunks, read a few things, write something, read a few things, write something. I laid out a spreadsheet with one page for every month in 1976. Then I listed all the dates in each month down the left column and got deep into the internet for a day or two on each month. I filled every date of the entire year with artifacts that were color-coded according to their subject area, like music or the election. Then I tried to find patterns through which to thread a theme for each chapter. Once I selected all my artifacts, it was cut and dried. Soak up all the stuff for one month, then craft all the chunks in the chapter. I'd let it sit for a week, then go back to smooth the transitions between chunks and sprinkle in a healthy additional dose of adjectives or make other voice-related edits. It was written chronologically start to finish. Glad you think it coheres pretty nicely. Thanks.

David: Asher Haig did 1976's illustrations. His work reminds me slightly of stuff by painters Francis Bacon and Schiele, and even Joseph Schindelman (illustrator of Roald Dahl's Charlie books). Haig says that he pays special attention to image distribution, the relation of images to each other and to what's written in each chapter. He's also an expert in artificial intelligence and psychoanalysis. How did you two hook up for the collaboration? What do you think of his work? Do you have any thoughts on AI?

Megan: Asher is amazing; I feel like I have my own Ralph Steadman. This is such a good story, too. He and I were on rival debate teams in college. Among the debate nerds, he was a minor deity and I was like a little earthbound chaos demon, occasionally knocking down the best-laid plans of my betters. Mostly he wiped the floor with me, as I recall it, and though we were certainly acquaintances who often orbited each other at times of late-night shenanigans, I wouldn't say we were friends. We had a healthy competition and a mutual respect. At some point, each of us moved to Atlanta.

So Mindy and I are in line at our local liquor store one sunny weekend afternoon, and she was holding too much stuff. A very nice gentleman let her cut in front of him in the line so she could put down the bottles. I only glanced at him briefly in saying thank you, but as soon as I left the store, something clicked. I just felt sure it was Asher, though we hadn't seen each other in over a decade. So then Facebook, where I discovered that not only was it him, but he does illustration work as something in between a hobby and a job. He was working on illustrating all of Kafka's aphorisms, which reminded me of how much Asher and I always had in common in our ways of thinking. So then coffee, and I offered him the project, which he was psyched to do. We have a natural language between us, with a lot of comfortable silence. He does beautifully precise, often hilarious work. We've already batted around one or two ideas for future collaboration.

Do I have any thoughts on AI? Yeah, sure. I think a lot of intelligence is artificial and I think artifice is a good offensive maneuver.

Endorsement blurb examples

Mathias Freese's *I Truly Lament: Working through the Holocaust*

Freese says that "memory must metabolize [the Holocaust] endlessly," and his book certainly turns hell into harsh nourishment: keeps us alert, sharpens our nerves and outrage, forbids complacent sleep so the historical horror can't be glossed over as mere nightmare. The Holocaust wasn't a dream or even a madness. It was a lucid, non-anomalous act that is ever-present in rational Man. In the face of this fact Freese never pulls punches. Rather, his deft, brutal, and insightful words punch and punch until dreams' respite are no longer an option and insanity isn't an excuse.

Louis Daniel Brodsky's *At Shore's Border: Poems of Lake Nebagamon Volume Three*

Until the Nebagamon books, I'd envied no man. Now, I envy Brodsky, who is both Thor and Thoreau (passionate ruler and passive observer) of this ladylike lake, which I feel I know so well. This volume is the best of the trilogy. Contrary to the title, it's no border; it's a faithful plunge into the lake herself, into Brodsky's fathomless soul, into and out of time, into our own swimless selves.

Louis Daniel Brodsky's *The World Waiting to Be*

Whitman says that "a great poem is no finish...but rather a beginning," and Brodsky sings this electrically in his latest book. Words are fertilization and birth; they speak being and become flesh. Creativity springs from the abyss to forever avoid the void. Blues hum and euphoria booms in the mini-creator poet who agonizes or wonders in "that evanescent just before" and finally writes life into the "grave" of the empty page, shouts into its "white silence." Through words about words and metaphorized metaphors, *The World Waiting to Be* is both lamentation and love song to creative inspiration and the intersection of time and eternity in the scribbling act. Brodsky pep-talks his pen into tumescent potency "until all empty space/ls finally filled with its sprawling existence."

Ward Abel's *LITTLE TOWN gods*

Ward isn't a poet of today. He writes in a no-time where the present is already dust and the dust is alive with ancient presence. This lyrical and enviably understated but profound book is off the grid, overgrown with kudzu, loamy, Gautama-silent and patient, content – and amused – that it will be outlived and buried by a wordless wisdom and "the perfection of decay."