

# THE ALGONKIAN



*“My father and me. Ours was a clash of civilizations.  
He was ancient Kurdistan. I was 1980s L.A.”*

*(See page 4.)*



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**EDITOR:** *Andra Olenik*

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# MY FATHER, THE LINGUIST OF KURDISTAN

by Ariel Sabar

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In order to explore the Jewish community of Kurdish Iraq for My Father's Paradise, Ariel Sabar first had to come to terms with his own com-*



Ariel Sabar,  
author of  
My Father's Paradise

*plicated relationship to a Kurdish Jew—his own father. Here he gives a glimpse of his maiden journey to Iraq via London with his father.*

The first thing I heard was a gasp somewhere above me. I looked up, bleary from the transatlantic flight to London, and noticed two young couples staring down from the top of the long escalator that lifts riders from the Underground to the city's Mayfair district. They weren't looking at me, I saw now, but past me. I spun around and saw the reason: my father was knotted in a fetal position and tumbling noiselessly down the moving steps. I watched his body wedge between the guardrails and stop, his left cheek flush with the step's metal claw.

My thoughts pinballed as I raced toward him. Was he hurt? Was there a hospital nearby? Would we have to call off our trip to Iraq? He had complained before we left of a sore back and bad knees. I had brushed it aside as just his latest round of excuses. I had assured him that he would survive Iraq. But now, it seemed, he could

scarcely navigate London.

My father and I had been at war over my plan to travel to his hometown in Iraq. I had quit my job as a reporter at the *Baltimore Sun* to write my father's story—how a Jewish boy born to an illiterate mother in the mountains of Kurdish Iraq wound up at UCLA as a professor of Aramaic, his ancient mother tongue. But I wanted the book to be something more: a way to repair a relationship with a man I had always kept at arm's length.

Trying to grow up cool in 1980s Los Angeles, I wanted nothing to do with him. His hair, a froth of curls combed over to one side, embarrassed me as a kid, even though some of my friends compared it to Einstein's. His pastel-plaid JCPenney suits would have won more style points on the back nine than at the faculty club, except that he didn't play golf or any other sport. As for his books, they would never make *Oprah*.

**MY FATHER'S PARADISE**  
by Ariel Sabar  
ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-490-5  
Hardcover  
Publication: September 2008

His latest is a Neo-Aramaic–English dictionary, a life’s work devoted to a three-thousand-year-old language that almost no one speaks.

I was a son of suburban Los Angeles, a skateboarder in Bermuda shorts and sunglasses. He was a son of Zakho, Iraq, raised in a mud shack in an ancient enclave of Jewish peasants and peddlers.

I knew I had to see my father’s birthplace to understand him. But this was July 2005—war-torn Iraq—and my father came to see me as frighteningly detached from reality. The height of the insurgency, he pointed out, wasn’t necessarily the ideal time for a sentimental journey by two American Jews, one whose name sounded a good deal like Ariel Sharon, then the prime minister of Israel.

I was aware of the risks. But with my father’s advancing age, I worried that if we didn’t go that summer, we never would.

I knew my father saw Zakho as a paradise of religious tolerance, a fairyland where Muslims and Jews had coexisted in peace for hundreds of years. So what did we have to fear? I asked, playing to his nostalgia. He resisted. But I pressed, and after a few months, he broke down. If I came with him to a linguistics conference outside London, he said, we could fly from there to southeastern Turkey, then hire a taxi to the Iraqi border.

“I can’t let you go alone,” he said. “God forbid anything should happen to you.”

On the escalator that night in London, I kneeled beside my father’s crumpled body. His suitcase and an overstuffed nylon tote were flipping in place on the bottom steps.

His eyeglasses had skidded to the floor a few feet away. I dug my hands under his armpits, straining at first, but then the load lightened. He was helping me. There was no blood. He was conscious.

I felt something inside my chest unclench.

“I think I must have lost my balance,” he said, dabbing sweat from his temples.

As the escalator churned higher, I asked myself what I was doing dragging this elderly man halfway across the world, to the edge of a war zone. If he wanted to pull out now, I would have to honor his wishes.

But not for the first time, I had underestimated him.

A worried-looking station attendant who had apparently been alerted was waiting at the top of the escalator. He led us to a small office and poured my father a cup of water. “Sir, please have a drink,” he said. I saw it as an act of kindness, the sort the British are famous for.

But my father, already lost in faraway thoughts of Zakho, saw something else. “In Kurdish tradition,” he told me, “you give people water to take the fear away.”

As a boy, I blamed his Kurdishness—his odd looks and off-kilter English—for my struggle to belong in America. Now, in this most unlikely place, I was starting to see how my father’s roots anchored him. In a strange land, when the world felt like it was giving way beneath his feet, he turned to the folklore of the Jewish Kurds for courage.

As he drank, I could hear his breathing grow steady, then strong. ■

*“I was a son of suburban Los Angeles, a skateboarder in Bermuda shorts and sunglasses. He was a son of Zakho, Iraq, raised in a mud shack in an ancient enclave of Jewish peasants and peddlers.”*

—ARIEL SABAR



# A MEDICAL MYSTERY TOUR

by Kirsten Menger-Anderson

EDITOR'S NOTE: *In Dr. Olaf van Schuler's Brain, Kirsten Menger-Anderson tells the story of an eccentric family of doctors, beginning in 1664, when Dr. Olaf van Schuler arrives in New Amsterdam with two bags of medi-*



Kirsten Menger-Anderson,

author of

Doctor Olaf van  
Schuler's Brain



**O**n my desk, behind the tub of paper clips and the collection of coffee mugs I have yet to return to the kitchen, is a small ceramic bust of a woman's head. The skull is smooth and crisscrossed with a network of dark blue lines demarking the various regions of the brain—with labels like “Ideality,” “Acquisitiveness,” and “Region of the propensities common to man and the lower animals.” In addition to serving as a model for eager, young phrenologists anxious to divine personality from the shape of the head, my ceramic sculpture opens at the breastbone so that it can be used as an inkwell. It sits as a source of inspiration, not ink, turned just enough so that the unpainted eyes do not regard me as I'm writing.

The colorful history of medicine has intrigued me ever since I looked up “phrenology” in the dictionary and marveled that

*cal implements and a carefully guarded book of his own medicines. We asked Menger-Anderson how she came to be interested in some of the curious medical practices of her characters.*

reading human characteristics in the contours of the skull was once common belief. What other (now discredited) medical ideas have we held, I began to wonder. I pored through the works of Jan Bondeson, Carl Zimmer, and several other medical historians and science writers who tell captivating tales of practices that read like fiction: curative radium, lobotomy, therapies requiring ground millipede and mercury. These techniques and the contemporaneous debates about life, death, and the soul took hold of my imagination. Who were the people who believed that humans could birth rabbits? Or that routine bleeding could cure the common cold? I began to look at how doctors and the medical philosophies of previous generations impacted daily life.

While doctors of the eighteenth century argued whether a lack of respiration and pulse confirmed expiration, common

**DOCTOR OLAF VAN  
SCHULER'S BRAIN**  
by Kirsten Menger-Anderson  
**ISBN-13: 978-1-56512-561-2**  
Hardcover  
Publication: October 2008

people worried that they would be buried alive. Despite diagnostic tools like tobacco-smoke enemas, applications of electrical current, and careful examinations of the eye for softening and drying, patients amended wills to request delays before burial and demanded that their coffins be outfitted with bells and speaking trumpets. No one knew exactly when the soul left its mortal coil, and many agonized. The potentially dead lay on tables for days awaiting putrefaction, the only certain symptom of death.

Similar uncertainty surrounded the soul and its relationship to the body. Did the soul cause the pineal gland to quiver, as René Descartes believed? Or did it reside, as Galen proposed, in the liver and heart as well as the head, comprising a cocktail of spirits that caused disease, even madness, when out of balance? Philosophers struggled to link the spiritual to the physical, but their understanding of the human body was primitive. Galen's anatomy, which was accepted well into the seventeenth century, was based on studies of "lower" animals: the brain of a cow, the uterus of a dog, the kidneys of a pig. Doctors endeavored to cure ailing patients, but they did not even know the true shape of the organ that, perhaps, housed the troubled soul.

Today, we continue to discuss how to di-

agnose and define life and death. In court, lawyers argue for and against pulling feeding tubes from patients in persistent vegetative states. Healthy people worry that signing up as an organ donor will lead to premature termination. And the debate about the soul and its relationship to human tissue is fundamental to conflicts that arise over abortion and stem cell research. Advancements in science have not answered the questions doctors posed centuries ago, and though we can sequence genes and associate specific markers with disease, we have not defeated illness.

It is easy to look back and laugh at how foolish our beliefs seemed. How could we have argued that the brain is no more than phlegm? Or that frogs live in our stomachs? Or that someone could spontaneously combust? We are all limited by the sophistication of our tools and the generally accepted theories of our times. And though the doctors of our generation will do their best to cure us, their practices might horrify or amuse our great-grandchildren.

I'm grateful for the science of my times. And despite the (sometimes staggering) mistakes of our past, I will always have a deep respect for the people who contribute to the evolving field of medicine, dedicating their lives to saving others. ■

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*"Who were the people  
who believed that humans  
could birth rabbits? Or  
that routine bleeding could  
cure the common cold?"*

—KIRSTEN  
MENGER-ANDERSON

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# JESUS FOR PRESIDENT

by Roland Merullo



Roland Merullo,  
author of  
American Savior

EDITOR'S NOTE: *As a novelist, Roland Merullo likes to explore, and to prod, and to challenge his readers. Fortunately, he also likes to entertain them, as he certainly*

*does in his new novel, American Savior, where he explores the possibility of Jesus' return—just in time to run for president.*

**A**s someone who grew up in a very large family of very devout Catholics, I was steeped in religious practice, religious ideas, religious talk, biblical parables, sermons, sins, confession, Lenten fasts, crucifixes, baptisms, first communions, confirmations, the hope of heaven, and the fear of hell. Later in life I moved away from the rituals, obligations, and absolute certainties of the Catholic Church, but that upbringing left me with the habit—a good habit, I think, for a writer—of pondering the meaning of life, the puzzle of love, and suffering.

Since I tend to write about things that are close to the intellectual or emotional center of my life, I knew I wanted to write about religion, but it is such a loaded subject that I waited many years to do so. I did not want to come at the life and death issues through the lens of any one

belief system. I did not want to preach, or even to appear to be preaching. I did not want to sound maudlin or somber, because religion, to me, is about how we explain life to ourselves,

and though life has plenty of sorrow in it, I don't see the world as being painted only in dreary, somber colors. I have the odd habit of listening to all sorts of religious programs on the radio, mostly in my car on long, solitary drives. Some of these are interesting, even enlightening. Some of them are extraordinarily strange. Listening to these shows, I have realized that, almost without exception, they are completely lacking in humor. So I decided to write a few novels in a way that made readers laugh and, at the same time, moved them to consider the big questions.

In addition to religion, politics fascinates me. My father was a local councilman and later worked in the Massachusetts

**AMERICAN SAVIOR**  
by Roland Merullo  
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Hardcover  
Publication: August 2008

State House. One of my earliest memories is walking up to the top of our street with him, late on a Tuesday night in November, and watching election officials count ballots in the basement of my elementary school. Religious and political figures loomed large in my young life. They don't seem like giants anymore; still, I see how much power they wield, how much of our daily existence is influenced by politics and faith.

All this—my dual fascinations, the ideas I explored in *Golfing with God* and *Breakfast with Buddha*—brought me to *American Savior*. Long before Mike Huckabee was asked what he thought Jesus would do if he were running for president, I asked myself the same question. I thought I could have some fun with the idea of bringing Jesus back to life and having him make a semi-realistic run for the White House. Within the framework of that preposterous idea, I wanted to address very real questions about the American political system, the way we approach religion, and the intersection of faith and politics in twenty-first-century American elections.

I surrounded Jesus with an unlikely cadre of political neophytes—an ambitious reporter for a local TV station, his therapist girlfriend, his Down's syndrome brother, his Jewish father, his Catholic mother, his hard-drinking boss, and two very different sets of parents, whose children are miraculously saved from death. In choosing these characters I was trying to counter some stereotypes, but I was also working against the idea that the people who surrounded the biblical Jesus

were all wonderful, saintly souls. In most instances, I think, they were ordinary people who doubted him, abandoned him, betrayed him, argued with him, misunderstood him, and ultimately stumbled along through their confusion propelled by his charisma and their own good intentions.

I was also taking dead aim at certain present-day, so-called Christians who spew hatred and divisiveness in the name of a man who, it seems to me, was all about love and compassion.

The Jesus of this book is the Jesus of my imagination and I make no claim to eternal accuracy. But, in many ways, that is a main point: like all holy figures, in all religions, Jesus is larger than our limited conception of him. Alongside the characters who surround him in *American Savior*, I am trying to figure him out and always failing. He is, in this book at least, a kind of holy trickster. He holds up a mirror to our foibles and foolish certainties, plays with our assumptions, and upends our suppositions, arguing always for kindness and unity and always against exclusivity, harsh judgment, and hatred.

In the end, I hope *American Savior* does for readers what books like Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* and the works of Kurt Vonnegut and Thomas Pynchon have done. Those books entertain, amuse, and make us wonder about things from a different angle. Their superficial goofiness is lined with the silk of important inquiry. *American Savior* is, I hope, squarely in that tradition: a novel of irreverent reverence. ■

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*"The Jesus of this book is the Jesus of my imagination and I make no claim to eternal accuracy."*

—ROLAND MERULLO

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# A ROSE GROWS IN BROOKLYN

by Stephen Scanniello

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Over the course of fifteen years, self-taught gardener Stephen Scanniello created one of the world's most renowned rose gardens at the Brooklyn Botanic Garden. A Rose by Any*



Stephen Scanniello,

coauthor of

*A Rose by Any Name*



**M**adame Boll had a famous establishment where she specialized in the latest beauties from France." I paused to cup a full-blown bright pink flower as four dozen men and women gathered around me. "Of course," I went on, "this was New York City in the 1840s, so Madame would no doubt have heeded Victorian propriety when calling her gorgeous stock in trade by name. She might, for instance, present one of her favorites as 'Maiden's Blush'—and later murmur to an inquisitive gentleman that in the Old World (Madame was Swiss), Empress Josephine had referred to this same charmer as 'Cuisse de Nymphé Émue', French for 'thigh of an aroused nymph.'"

At that moment, as the neatly lettered label at the base of the three-foot plant beside me confirmed, I stood next to *Rosa*

Name explores the history, stories, myths, and etymology of dozens of roses from that garden. And here Scanniello tells us a bit about the folks who travel far and wide to visit the roses.

'Madame Boll', the Manhattan proprietor's namesake rosebush. It was Rose Day 1997, the seventieth annual ceremonial opening of the Brooklyn Botanic Gar-

den's Cranford Rose Garden, an event held on the first Wednesday of June at precisely two o'clock in the afternoon. This was the fourteenth Rose Day walking tour for BBG members that I had led as the Cranford's director, and as always, it was a welcome break from our strenuous horticultural routine during the peak season of bloom. Veterans of previous tours knew better than to expect another lecture about the finer points of pruning, spraying, deadheading, or watering. Instead, this excursion would be a chance to

drink up stories attached to the names of the roses: a mix of history, gossip, and romance that celebrated the plants as well as the personalities behind them. With more than 1,100 different

**A ROSE BY ANY NAME**

by Douglas Brenner and

Stephen Scanniello

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Hardcover

Publication: February 2009

rose names in the garden, I was never at a loss for juicy tales.

“Who’s new in the garden?” some Brooklyn Rose Day attendee invariably shouted at the start of a Cranford tour. “We’ve added ‘Gracie Allen,’” I answered one year, “and we’ve planted her where she belongs, beside ‘George Burns.’” I then explained that the nursery catalog debut of Burns’s yellow-and-red striped rose was timed to honor his one hundredth birthday and that the comedian himself selected the pink hybrid named after his late wife. “For you tennis fans,” I added, “we have ‘Chris Evert.’ She’s fol-

lowing in the tradition of athletic roses, along with Brooklyn’s own ‘Babe Ruth’ and Brazil’s ‘Pelé.’” I had to point out that the last of these only indirectly honored the soccer star: it actually commemorated a dog named Pelé whose black-and-white fur resembled the markings on a soccer ball.

Suddenly a ferocious yell erupted. “How dare you grow a rose called ‘Reichspräsident von Hindenburg’! It is because of him that Hitler took over Germany!” The crowd parted to reveal a red-faced man pointing his quavering finger at me. The gatecrasher (as he turned out to be) then announced to the group that he sneaked in every spring to destroy the offensive plastic plant tag. I inwardly sighed, knowing full well that rose names had long stirred righteous passions (like the World War I anti-Teutonism that caused patriotic U.S. nurseries to redub ‘Frau Karl Druschki’, a German rose, ‘White American Beauty’). Not missing a beat, I waved at a large yellow-flowered shrub

behind my listeners. “Did you know that the garden where this magnificent hybrid was first found now lies buried under Penn Station? That plant, ‘Harison’s Yellow’, was first grown in the 1830s by Mr. Harison, a reclusive Manhattan lawyer who spelled his last name with one *r*. You probably know it better by its nickname, the ‘Yellow Rose of Texas!’” Appreciative oohs and aahs over my diversionary non sequitur couldn’t muffle the crunch of plastic in the vicinity of ‘Reichspräsident von Hindenburg’.

Not everyone who turned up on Rose Days chose to follow my tour. Clearly, having your picture taken next to the ‘Queen Elizabeth’ rose or ‘Dolly Parton’ was almost as exciting as meeting its namesake celebrity in the flesh. Representatives of the Judy Garland fan club would stand vigil by their idol’s diminutive shrub. Devotees of another diva solemnly made their way to ‘Maria Callas’, a rose bred in France and christened the year of the American soprano’s farewell performance onstage. Even after being renamed ‘Miss All-American Beauty’ by a distributor convinced that operatic references don’t sell on our side of the Atlantic, this fragrant deep pink rose has retained the tragic magnetism of its original honoree. Just as pilgrims to the Parisian cemetery Père Lachaise leave offerings of marijuana joints and dollar bills on Jim Morrison’s grave, visitors to the Cranford, it is said, scatter the ashes of loved ones around ‘Maria Callas’. As far as I know, no one has tested the prima donna’s soil to verify this Brooklyn legend, but the rumor—like the fame of the rose—lives on. ■

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*“With more than 1,100 different rose names in the garden, I was never at a loss for juicy tales.”*

—STEPHEN SCANNIELLO

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# THERE WILL BE GREASE

by Greg Melville



Greg Melville,  
author of  
Greasy Rider



EDITOR'S NOTE: In *Greasy Rider*, Greg Melville and his buddy Iggy attempt the ultimate road challenge: to go cross-country in an old car fueled by recycled fryer oil. Their adventures on

*and off the road include visits with companies and people who are changing the way we think about energy. Getting from point A to point B, as Melville confesses, takes some creativity.*

Iggy and I both spotted it at the same time. It was too imposing to miss. We had arrived in the Grand Canyon National Park and parked by the tourist-filled general store.

"That's really something," Iggy said.

"A beaut," I added.

Iggy scurried to its edge and looked around to see if anyone was watching. The coast was clear.

"Go on," I said.

He stood on tiptoes and peered as far into its depths as possible. "Major disappointment," he declared.

"No! Say it ain't so." I took a look inside the black, one-hundred-gallon grease Dumpster behind the general store's snack bar.

It was the largest one we had ever seen, and we were no grease Dumpster virgins. During the previous twelve months, my old college buddy and I had taken

two cross-country trips from our homes in Vermont in my 1985 Mercedes diesel station wagon, which runs on waste fryer oil from restaurants. The benefit to such a car—besides the low

environmental impact and pleasant french fry scent from the exhaust pipe—is that the fuel is free. As in zero dollars per gallon. The downside is that Dumpster diving behind restaurants to find a decent cache and then approaching the owner or manager about taking it requires a lot more effort—and gumption—than pulling up to the neighborhood gas pump. A decent pair of rubber gloves comes in handy, too.

For this reason, we made grease gathering the first priority whenever we reached a new destination, even at the South Rim of the Grand Canyon on a clear September afternoon. We used three different strategies during our journeys, depend-

**GREASY RIDER**  
by Greg Melville  
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Trade Paper Original  
Publication: October 2008

ing upon the situation: beg, barter, or steal (I mean, liberate).

**Beg.** This is the strategy we used most. At the Grand Canyon, the Dumpster was nearly filled to the lid with a coffee-colored liquid that stank like two-day-old roadkill and had lumps of what appeared to be meat floating on the frothing surface. It was useless. But sometimes when restaurants empty their fryers, they leave the fresh waste oil sitting in the kitchen to cool before dumping it out back. So Iggy and I went inside to speak with the manager.

He was a tall man with an easygoing smile. I explained that we were driving around the country on a grease-powered car. He laughed. I said I was serious. He said he believed me, and then he laughed harder. Undeterred, I politely pleaded for any fresh waste grease that might be sitting in the kitchen.

“You’ll be helping two guys very far from home,” I said, “and helping the environment, too.”

“There’s not enough to get you to Vermont, but I can give you the six or seven gallons I’ve got here,” he replied.

“What kind of oil do you use?” I asked. The car could run on just about any pure vegetable oil, getting better than twenty miles to the gallon, but not lard or hydrogenated vegetable oil (like shortening). They congeal at too high a temperature and would clump in the fuel lines.

“Soybean,” he said. Perfect. Iggy and I grabbed a couple of white plastic five-gallon buckets from the back of the wagon. The stuff was magnificent—smooth, clear, and nearly odor free.

**Barter.** Even though the country is awash

in glorious artery-clogging fried foods—not to mention the grease-filled vats used to fry them—finding quality oil wasn’t always easy. Sometimes restaurants would turn us down flat, or their waste grease was of highly questionable quality, or they were simply out. It was

possible for us to drive through an entire state without success. So to ease the collection burden, we would occasionally contact other veggie oil drivers through grease-power Internet discussion boards, offering to trade a six-pack of beer for fuel as we passed through their

town. Turns out veggie oil drivers are suckers for beer.

**Liberate.** Twice Iggy and I stumbled onto Dumpsters loaded with high-quality grease before the restaurant had opened for the day. We were torn both times: Do we waste precious minutes by waiting for the manager to arrive? Do we liberate it? Or forget it altogether? My wife (who has never been in the trenches hunting for oil) says a more accurate word than *liberate* would be *steal*. But if a starving man takes a ham sandwich from a trash Dumpster, is he stealing? No. And isn’t waste grease simply trash? Iggy and I ultimately decided that not only is liberating *not* stealing, it’s an act of charity. We were removing a restaurant’s trash without taking any credit for it, like grease-powered good Samaritans.

Fortunately, when we were at the Grand Canyon snack bar, we weren’t presented with any moral dilemmas. The hunting was quick and easy, and there was even enough time for us to walk to the canyon’s edge and watch the sunset. Unlike the view inside the Dumpster, this one wasn’t a disappointment. ■

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*“If a starving man takes a ham sandwich from a trash Dumpster, is he stealing?”*

—GREG MELVILLE

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# THE LOST FRIEND

by Deborah Copaken Kogan



Deborah Copaken Kogan,  
author of  
*Between Here and April*



EDITOR'S NOTE: *Deborah Copaken Kogan's riveting first novel follows the path of Elizabeth Burns as she embarks on an investigation to understand how it*

*was that a childhood friend met her untimely death at the hands of her own mother. As Kogan explains, the impulse for the novel was not so far from real life.*

In early February 2003, I received a call from an editor at the *New York Times Magazine* asking if I would like to go to Baghdad. My livelihood depends on such work, but I hadn't covered a war, at least up close, for many years.

After mulling it over with my husband, who pleaded with me not to take the assignment, I went for a run in the park to try to sort out my thoughts. Some part of me wanted to take the assignment, safety and motherhood be damned. I rationalized that this was my authentic self resurfacing, the former adventurer reclaiming her mantle. But deep down I also realized that something must be amiss, internally, for me to be flirting, once again, with death. Risk-taking was one thing; deliberately putting oneself in harm's way, as the assignment required, was something else altogether.

Every war correspondent I've ever met has had a fascination

with suicide, whether tacitly acknowledged or subconsciously denied. This fascination, I would argue, is simply a magnification of the same polarities tugging at each of us: to be or not to be, the eternal question.

As I was running along the icy path that day, trying to reach a decision, I happened upon a dead rat. The crimson stain of her squashed innards was made more grotesque for having seeped into virginal snow. Now, normally I don't believe in signs, but when I saw that mangled rat, I froze, my heart beating at twice its normal speed. My reaction was out of all proportion to the sight, but still I ran past it as if I'd seen a ghost.

Which, in a way, I had. For at the very moment I saw the rat and thought about what would happen to my children if I went to Iraq and didn't come back, I suddenly recalled my childhood

**BETWEEN HERE AND APRIL**  
by Deborah Copaken Kogan  
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friend Connie, who one day simply vanished. Rumor had it that her mother had killed herself. And Connie. A car was involved. Toxic fumes. Maybe. I wasn't sure. I hadn't thought about her for thirty years. All I could remember were her blood-red shorts.

I went home spooked, and I googled Connie on my computer but came up empty-handed. I finally located my grade-school teacher, who confirmed the rumors. Yes, Connie's mother had committed suicide and taken her three children with her. The story had been swept under the rug, where Connie's father had wished it to stay.

But eventually such stories bubble up. Anything can trigger it: a crisis of conscience, a dead rat.

Perhaps the kind of professional risk I needed to take, I realized, was not to put myself in physical danger by going to war but rather to assume the mental onus of this story, of a mother whose internal battles between her domestic and independent selves raged so violently that both she and her children were destroyed by them. I also secretly hoped that by so doing—by delving into this woman's dark demons—I might be able to quiet my own.

I did the basic preliminary document research, assuming I'd write the story as nonfiction. An FOIA request turned up the police report, a week away from being shredded; microfilm offered three short articles, all buried deep within the Watergate-era *Washington Post*. These offered the facts of the tragedy—a vacuum hose had been

retrofitted to an exhaust pipe and fed through plastic sheeting; the car had been found, still running, in the woods—but not the truth of it. What I actually wanted to know about the crime—what happened in the car that night, what was going through her head—was unknowable. Not even Connie's father, whom I'd located but not contacted, would be able to help on that score, never mind that I was loathe to bother him.

The only way to tell my friend's story, I realized, was to fictionalize it. (And to steal, ruthlessly, from Dante.)

My older kids now joke about the time Mom nearly offed herself while writing the story of a mother who kills herself and her kids, which like any joke carries seeds of truth. This book took more out of me than any war I've ever covered, but unlike a war, it also gave back as good as it took. I still struggle to be the kind of mother who cooks french toast with plenty of cinnamon and vanilla tossed in before rushing to drop off kids and write prose and meet deadlines and make it to daycare pickup on time, but now on the days when I fail to do one or all of these things well, I don't see it as either a failure of character or a reason to throw in the towel. I see it as life. My life.

We even have a new baby now, conceived in the middle of writing the novel, and though I didn't plan on getting pregnant, sometimes I look at him and think he willed himself into being as a counterpoint, a burst of life to counteract the years spent thinking about its antipode. Had he been born a girl, we might have even named him Connie. ■

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*“What I actually wanted to know about the crime was unknowable.”*

—DEBORAH COPAKEN  
KOGAN

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# KNOWLEDGE IS POWER

by Jay Mathews

EDITOR'S NOTE: Washington Post education reporter Jay Mathews has been in search of inspirational educators for over twenty-five years. When he tracked



Jay Mathews,  
author of  
Work Hard, Be Nice



It took me a long time to find Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg, the most exciting people I have ever encountered in American public schools. My search began in 1982, when I was the *Washington Post's* West Coast correspondent and saw a story in the *Los Angeles Times* about impoverished Mexican American kids at Garfield High School getting high scores on the Advanced Placement calculus test. I tracked down the students' teacher, an overweight, balding Bolivian immigrant named Jaime Escalante, intending just to rip off the *Los Angeles Times* story. Instead, I found myself going back to Garfield frequently for the next several years, eventually writing a book about Escalante and the other teachers there who were helping hundreds of at risk students pass the toughest exams in American secondary education.

I loved Escalante, but it wasn't

down the two young teachers who started the KIPP middle school program, he had an "Aha" moment. He knew he had come upon the real thing.

his calling to change the world. He was fifty-eight when he became well-known and preferred to stay in his classroom, teaching math and talking to his kids about *ganas*, his favorite Spanish

word for the urge to succeed. After seeing the movie about him, *Stand and Deliver*, people decided he was a magic teacher, part of a Hollywood fairy tale that had no meaning for average teachers struggling with below-average, low-income students.

So I continued my search for evidence that other teachers could do what Escalante did if given the right training and leadership. I moved to New York, covered Wall Street during the day, wrote books about a couple more schools, resettled in Washington, D.C., and eventually became a full-time education reporter for the *Post*. But I still did not give up my search. In 2001 I read a story in a Georgia paper about

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by Jay Mathews  
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two young teachers, good friends, who had started middle schools in Houston and New York that had had surprising test results. The story said they were trying to expand. Their idea was called KIPP, for Knowledge Is Power Program. A KIPP school was opening in D.C.

I found the new charter school's principal, a woman named Susan Schaeffler, in an Anacostia church basement, screwing together new desks. She told me that the KIPP founders, Dave Levin and Mike Feinberg, had produced the highest test scores in their districts, in two very different inner-city neighborhoods. She showed me what she called the paycheck, the way each KIPP student earned points for hard work and being nice.

One item on the paycheck caught my attention. It said, "Ganas Points." "Do you know what *ganas* means?" Schaeffler asked.

Whoever Feinberg and Levin were I had to meet them. They had many of Escalante's gifts, his strong belief in the abilities of impoverished children, his sense of humor, his love of students, and his deep knowledge of what makes a good teacher. KIPP teachers were very carefully selected for energy and skill and encouraged to use any methods they liked—the more imaginative the better—as long as they engaged their students and raised levels of achievement. The KIPP day was long, more than nine hours, and daily homework could not be avoided. There was school on Saturday morning every other week, required summer school, plus lots of

physical activity and fun, including music, sports, and field trips.

Feinberg and Levin knew of Escalante's work, but in some important ways they were different from that great teacher. When I met them, they were barely in their thirties and had energy and ambition to burn. They understood American culture and the possibilities for changing it. Feinberg and Levin were willing to take enormous risks and confront the powerful inertia of public school systems to get what their students needed. Feinberg staked out the parked car of the Houston superintendent for several hours so he could persuade him to overturn a decision to kill KIPP. Levin snuck into parents meetings from which he'd been barred to recruit

more students. They often went too far, yelling at kids until they learned the power of a whisper, taking a television set away from a student's family until she did her homework, stuffing extra kids into hotel rooms on their weeklong field trips until they found a way to raise enough money—all the while convincing administrators they were nothing but annoying troublemakers.

But they did not quit, instead rallying many energetic educators to their cause. This year there are sixty-six KIPP schools in nineteen states and D.C. producing results never before seen with disadvantaged children. Many of their urban, low-income, minority kids are performing as well as white affluent kids and joining them in good colleges.

That's a lot of *ganas*. ■

*"KIPP teachers were very carefully selected for energy and skill and encouraged to use any methods they liked—the more imaginative the better—as long as they engaged their students and raised levels of achievement."*

—JAY MATHEWS

# THE TAPESTRY OF PLACE

by Jayne Pupek



Jayne Pupek,  
author of  
Tomato Girl

EDITOR'S NOTE: *No matter the subject, it is virtually impossible for a novelist to create a story that is not in some way informed by his or her own heritage. In Tomato Girl, first-time author Jayne Pupek has gone back to the*

*era in which she was a child, the 1960s, and the place in which she was raised, to create a moving fictional story of a young girl clinging to childhood while being forced to deal with adult emotions.*

**T**he voices I most often hear while writing belong to the people of rural Virginia. It's fair to say that I know no other place as intimately as I know the Commonwealth. Having lived there my entire life, it was inevitable that the landscapes and people of this region would find their way into my writing.

The world I knew as a girl growing up in the sixties was one divided between blacks and whites. Small towns often run behind the times, so I did not see the overt protests and struggles of the African American community that occurred in more populated areas. But I saw many examples of racism, even among my own kin. My grandmother spoke in matter-of-fact tones about watching crosses burn in yards. My grandfather teased me about the black doll I carried, referring to it as my "tar baby."

He made fun of the way blacks dressed and the way they talked and the food they ate. As children, we received mixed messages about the value of people based on their race: we were told

that God loves everyone the same regardless of skin color, and simultaneously, we were warned not to put coins into our mouths because someone "colored" may have touched them, making the money "dirty."

Growing up with a physical disability, I spent time in hospitals and rehabilitation centers where I had more contact with African Americans. Some of the nurses and aides caring for me were black, as were some of the children with whom I ate meals and played while waiting for therapy sessions or to see another doctor. In school, friendship mattered more than skin color as my own differences drew me to those who were also different. Years later, issues of

**TOMATO GIRL**  
by Jayne Pupek  
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race resurfaced as important ones as I became a mother by adopting three children of color.

As a girl, I was also fascinated by a mentally ill woman who lived near my grandparents. My cousins and I took walks by her house often, each of us speculating about what had caused her to go mad. At about the same time, one of my aunts began working as a psychiatric nurse. Her stories ranged from the eerie to the disturbing. I spent many hours wondering about these people. Their bizarre behavior intrigued and terrified me. I wanted to know what compelled the woman who spent hours seated before a mirror where she continuously braided her hair. The story of the woman who had placed her own baby in the oven sounded like the most horrible of fairy tales come true, and yet I wanted to hear every detail.

These stories not only triggered my interest in a career in mental health but also found their way into my writing. They influenced how I developed certain characters and also prompted me to explore the ways people view and respond to the mentally ill. In the South, and perhaps elsewhere, there remains a sense of mental illness as taboo, as something one

needs to conceal, even when doing so has devastating consequences. In addressing situations that might benefit from outside intervention, one often hears the phrase, "It's not my place." I wanted to explore the effects of failing to help.

Faulkner said that "to understand the world, you must first understand a place like Mississippi." Although I substitute Virginia for Mississippi, I tend to agree. As children, we think everyone lives as we do and sees the world as we do. Then we

meet others whose experiences do not mirror our own. In college, I met people whose family histories didn't include racism and whose elders weren't superstitious. I met people who had never used an outhouse and didn't butcher hogs on Thanksgiving. People who didn't call dragonflies "snakedoctors" and whose fathers didn't compare useless things to "teats on a boar hog." I envied my Northern and urban counterparts for seeming more open-minded and sophisticated. Older now, I've learned to value the complex beauty of blue-collar lives and ways. I've grown to appreciate the unique tapestry of the place that is home to me, and subsequently, home to my characters. ■

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*"In college, I met people whose family histories didn't include racism and whose elders weren't superstitious."*

—JAYNE PUPEK

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# BEHIND THE MUSIC

by Barbara Hall

EDITOR'S NOTE: *The music teacher in Barbara Hall's debut novel teaches others what she could never truly master herself. When she encounters one particularly talented little girl, Hallie, her highest hopes for success ap-*



Barbara Hall,  
author of  
The Music Teacher

It started like this: I wanted to learn how to play the violin. But wait, it started far earlier.

I was in second grade and some kind of music person came to our school. We gathered in the lunch room and took a quiz. The quiz went like this: someone played a note, and we determined whether the subsequent note played was higher or lower on the musical scale. I got a perfect score. Why did I get a perfect score? I don't claim to know, but when I was about kindergarten age, I started fooling around with the badly tuned, just-for-looks upright piano in our den. I managed to teach myself how to play hymns, and one day my mother took note.

When my father got home from work that day, she dragged him into the den and told me to repeat what I'd just done, so I played the hymn as I heard it

*pear to be at her fingertips—until she makes a terrible mistake. Like Hallie, Hall herself came to music at a young age, and like the music teacher, it never seemed to release its hold on her.*

by ear. That was the end, at the time, of my musical career.

Then the music person at my school recognized that I had a talent. It wasn't so much a talent as an ear. He wrote to my mother to say that I had an ability to hear the musical scale and that potential should be mined. My mother's response was this: "We can't afford it." I told her that it was part of school, it wouldn't cost anything. She said, "You'll have to pay for your instrument and I'll have to drive to lessons and I'm not willing to do that." So again it died. Temporarily.

To be fair to my mother, a decade later, when I mentioned I wanted to learn to play the guitar, she bought a new one for my fifteenth birthday. She hadn't spent a lot of money because she knew I might abandon it. But she agreed to pay for and drive to a year's worth of lessons. One

**THE MUSIC TEACHER**  
by Barbara Hall  
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has to wonder what she was thinking. The odds were against me sticking with this instrument. The odds were overwhelmingly against me ever making a living at it. What was she investing in? It couldn't have been a secret love of music. We didn't even have a record player in my house. It couldn't have been an investment in fame. There was no fame in my town. I have to believe it was a devotion to some abandoned part of herself. Perhaps she saw herself as an artist at some point.

I stuck with the guitar. I took lessons but they were secondary. I hated hearing about nomenclature and math (I always hated math) and I hid the fact that I could learn music by hearing it. I didn't know the names of the chords. I could hear how they sounded next to and against each other and I put them together. But it didn't matter how much I progressed because I suffered from a debilitating shyness of playing around other people. It was just me and the guitar and no one knew about our relationship.

When I moved to Los Angeles after college, I signed up to study with a bluegrass teacher. We worked well together and covered so much ground that at one point he said to me, "I can't teach you anything else. You have to play in a band." I put the guitar down that day and didn't pick it up for six years. Still shy or unwilling, depending on how you look at it. The difference is slight enough to invoke theological debates.

A lot of stuff happened. I got married, had a kid, divorced. I went on to create and produce TV shows. But on one of those TV shows, I made friends with some musicians who were answering phones and running errands, which is what musicians often do in Los Angeles. I stepped into a departure where I stopped caring what anybody thought. I started following music as if it were Timmy and I were Lassie. I walked out of my father's shrug and into the kingdom of heaven.

Shortly after, I formed my band, the Enablers. I decided to take violin lessons because I wanted a fiddler in the band and I had developed all kinds of musical pride. The instrument itself wasn't what brought me down. I wasn't humbled by it—in fact, I was quite good at it. But I became distracted by something more interesting. My violin teacher, a wiry, prematurely gray-haired lady, didn't want to teach me. It made her mad that I wanted to learn. I needed to know why. Eventually I figured out that she didn't want to teach anyone. It wasn't her calling. Or so she thought. Looking back and thinking of the violin teacher I found after her, she was right. Only a person who had abandoned her calling could be so angry.

*The Music Teacher* is about the loneliness of answering a call, pitted against the misery of not doing so. These are our choices. Whoever we are. I never really learned to play the violin. But I did find a novel. ■

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*"I started following music as if it were Timmy and I were Lassie."*

—BARBARA HALL

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# THE DOUBLE INDEMNITY OF THE SOUTH

by ZZ Packer

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Guest editor for this year's New Stories from the South is the acclaimed writer ZZ Packer, whose story choices reflect an often rough yet still seductive region. As she argues in this*



ZZ Packer,  
guest editor,

New Stories from the  
South, 2008



Though I'm not a "Southerner," I am a "southerner." I don't pride myself particularly upon being any more hospitable than those hailing north of the Mason-Dixon, nor do I defend foodways one step away from roadkill masquerading as Southern delicacies (headcheese, chitlins, hog maws, and squirrel brains—if truly Southern—put my intestinal tract somewhere north of Rhode Island). I don't believe that one should stay in the same county as one's grandfather *just because*, nor can I get on board with pronouncing "library" as "lie-berry" or "ask" as "ax"—though I am adamant about the pronunciation of my Kentucky hometown, always and forever "Lou-a-vull."

White Southerners, we are told, ooze with hospitality and charm—that is, when they're not tying up unsuspecting passersby, *Deliverance*-style. Born in a land of contrasts, the men

*excerpt from her introduction, the South has always straddled a complicated past; sometimes the contradictory images of what constitutes a Southerner make the best stories.*

are either Cavaliers, brought up on a diet of buttermilk biscuits, bourbon, and cigars, or the red-neck yeomen whose enormous wads of snuff are rivaled only by the enormity of their goiters. They are always going about,

these Southerners, quoting either Faulkner or Thomas Wolfe or Aeschylus or Jeff Foxworthy. The females of the species are hardly better—belles and well-bred spinsters alike concerned largely with lunching and pastel foofaraw. Keeping their husbands aswim in seersucker in June, they spend their weekdays mixing juleps, sipping on them beneath their cantilevered Kentucky Derby hats. And if they're poor, the toothless, bra-less wonders whoomp it up at NASCAR rallies passing around Wonder Bread and Miracle Whip sandwiches.

Black Southerners, if we're to believe Faulkner's Quentin Compson, "laugh at things that aren't funny and cry at

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SOUTH, 2008**

**ZZ Packer, guest editor**  
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things that aren't sad." They are sage subliterate who, if not Mammys or Uncle Toms or Amoses or Andys, are most certainly minstrels of another stripe: the lazy—albeit colorful—buffoon, the saucy Negress, the barbarized insurrectionist. When they accompany whites (see above paragraph), they are Magic Negroes, imminently risible, ready to help or aid someone else's story from slipping into irrelevance without good old-fashioned grounding in common sense. They are not intelligent so much as wise, they are not hard-working so much as naturals, they are not eloquent so much as articulate. They have no agency, these black Southerners. Except, of course, when they commit crimes.

If being a southerner and not a Southerner means one is not quite so self-assured, it also guarantees some reflection, some twisted-arm compromise, a kind of double indemnity of the soul peculiar to thinking folk. One cannot inhale the gothic miasma of Flannery O'Connor's *Wise Blood* without being forced to reckon with one's own sense of mortality and failings, as one cannot read *The Sound and the Fury* without witnessing those cardboard cutouts *nostalgia* and *sentimentality* handily slain by bitter, awful truths.

It is telling that a culture alternately cheered and derided for its unapologetic obsession with the past should find its most perfect expression in literature, a medium destined to record our secret past in greater detail than any of our histories. Both Southerners and southerners do not tell so much as retell, they do not create so much as cajole, and they do not offer

resolutions so much as revelations. Their very disinclination to adapt is borne out of being forced to do it, time and time again, as no era of Southern history has dovetailed peaceably into the next, leaving its citizens relaxed and refreshed, ready to inaugurate new relations with a smile. It has always been bloody and embattled: colonization, slave revolts, the Civil War, Reconstruction, Jim Crow, the fight for civil rights, integration, the heady commercialism of the "New South." It has been a zig-zag course, a jolting ride with nary a denouement.

In selecting the stories for this collection, I wasn't surprised that I found myself drawn to

the stories by southerners over Southerners. The Southerner has pride in the past glories of the South while the southerner stakes his pride in the small daily miracles of the South—the progress that is made each day of our lives, often absent any viable examples. But I was surprised that I found myself attracted to stories that managed to straddle the southern-Southern divide, stories that paradoxically evoked the mythic South as well as the somewhat bastard South. I often felt as though I was not editing *New Stories from the South* so much as *Stories from the New South*, stories that seem to ask "How do I get out of here?" or "How can I ever piece my life back together?" These were stories of struggle, tales of those who wrestled with demons and often came out losing, but the authors, the characters, refused to whitewash said demons into angels, or to prettify (or for that matter, uglify) their trailer-parks,

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"Every other region can jam its fingers in its ears and shake its head and tunelessly chant 'Not in My Backyard,' but not so the South. The South is the backyard."

—ZZ PACKER

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greasy spoons, halfway houses, or meth labs in order to make us readers feel some sense of familiarity with the South we're apt to find simulcasted to us to us from twinkling electrostatic of our TVs.

Living in New Orleans post-Katrina, I saw the wreckage of a very real Ninth Ward displacing the cried-over ruins of an Old South that never was. Similarly, a month-long stay in Wilmington, North Carolina, put me squarely in the same town that decimated its black population in 1898, then proceeded as genteelly and graciously as if nothing of consequence had happened. I chose stories that refused to gloss over such inequities or pretend such travesties never occurred. I wanted—needed—stories that would remind me that stories are all about problems—that literature is the halfway house for conflict, and that there wasn't a fiction in-

vented that did not question myth or meaning. Whatever our Southernness amounts to, these stories seemed to say, it doesn't amount to much if our talent for dressing a bird, loving our neighbors, or serving life with a spoonful of sugar can't square with our utter superiority at telling tales of woe and our penchant for wrong choices.

Every other region can jam its fingers in its ears and and shake its head and tunelessly chant "Not in My Backyard," but not so the South. The South *is* the backyard. And as backward as we've been portrayed—or as backward as we've sometimes portrayed ourselves, slipping behind a curtain of innocent and naive agrarianism, rural somnolence, and sleepy everlasting vowels—the truth is that every awful and beautiful thing that has happened in America happened in the South first. ■

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