

THE ALGONKIAN



Hodding Carter swims his way to a younger self.
(See page 14.)

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IN SEARCH OF UNDERSTANDING

by Ellen Gilchrist

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Some events impact our lives in ways that alter our view of ourselves and the world around us. For the characters in Ellen Gilchrist's new novel, the aftermath of 9/11 has been like an ever-present cry that continues*



Ellen Gilchrist,
author of
A Dangerous Age

Early one morning in September 2001, I drove out to my local gym in Fayetteville, Arkansas, to exercise. I parked in my usual space and ran in the door and up the stairs to see if a treadmill would be free at this popular time of the day. Rather than exercising, everyone in the gym was standing around watching a line of television sets. As I joined them, the second plane flew into the World Trade Center.

A young woman who was my Pilates instructor was surrounded by the other trainers. Her husband, along with several colleagues, was at that moment in the World Trade Center for an early morning business meeting. He had called her that morning and told her about the towers, how beautiful they were, how impressive, and how excited he was about the business he was conducting. Now, we all

to echo all around them, sometimes a close scream, sometimes a distant whisper. As the author explains here, the novel has been for her an effort to decipher that echo, and in the process to find understanding.

watched as this young woman's long vigil began. We watched as the world we knew came apart on the line of television sets, and we watched a wonderful young woman we loved wait to see if it would also be the end of her personal happiness.

This particular story had a happy ending. Her husband was able to escape the building and make his way home during the next two days. He and a colleague had done daring things to achieve their safety, and their journey home culminated with a seventy-five-year-old physician, the man's father, driving from Fayetteville to Atlanta to meet them. In the midst of our dismay over the events in New York and Washington and Pennsylvania, we took comfort in the courage and bravery of the folks from Fayetteville.

This story haunted me as the months rolled on. I became obsessed with news about Al-

A DANGEROUS AGE
by Ellen Gilchrist
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Queda and about weaponized smallpox and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I watched news programs by the hour and read hundreds of newspaper and magazine articles. I was torn between sets of ideas and felt that there was information I needed that I did not have. Unlike during most crises in the United States, I did not call senators and representatives and the White House and tell them what to do. I didn't know what to suggest. I

watched as this young woman's long vigil began. We watched as the world we knew came apart on the line of television sets, and we watched a wonderful young woman we loved wait to see if it would also be the end of her personal happiness.

I kept wondering how reporters and editors must have felt as they strove to report the unclear and incomplete news from around the world concerning the threats against the United States. How did they keep their emotions from taking over?

During this time I began to write a series of stories about a group of women cousins

in my fictional Hand-Manning family from North Carolina. These cousins were all nieces of an earlier character, Anna Hand.

So the novel began to weave itself in my mind. I believe that poetry and literature help us understand our lives. As I have grown older, I have found that writing fiction helps me understand the world in which I live now, especially the quiet, lonely place where each human has to make his peace with the powerful forces that play upon our lives, and over which we have very little real control.

Olivia, Jessie, Tallulah, Winifred, Susan, and Louise are the cousins who live in this novel. Perhaps their stories are all a drama I invented to help me believe that good can come of evil, that life can triumph over death, that the seas will calm and the vessel will right itself. It has meant a great deal to me to write this book, and my hope is that readers will come away from it with a new understanding of how our lives have been forever changed. ■

*"As I have grown older,
I have found that writing
fiction helps me understand
the world in which I
live now."*

—ELLEN GILCHRIST

A WORLD STRANGE, MARVELOUS, AND TERRIBLE

by Hillary Jordan

EDITOR'S NOTE: When Barbara Kingsolver chose *Mudbound* as the winner of the prestigious Bellwether Prize, she was looking to honor a manuscript that spoke to issues of social justice. But what



Hillary Jordan,
author of
Mudbound

grew up on stories about the farm.

We got our water from a pump in the front yard. In the wintertime the pump would freeze, and Daddy would thaw it by wrapping it in rags soaked in kerosene and lighting them on fire. . . .

"It had a river running through it, and whenever it flooded we'd be stranded. That's how the farm got the name Mudbound. . . ."

My mother, aunt, and grandmother spoke of it often, laughing and shaking their heads by turns, depending on whether the story in question was funny or horrifying. Often they were both, as southern stories tend to be.

"One spring our sow birthed her litter too early, and I found the poor piglets lying frozen in a ditch. I put them on a baking sheet and popped them into a warm oven. And do you know, four of those six piglets survived? At least, until they were old enough to be turned into bacon. . . ."

was foremost in Hillary Jordan's mind as she was writing was to come to terms not just with a moment in Southern history but with her own family history as well.

These stories were a peephole into a strange and marvelous world full of contradictions, and terrible beauty. They revealed things about my family, especially about my grandmother, who was the heroine of most of them for the simple reason that whenever calamity struck, my grandfather was invariably elsewhere.

My grandmother was not a country girl. She was forced to become one in 1946 when my grandfather decided—without bothering to consult her beforehand—to move the family from Dallas to a farm in Podunk, Arkansas. Like Henry in *Mudbound*, he wanted to be near his recently widowed sister, whose husband had committed suicide. And, too, my grandfather yearned to be a farmer. He was a native Mississippian; reverence for the land was bred into his bones.

My grandmother had never seen the property, and she arrived to discover that she would be rearing her two small children in

MUDBOUND
by Hillary Jordan
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a shotgun shack fifteen miles from town, with no electricity, telephone, or running water. But Nana was a woman of her time, obedient to her husband's wishes, and so she made the best of it. My grandfather's brother came to live with them, followed by her cantankerous father-in-law, and she cooked and cleaned uncomplainingly for all of them. Like Laura in the novel, Nana was a singer, and the songs she sang were indicative of her mood. "Rock of Ages" was a frequent refrain on the farm, and—when things got really bad—"Were You There When They Crucified My Lord."

To my mother and aunt, their year on the farm was a grand adventure, and indeed, that was how all their stories portrayed it. It was not until I was in my

thirties that I realized what an ordeal that year must have been, and that, in fact, these were stories of survival.

I began the book (without knowing I was doing any such thing) in graduate school. I had an assignment to write in the voice of a family member, and I decided to write about the farm from Nana's point of view. But what came out was not a merry adventure story, but something darker and more complex. What came out was, "When I think of the farm, I think of mud," which was not my grandmother's voice at all. That realization liberated me to write fiction rather than fact.

As the story grew, I began to want other perspectives. My grandparents had black sharecroppers on the farm and a black maid who helped with the housework. They were usually in the background of the stories, where Afri-

can Americans in the Jim Crow South were thought to belong. My grandparents were products of that time and place; their racism was deeply ingrained. They said "colored," "nigra," and occasionally, "nigger." And yet, they were good people, kind and bighearted. Nana was a devout Christian. That contradiction—the entrenched bigotry of otherwise good people—is a key underpinning of *Mudbound*.

I decided to move the black characters to the foreground, to let them answer the ugliness of Jim Crow in their own voices. I was, frankly, a little afraid. I knew I would be excoriated (and rightly so) if I got it wrong. A number of well-meaning colleagues said things to me like, "You know, even Faulkner didn't write about black people in the first person." But ultimately, I decided that letting my African American characters speak was the only way to give them a small measure of justice.

My grandparents are long dead, as are the sharecroppers who worked for them. I often wonder what they all would have thought of the story I made from their stories. Certainly Nana would have been horrified by the idea of committing adultery with her brother-in-law; Pappy, who by all accounts *was* a bigoted jerk, would not have appreciated being killed off for it; and my black characters would undoubtedly have wanted to set me straight about a few things. But my hope is that all of them would be proud that I was so captivated by their stories that I had to retell them, and pleased that I've painted a lasting, if fictional, picture of their world. ■

"I loved listening to these stories. They were a peephole into a strange and marvelous world, a world full of contradictions, of terrible beauty."

—HILLARY JORDAN

THE WHISTLE-BLOWER AND THE JOURNALIST

by Alison Bass

Editor's Note: *In Side Effects*, award-winning journalist Alison Bass follows the landmark case brought against the pharmaceutical giant GlaxoSmithKline, maker of the antidepressant Paxil, for con-



Alison Bass,
author of
Side Effects

sumer fraud. Here she explains how her interest in the story began more than ten years ago, with an anonymous tip that she almost didn't pursue.

for research that wasn't being done. Howard said she also suspected that Keller's department was misrepresenting data for two drug trials. I remember typing quick notes, phone cradled to ear, thinking this can't be for real. Why would the employee of an Ivy League institution be telling me this?

Donna and I agreed to meet the next day at a Burger King on Route 24, halfway between our respective locations in Providence and Boston. She would be wearing a navy skirt, she said, and had long brown hair. In turn, I told her I would be wearing a red winter coat. In my time as a reporter, I've ventured into riot-torn ghettos, slipped into locked mental institutions to investigate allegations of abuse, and met sources in smoke-filled back rooms of dingy bars.

I've even gone undercover as a waitress at a restaurant in Miami to investigate possible labor violations. So meeting a

The first time I spoke to Donna Howard my guard was up. Who was this anonymous caller who had left a cryptic message with the *Boston Globe's* City Desk?

Something about the misappropriation of funds from a state mental health agency. It sounded vaguely interesting, but as the newspaper's mental health reporter, I fielded plenty of crank calls and dead-end leads. It was late in the afternoon, I had just filed a story for the next day's paper, and I wanted to go home. Still, I dutifully dialed her number and identified myself. She sounded grateful, her voice clear, as she explained that she was the assistant administrator for Brown University's Department of Psychiatry and had in her possession documents proving that Dr. Martin Keller, the chief of psychiatry at Brown, was receiving hundreds of thousands of dollars from the Massachusetts Department of Mental Health

SIDE EFFECTS
by Alison Bass
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woman whose laugh reminded me of chimes at a Burger King outside of Brockton would be one of my less adventurous outings. Or so I thought.

In a small corner booth, Donna explained she'd come forward because she had a daughter with mental illness and was outraged that a financially strapped state agency was providing a wealthy institution like Brown money under false pretenses. She said she also was concerned about the possible skewing of research data in two large randomized drug trials being conducted at the prestigious university. One of them was studying the effectiveness of the antidepressant Paxil, which would become one of the best-selling drugs in history.

Donna struck me as sincere, someone who had taken an enormous risk in meeting with a reporter she didn't know. True, she had recently accepted another job and would be leaving Brown in a month's time, but Martin Keller was a powerful man in certain circles. He could make it difficult for her to ever find another job in the mental health field. And she had no close relatives to support her if things went bad: her parents were deceased, her one sister had moved out of state, and she was a single parent raising a severely troubled child, whom she had recently adopted.

Everything Donna told me was backed by extensive documentation, including internal university records, and I filed a series of articles in the *Boston Globe* about research and billing transgressions by Brown's chief of psychiatry. Three years later, I wrote another page-one piece about Martin Keller, this

time reporting on the hundreds of thousands of dollars he was earning in annual personal income from the same drug makers whose products he studied and touted in medical journals. As with my first series, there were calls for investigations. In the end, no action was taken against Keller and he remains chief of psychiatry at Brown to this day.

All through this time, I kept in touch with Donna as she struggled to keep her manic-depressive daughter safe. Her steadfastness in the face of daunting personal and career challenges made the daily annoyances of my job as a journalist seem petty and insignificant by comparison.

In June 2004, when I read about the New York State Attorney General's landmark lawsuit against GlaxoSmithKline for allegedly deceiving the public about its blockbuster drug Paxil, I suddenly remembered what Donna had told me almost nine years prior. Back then, I hadn't been able to pin down her allegations about Keller's Paxil study, but now, with a few phone calls, I discovered that the Glaxo lawsuit was the brainchild of Rose Firestein, a feisty newcomer to Attorney General Eliot Spitzer's office. Thus another remarkable woman entered the story. In suing the second largest pharmaceutical company in the world, Rose took up the baton that had Donna hoisted.

It was the determination of these two women to fight for the public good that inspired me to write my book. I wanted the world to see them as I saw them: unsung heroes. ■

"I remember typing quick notes, phone cradled to ear, thinking this can't be for real."
—ALISON BASS

THE BIRTH OF A SALESMAN

by George Shaffner



George Shaffner,
author of
The Widows of Eden

Editor's Note: *In the novel The Widows of Eden, a salesman comes to a town on the verge of collapse and turns it, as well as the people who live there, around*

When I was a young man, I had the same idea of a salesman that most people have: glad-handing, fast-talking, and about as trustworthy as a snake in a henhouse. It probably wasn't fair to lump them all together like that, but every time I passed a used-car lot, I saw at least one salesman who seemed to fit the mold, all the way up to the oily hair, the gold chain, and the disingenuous smile.

Then, in my midtwenties, I had my general notion of the sales profession turned upside down by none other than the IBM Corporation. They recruited me out of graduate school and promptly sent me to—*gasp!*—sales school. Not only was I afraid that I wouldn't make the grade, but I didn't own a single gold chain.

How little I knew. It turns out that big league sales, where millions of dollars are at stake,

by asking the right questions and listening. We asked George Shaffner how he came to this unique character and his distinctive style.

is as much like selling a used car as making a chocolate soufflé from scratch is like dropping a Pop-Tart into a toaster. IBM taught me that the best salespeople don't talk; they ask good questions and shut up. I was a slow learner, I suspect, but it turned out to be an important lesson on more than one occasion.

Long ago, when "mainframe" computers were the size of semis and cost more than the national debt, my technical sales partner and I were in a fight to the death for a large account in the Midwest. We were the incumbent but we were losing badly, mostly because our mainframe threw off so much heat that it required water cooling and about a zillion dollars' worth of expensive plumbing. In contrast, the competition's was air cooled, meaning that all it required was air, a commodity that was in abundant supply.

One day, my technical part-

THE WIDOWS OF EDEN
by George Shaffner
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ner and I were hanging out in the computer room at the account, a glass-enclosed area for the mainframe, plus a long line of refrigerator-size tape drives and a cluster of disk drives that were bigger than washing machines. We noticed that the plant engineer was working at a computer terminal in the corner, and he appeared to be in distress. Since we were a curious pair, we sauntered over and asked him what he was doing. It turned out that the plant was about to double in size, and he was trying to figure out how he was going to heat so much additional space.

To make a long story short, our mainframe generated so much heat that it could solve the whole problem, and it could compute to boot. The competition's could only compute, which, in light of the expansion, was a clear disadvantage. We closed the sale soon thereafter, and all because we asked some questions and listened.

Here's another thing I didn't know: It

turns out that being a salesman is a lot like being a Marine or a pilot. Once you are one, you are one, even after you stop making a living at it. When it came time to pick a profession for Vernon Moore, the protagonist of my first novel, *In the Land of Second Chances*, there was never a doubt in my mind. He had to be a salesman. His job, after all, was to sell hope to a spent, hopeless man, and he did it by asking questions and paying attention to the an-

swers. He was called back to Ebb, Nebraska, in *One Part Angel* to sell charity to an angry teenaged felon. In my new book, *The Widows of Eden*, the stakes are higher: Vernon must sell faith to a godless businessman facing his mortality while helping the town through one of the worst droughts in history. Vernon, though, is a master salesman and knows that answers to the big problems come with asking the right questions. The same, it could be said, is true for writers. ■

"IBM taught me that the best salespeople don't talk; they ask good questions and shut up."

—GEORGE SHAFFNER

IRRESISTIBLE CLOSENESS

by Nina de Gramont



Nina de Gramont,
author of
Gossip of the Starlings

EDITOR'S NOTE: Centered on a group of young, privileged, cosseted girls in a private school, *Nina de Gramont's* first novel reveals how all can go awry in adolescence when you're in the thrall

567-8720. This was the phone number of Mary Jane, my best friend from fifth grade through tenth grade.

If it seems remarkable that I can remember a set of digits I haven't dialed in over twenty years, bear in mind that I once dialed it upwards of ten times a day. Long before text messages, IMing, and cell phones, the height of teenage-girl luxury was the private telephone line. When M. J.'s line was busy for longer than I liked, I would press 0 and demand an emergency breakthrough.

"Nina is calling with an emergency breakthrough," the operator would say, clearly aware that the emergency involved little more than impatient adolescent angst. "Will you relinquish the line?"

I can't remember M. J. ever refusing. Rude as the interruptions seem to me now, at the time they were perfectly appro-

of a friend's spell. It's hard not to want to sacrifice everything for those friendships, even your own self. *Nina de Gramont* remembers how she once felt that same way.

priate to our relationship, which was one of intense urgency and unchecked intimacy. We told each other everything.

There was a lot to tell. M. J. had a privileged but turbulent home life that manifested itself in severe anorexia the summer she turned fourteen. Her parents sent her to a sanitarium with tennis courts and a heated pool. She had a private line there, too. Before I visited, three weeks into her stay, I could have written a memoir of the place, from the patients to the therapists to the acres of trimmed, country club green.

When I did finally visit, I brought M. J. a poem I'd written. Ever since she'd returned from a summer in the west, so painfully thin that her clavicle and elbows pressed through her skin like sharpened sticks, I had read everything I could on eating disorders, including *The Golden Cage*

GOSSIP OF THE STARLINGS
by Nina de Gramont
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by Hilde Bruch. Still considered the classic volume on the subject, it seems heavy reading for my then fourteen-year-old self. But I tackled it in the name of love, and borrowed its title for my poem, of which I remember the first line: *This bird had lingered in her golden cage*. Less exactly, I remember the last two lines, when the bird finally sees that she is lovely, and now, at last, may fly.

It's the only love poem I've ever written. Looking back I'm slightly in awe of my lack of self-consciousness as I handed over this romantic ode in plain view

of M. J.'s mother. Equally without embarrassment, M. J. read it on the spot, then showed it to her mother and her roommate.

The fancy sanitarium cured the anorexia, but her parents still insisted on weekly sessions with a male psychiatrist whom M. J. called *The Nit*. She refused to say a word to him. Once, she invited me to a session. The Nit's office was full of leather and embroidered fabric. Everything looked so expensive, so clean, that I thought he must be a very good psychiatrist.

Have I mentioned that M. J. was beautiful? Her skin was clear and perfect, her long hair lustrous and naturally blond. When *The Nit* asked her questions, she chortled back at him, a sexy rebuke. She would not give him an inch, would not accept his—or her parents'—help.

I don't think it occurred to me at the time: the irony of M. J.'s refusing to speak to her psychiatrist, with me—the receptacle for endless confessions—sitting right beside her. If only he had left the room and pressed an

ear to the door, *The Nit* would have obtained all the information he needed and more.

At the end of that year I transferred to a different school. The frequency of our phone calls rose, and then tapered off. One summer evening between high school and college, we had a violent argument in her car, sitting in the parking lot of a deserted Carvel. We screamed at each other and then made up, sobbing in each other's arms. Though in the years we knew each other M. J. and I never kissed—and, I think, never wanted to—the relationship was as intense and turbulent as I've had with any man.

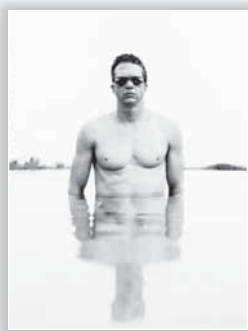
When I wrote *Gossip of the Starlings*, I wanted to capture a particular kind of friendship that exists between teenage girls. Lines between two people blur, along with all logic, and self-preservation is lost in favor of preserving the relationship. Privacy is nonexistent: every thought, every event, every feeling is shared. Like M. J. and me, the girls in *Gossip of the Starlings* know each other too well. Catherine is able to narrate Skye's and Susannah's lives as vividly and immediately as her own.

Unhealthy though it may be, there's an unbearable innocence to this kind of connection, and an undeniable romance. When I think of M. J. now, I don't miss our melodramatic intimacy. But I loved re-creating it in Catherine and Skye—acknowledging the courage it takes to share innermost and still developing selves so completely. Because as Catherine discovers the short distance between eyewitness and accomplice, she learns that the sometimes lethal danger in closeness can be as terrifying as it is irresistible. ■

"Privacy is nonexistent:
every thought, every event,
every feeling is shared."
—NINA DE GRAMONT

ONE OF THE FASTEST MEN IN AMERICA (MAYBE)

by W. Hodding Carter



W. Hodding Carter,
author of
Off the Deep End

Editor's Note: *Maybe he's deluded, but W. Hodding Carter is determined to get to the Olympics in 2008 as a sprint swimmer. At the age of forty-five. It may not*

I was flexing my right bicep the other day, musing on what this swimming book has done for me (yes, at the age of forty-four I definitely have bigger muscles than ever before) when my wife slouched by with a basket of laundry she'd just folded. Unlike my great-grandfather, my grandfather, and my father before me, I can't make my muscle pop up and down like a gelatinous Mexican jumping bean, but still, there it was: taut, sturdy, and if I say so myself, quite eye-catching.

"What are you doing?" she asked, sweat streaming down her face. I think she'd just finished mopping the kitchen floor after helping a client get a protection order against her abusive husband. (Lisa is an attorney; she's constantly dealing with no-good husbands.) She set down the basket next to my crossed legs and stood up, placing her hands behind her lower back, forcing

be a reachable goal, but Carter has spent nearly all of his time preparing for it—and writing a book about it—doing his own kind of "research."

herself into a straight position. Wasn't it obvious what I was doing?

"Research."
That's the beauty of writing a book like this—practically everything I've done the past few years and am still doing right this very minute is research for the book. Writing about writing about swimming? Research. Sleeping? Research. Stretching to get a bowl from the top of the kitchen cabinets? Research. Watching TV in the middle of the afternoon? Research. (I have to do it sometimes to recover from a workout.) Even not cutting my toenails is research, since I can see if the extra length makes me go any faster. All the faster swimmers have huge feet: Michael Phelps, Gary Hall, etc. (I think you and I could actually beat them if they had regular-size feet.) In fact, I've even considered making a trip to Siberia to consult

OFF THE DEEP END
by W. Hodding Carter
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with the famous Ilizarov Center to see about lengthening them. Ilizarov was this Russian Jewish doctor who was sent to Siberia not for punishment but to hide from the invading Nazis during World War II. He discovered that if he separated bones at the rate of one millimeter a day, they would grow more through in orthopedic surgery in the twentieth century—that and those you-choose-the-color casts, of course—yet for decades nobody believed it was true because how could an exile out in Siberia discover anything? Eventually, though, thanks to some clandestine surgery on the record-setting Olympic

"Speaking of which, did you know that the Romans believed people were well educated only if they could read and swim?"

—W. HODDING CARTER

high jumper Valery Brumel's tibia, Brumel became the first man to clear two meters, and the Ilizarov method of bone repair and lengthening became the world standard. How do you think Sun Ming Ming got so tall? Seriously, certain models (names withheld in hopes of a future date if my wife and I ever divorce), thousands of people with unusually short limbs, and many people with dwarfism have been treated by the Ilizarov method. Why not me?

How do I know all of this? Research.

Back to those muscles and our household laundry. I've been developing my muscles to a much greater extent than I ever did when swimming in college for two reasons: (a) I obviously like the way they look, and (b) my old college coach told me I should, and (c) (OK, *three* reasons) research conducted by

the Counsilman Center for the Science of Swimming at the University of Indiana has shown that you can keep putting on muscle even into your eighties. The common belief that you lose 1 percent of muscle a year starting in your twenties is completely wrong. You can put on that much muscle and more for the rest of your life. And they really do come

in handy beyond the confines of the swimming pool. When Lisa, without a single scream or grunt of warning, hurled the wicker basket at me, I was able to deflect it with a quick contraction of my biceps, delts, and teres minor. In fact, my deflection was so spot-on and reaction so quick that it snapped Lisa out of her ill temper long enough for her to ask, somewhat out of breath (whether from doing our household chores, tossing the basket, or excitement over my basket-deflecting prowess, I don't know), "How'd you do that?"

And I, of course, answered her honestly and quickly, thanks to all the research I've been doing: "Research."

Speaking of which, did you know that the Romans believed people were well educated only if they could read *and* swim? Caligula couldn't even dog paddle and that's why, among a few other reasons, he was such an embarrassment to his fellow Romans. I thought about pointing this out to Lisa as I bent over to help pick up the laundry, but even I knew to save that gem for later. I didn't want her to think I was obsessed or something. ■

JUNK FOOD JUNKIES

by Betsy Block



Betsy Block,
author of
The Dinner Diaries

Editor's Note: *In The Dinner Diaries, Betsy Block chronicles her family meal makeover, which entails eating more whole grains, fruits, and vegetables and eat-*

I don't want to learn more if it's going to make me not want to eat, okay?" Zack warned me one afternoon last fall when the two of us were driving to his drum lesson.

We were still near the beginning of our makeover, and when he said this, I kind of shuddered. He was letting me know, in no uncertain terms, that he would be resisting progress every single step of the way. "I love food and I don't want you to wreck that."

Andy and I love food, too; it's just that we love our kids more. But what we see as life enhancing—serving less meat and dairy, using a fish list, eating with the seasons—smells suspiciously like deprivation to Zack and Maya. "We're doing this makeover because we care about you so much," I reasonably explain. "No, you're doing it to torture us," Zack replies, only half kidding. But of all the changes we've made since

ing less meat, refined sugar, and bad fats. We asked her what was the hardest thing to contend with during the makeover. Snacks, she said, take the prize, hands down.

that ominous moment of foreshadowing by Zack, none has been more difficult to contend with than snacks.

Technically, snacks are just food eaten between meals; a little nosh meant to tide a person over until lunch or dinner. That shouldn't be too hard to manage. Besides, eating five or six small meals a day is actually much healthier than three big meals a day, especially if the heaviest is served at nighttime.

But realistically? Snacks are the bane of my days. That's because I believe that, no matter when or even where it's eaten, food should be nourishing. Meanwhile, Zack and Maya just want anything crunchy, salty, or sweet; if it's full of bad fats, too, so much the better.

That's why, for years now, the kids and I have been playing a little game each day after school: "Can we have potato

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by Betsy Block
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chips," one of them will ask, and I'll respond with, "How about some fruit." Maya: "I want something from the snack closet," and she'll open the door to the cupboard and pull out a bag of chips. I'll cock my head and try to figure out where they came from, because I don't remember buying them. Then I'll realize, that's because I didn't; Andy did. I'll take a moment to collect myself, then I'll frown and say no a little more loudly than I'd intended, which means I'm not only robbing the kids of what they see as their rightful snacks but also giving them a crabby mom to boot.

This can't go on.

As I think about it more, though, I realize that children are not foie gras geese to be force-fed, even if it's with ideas about "good nutrition" by their "loving mother." They're their own people. I want to guide, not bully. Besides, bullying doesn't work. I know because I've tried. Instead, I'm going to have to meet them where they are. Isn't this what good parenting is all about? Constantly finding the middle ground between what we want for our kids and what they want for themselves? But I still need Andy on board, and before I can state my case to him, I need to engage in a little journalistic fact gathering.

"I know you love potato chips," I begin, trying to ease my way into the subject, but he immediately cuts me off with, "No, I don't."

"You don't?"

"No. You do." He's right; I do. But I've

mostly stopped eating them, because I'm trying to set a good example and all that. Plus, now that I've learned about the glycemic load and I understand why they're so bad, I really do crave them less often. "You don't love chips, too?" I ask, amazed. "Then why'd you buy them?"

"Andy and I love food, too; it's just that we love our kids more."
—BETSY BLOCK

"Because she," and here he nods his head in Maya's direction, "wanted them." Seeing my face darken—what if *she* wanted a new toy every day, hmm?—he quickly adds, "I'd already said no to about a hundred things.

She wanted fruit leathers, juice boxes, cookies—it's not easy when she's there."

Fair enough. A few days before I discovered the chips, Andy had taken Maya shopping while I stayed home with Zack and we worked and watched TV, respectively. I have no right to complain. But I can still nudge.

"That makes sense," I say soothingly. "It's just that, if we have them in the house—"

"I know. I'm trying."

I nod sincerely. He really is. In fact, we all are, and we have a healthier and more varied diet, lower cholesterol, better moods, and just a touch of weight loss to show for it.

But life is full of compromises, and so, when we're planning a summer barbecue with friends, who's the one to suggest we buy sweet potato chips? Me, because while I'm well aware they're rife with fat and salt, they're also chock-full of vitamin A.

If into every life a little junk must fall, at least we can try to make it better junk. ■

CONFESSIONS OF A COMIC BOOK DILETTANTE

by Jack O'Connell

EDITOR'S NOTE: *Comic books have been a part of our popular culture for decades, and in many ways they are a startlingly accurate reflection of the times in which they were written. For Jack O'Connell, author of *The Resurrectionist*, a lifetime of com-*



Jack O'Connell,
author of
The Resurrectionist

I admit it. I'm one of those writers so enamored of fiction that I elevate its needs and its virtues and its abilities above those of history. Should I ever find a way to fashion my sedate life into a memoir, my compulsion to invent would make James Frey blush and shudder.

So, I want to insist that as a kid I was lodged firmly on the extreme and foggy cutting edge. That back in the '60s, when my peers were spinning the Monkees, I was pondering the psychedelia of Roky Erickson. That while my neighborhood buddies were lining up to see *The Love Bug*, I was sneaking into the balcony to witness *Midnight Cowboy*. And that while my pals were kicking back and reading about Superman's latest go-round with Lex Luthor, I was awash in the mystic sputterings of Mr. Natural and the pharmacological safaris of the Fabulous Furry Freak Brothers.

ics have inspired him to create a world filled with benign, even lovable, sideshow freaks, whose comic book story unfolds as a parallel to the "real world" of a rust-belt city in postindustrial New England.

I want to insist that all of that happened, but I'd cave and admit the truth. Or, at very least, the closest approximation to the truth of which I'm capable.

My novel, *The Resurrectionist*, is chock-full of comic books. Which might lead the reader to suspect that the same could be said of my childhood. In fact, my relationship with comics while growing up was fleeting, sporadic, and haphazard. I would like nothing better than to report warm memories of readings of *The Hulk* and *Green Lantern* and *The Fantastic Four*. But the truth is a little more prosaic, if not less revelatory.

From about 1967 or so, the only comic book I read regularly was *Treasure Chest*—"the Catholic Comic Book," as the slogan baldly proclaimed. I've always believed that *TC* was the product of a rare compromise among the black-habited nuns of my youth. I can still imagine them, encircled like Shakespearean crones around

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By Jack O'Connell
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a bubbling cauldron, some ancient Mother Superior deciding *All right, if they must read comic books, they'll read our comic book!*

Treasure Chest featured the wholesome adventures of Chuck White, an All-American Boy running through the suburbs of the American Century collecting moral lessons. Think *Leave It to Beaver* without the edginess. The fact is, I loved the pulpy thing in all its cheery, dogmatic glory. And to this day, there's a box of them moldering away in my attic.

In general, comic books for me were a summertime phenomenon. But when my father walked my siblings and me up to the beach-front penny candy store, and I stood before those wire spin racks, I'm embarrassed to admit that, unlike so many of my demographic cohorts, I did *not* select the coolness that was Marvel or D.C. I strolled home along the boardwalk, grasping *Archie* and any number of imprints from the Harvey line—*Sad Sack*, *Richie Rich*, *Little Lotta*.

There is an almost unbearable innocence attached to my memories of these comic books. They are so utterly of another era that they feel near archaic to me. And in this way they stand as polar opposites to the comic book that appears in my novel.

That comic book is called *Limbo* and it tells the story of a group of circus freaks and their wanderings through bizarre landscape in search of sanctuary from a murderous pursuer. *Limbo* is a dark, adult, complex story. I like to think of it as what might have devel-

oped had Kafka snuck up on *The Adventures of Tintin* creator Hergé, stabbed the artist to death with his own charcoal pencil, and then highjacked the story.

Which raises the question: how did I move from *Treasure Chest* and *Richie Rich* to the hermaphrodite and the mule-faced boy of the *Limbo* universe?

Well, let's face it—lots of strange things happened in the eighties. And while we might want to forget many of them, I'll always treasure the memory of strolling into a new comic book store and scoring the first issue of *Mister X*, Dean Motter's short-

lived but electric tale of an insomniac architect in a neon-splattered tenderloin. The comic was a trove full to bursting with all the coolest tropes—film noir, dystopian SF, Bauhaus design, German Expressionism. The story was hip, inventive, surprising, and smart. I was hooked by the checkout line.

Mister X kicked down a door for me that remains wide-open to this day, allowing a stream of rich narrative to light up my middle-aged melon. Motter's rococo world may not have lasted long, but it gave me a gorgeous map and a hard shove into the work of Neil Gaiman and Art Spiegelman, Grant Morrison and Warren Ellis.

Beyond this, it provided the inspiration of the crucial subplot that would make *The Resurrectionist* a richer, deeper novel about the ways we find meaning in the most unexpected stories. ■

"While my neighborhood buddies were lining up to see *The Love Bug*, I was sneaking into the balcony to witness *Midnight Cowboy*."
—JACK O'CONNELL

MEMORY IS A KNAVE

by Shirley Abbott



Shirley Abbott,
author of
The Future of Love

EDITOR'S NOTE: After writing three nonfiction books, veteran writer and longtime New Yorker Shirley Abbott makes her fiction debut with *The Future of Love*, a novel that allows us to see the possibility of happiness even as

It's been said, perhaps too often, that all fiction is memoir and all memoir fiction. I've written three memoirs and now one novel. Is it time to own up?

I was born and grew up in Hot Springs, Arkansas, which in those days was sin city. My mother was a farm girl, not a sinner, and the circumstances of her life—and her mother's—gave me the makings of my first memoir, *Womenfolks*.

My father was a bookmaker, i.e., a bookie. He made our living taking bets on horses. Not a perfect father, but he was the best an aspiring writer could have wanted, for he was a passionate lover of books. "In the beginning was the word," and the word was with him, the spinner of tales. It occurred to me later that a horse race is a perfect metaphor for a narrative. His life and times gave me my second memoir, *The Bookmaker's Daughter*.

her characters and their beloved city are tested. We asked her to consider the difference between her characters' lives in New York and her own and between writing nonfiction and fiction that is informed by real life.

A third memoir, *Love's Apprenticeship*, is partly about love and its thrills and discontents, but chiefly about books and movies. And songs. And how women are taught to love and are snookered by love and uplifted and defined by it and how they sometimes survive it. And to what extent the conventional wisdom rules.

I never thought of my memoirs as being about me. I wanted them to be about the reader. Still, they weren't fiction. They were made out of memories. But memory is a knave.

As I began work on *The Future of Love*, I felt not only afraid but a fraud. I was Making Things Up. I knew my setting had to be New York—my home for many years, where I had married and worked in publishing and raised two daughters. But it did not belong to me the way Hot Springs belonged. Edith Wharton and Damon

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by Shirley Abbott
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Runyon I am not. I began with a woman about my age. A widow (which I am not) who has one daughter. And one granddaughter (at the time I had none). For a while this character had a son and two nasty grandsons, but I killed them off.

My Antonia (was I thinking of Willa Cather?) lives on Perry Street, in the West Village, but her apartment is far grander than the one I inhabit and of a size that hardly exists on Perry Street. If you're fabricating real estate, you might as well make

it a three-bedroom apartment. I thought up a man for her—Sam Mendel, concocted out of two or three men I have known. Two other characters, the elderly gay couple who live in Antonia's building, presented themselves early on. But I was getting nowhere. There was no action. The horses refused to come out of the post.

And then that rough beast known as September 11, 2001, slouched toward lower Manhattan to be born. I was out in the streets when it happened, not far from the World Trade Center. My habit was (and is) to walk in that direction on a fine morning to the Staten Island Ferry slip and back. That morning, I had been delayed by a phone call and had only begun my walk when the attack occurred. I knew at once that this was a huge disaster, not some random mistake by air traffic control, and I ran home. And then,

somehow, as the days went on, I stopped feeling like an immigrant. This slammed, wounded city was mine. It needed all of us.

"It was an honor to live here—polluted air, sirens, threats, grief, death, uncertainty, empty streets, lunacy, and all. Mettlesome, mad, heroic city!"
—SHIRLEY ABBOTT

Nobody was a foreigner. It was an honor to live here—polluted air, sirens, threats, grief, death, uncertainty, empty streets, lunacy, and all. Mettlesome, mad, heroic city! Walt Whitman would have been proud.

Life truly changed afterward. Politics was not the same. Everything had to be rethought. Thinking of those nineteen men who hated us enough to die for

their beliefs, I realized how little I knew. As I tried to make sense of things, my characters mysteriously began to get a life. Mark Adler, trapped by bad luck and fecklessness, came immediately on stage as Maggie's husband, Toni's dad. For him, as for his lover Sophie, 9/11 seems to open doors, to insist on choices. As it does for Edith, Sam's wife, who realizes she has scores to settle, battles to fight, and a way of life to conserve. Time, they realize, is short.

As I went onward, my characters grew up. The way children do. Not always doing what one wished. But under their own steam. With voices of their own.

Are they fictional? Yes, surely. None is a portrait of any person, living or dead, least of all me. But to my enduring surprise, every one of them, warts and all, is me, and I am them. ■

NO BROADWAY BABY

by Barbara Suter



Barbara Suter,
author of
Dorothy on the Rocks

EDITOR'S NOTE: Many passionate readers of fiction tend to believe that reality is way overrated. We suspect that's the case also for actors who make a career out of not being themselves. Cer-

Whenever Mary Martin's *Peter Pan* played on television, as it did every year around Easter,

I would put on my green tights and green T-shirt and sing along and then fly off the couch to Never Never Land, "second star to the right and straight on till morning."

I memorized the complete scores of all the Rodgers and Hammerstein Broadway musicals from the show albums my parents bought. I would stand in front of the mirror with my hairbrush and sing along with Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza in *South Pacific*.

In high school I tried out for chorus but was informed by Miss Boytim, the music teacher, that I had a problem with pitch and wouldn't be needed for the spring concert. I was devastated, but, fortunately, had just auditioned for

tainly it's true for Maggie, the eternally struggling actress heroine of Barbara Suter's novel, and as the author tells you here, she, too, has been known to surrender occasionally to flights of fancy.

the school play and was cast as one of the leads, so I became an actress instead.

During college I spent my summers apprenticing in summer stock theaters, sewing costumes, painting scenery, and cleaning toilets. During the musicals, I would stand backstage with my hair twisted on top of my head, wearing paint-stained overalls, and sing along, sotto voce, as I ran the ancient light board by the side of the stage and cued the singers for their entrances.

When I moved to New York, my first job was working for a children's theater. I started out stage managing but was soon playing witches and ugly stepsisters and ingenues, including Wendy in *Peter Pan*. I wore a curly blond wig and eagerly followed Peter, played by a chain-smoking fifty-year-old actor just back from a bus and truck of *Camelot*, to Never Never Land.

DOROTHY ON THE ROCKS
by Barbara Suter
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Right before my fortieth birthday I read the book *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers and decided it was time to try to sing again, to see if maybe I could find my voice and recapture my dream of being in a Broadway musical.

I signed up for a class called *Singing for Actors*. It was taught by a short blond woman named Cassie, who claimed to have understudied Patti LuPone in *Evita* on Broadway. She wore cowboy boots, bright red lipstick, and short leather skirts. The accompanist at the piano had long blond hair, pink nail polish, and

read *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel García Márquez when not playing. He also wore short leather skirts and bright red lipstick when performing as Miss Magnolia Monroe in the West Village cabaret clubs.

When it got to my turn in the class, the understudy in cowboy boots asked me why I had signed up. I told her that I wanted to stand center stage in a spotlight in a Broadway musical and sing with a big brassy voice. In short, I wanted to be a star.

Nobody said a word, then the accompanist, Jeffrey Roy, aka Miss Magnolia Monroe, suggested we start with something a little simpler, like scales.

I eventually dropped the class and studied with Jeffrey privately. We worked on phrasing, rhythm, and my personal nemesis, pitch. I brought in the sheet music of all my favorite Broadway songs. Jeffrey played and I stood by the piano and sang my versions

of Nellie Forbush and Maria Von Trapp and then moved on to Sondheim; Mrs. Lovett in *Sweeney Todd*, Sally in *Follies*, the witch from *Into the Woods*. I brought in wigs and costumes and acted out the songs.

I loved my sessions at Jeffrey's studio on West Fiftieth Street and Jeffrey loved my wigs and costume jewelry and stiletto heels. I started playing the tambourine to give the songs more flash and to help with the tempo, but mainly I wanted to distract my imagined audience from the fact that I still had trouble staying on pitch.

"I don't understand it," Jeffrey would say, shaking his head. "You've got all the ingredients, but it just doesn't cook up right."

Finally, out of frustration, I decided to write a monologue for a character that was a bad lounge singer but a lovable gal who just sang because she loved to and didn't care what people thought. I called her Bette Lou Delp.

Decked out in a big red wig and fishnet stockings, I read the monologue for Jeffrey at our next session. He sat at the piano while I performed. When I finished, Jeffrey grinned.

"There's your voice," he said. "You're not a singer, you're a writer."

"Really?" I said, and somehow I knew it was true. I knew that what I would never be able to express as a singer, I would be able to as a writer.

"So get to it," he said. And I did. ■

"I wanted to stand center stage in a spotlight in a Broadway musical and sing with a big brassy voice. In short, I wanted to be a star."

—BARBARA SUTER

