

# SHORT TAKES II

Reviews and Opinions  
by  
Fred Russell

scarswop!?!?!and  
2016 chapbook

# Contents

<i>About the Author</i> .....	3
State of the Union .....	4
Who Do They Think They're Kidding?.....	6
War and Morality.....	8
Wreaking Havoc .....	10
The Bletchley Circle.....	12
Faking It.....	13
Dr. Phil Is Not a Pill.....	15
Grisham.....	17
Harlan Coben, Among Others.....	19
The Mustache.....	25
Violins in the Void: 3 by Nabokov.....	27
Einstein on the Beach Again .....	33
The Art of Dreaming.....	36
<i>Acknowledgements</i> .....	39

# About the Author

Fred Russell is the pen name of an American-born writer living in Israel. His novels *Rafi's World* (Fomite Press), dealing with Israel's emerging criminal class, and *The Links in the Chain* (CCLaP), a thriller set in New York against an Arab-Israel background, were both published in 2014. A chapbook collection of his shorter opinion pieces called *Short Takes: American Notes* may be downloaded as a free PDF file at <http://scars.tv/chapbooks/> under the publisher's listing for 2015. His longer stories and essays have appeared in *Third Coast*, *Polluto*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Wilderness House Literary Review*, *Ontologica*, *Unlikely Stories: Episode 4*, and *The Satirist*.

As Fred Skolnik, he is best known as the editor in chief of the 22-volume second edition of the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, winner of the 2007 Dartmouth Medal. He is also the author of *The Other Shore* (Aqueous Books, 2011), an epic novel depicting Israeli society at a critical juncture in its recent history. A second novel, *Death*, was published by Spuyten Duyvil in 2015. His stories and essays have appeared in over 150 journals, including *TriQuarterly*, *Gargoyle*, *The MacGuffin*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Prism Review*, *Words & Images*, *Literary House Review*, *Montréal Review*, and *Underground Voices*.

# STATE OF THE UNION

Most politicians have the same social vision: to improve everything. That means less crime, less poverty, more health, more education. Some even offer specific programs. None, however, has succeeded in improving the look of society in any significant way. This is not surprising. Politicians are not social scientists, nor are the bureaucrats who administer government offices. Tocqueville noted nearly 200 years ago that in America it is the least talented men who go into politics. Nothing has really changed, though it is true that as government expanded and offered greater opportunities to exercise power and enjoy prestige, it began to attract more talented individuals with successful careers behind them – businessmen and military men, for example. However, these governed no better than their predecessors, bringing to government skills that were not especially suited to governing a nation, as well as appetites and ambitions that overrode the will to serve. Of course, governments also enlist the services of experts – those same social scientists – but even these are tied to concepts that have never really worked.

Education, for example, is still tied to the old Church idea – propagated by countless generations of churchmen serving as teachers – that as a consequence of Original Sin all men are born evil and must therefore be coerced into doing what is good, an idea that produced rigidly structured educational frameworks where teachers hammered away at the captive child until his head was ready to explode, making study a burden and creating in the child an aversion to the learning process that persists to this day in these same rigid frameworks. The result is a nation of ignoramuses (40% of Americans don't know that Germany and Japan were the enemies in World War II). Health care, in America, has been so difficult to reform because America is tied to an ideology that makes the idea of socialized medicine anathema, an idea that one might say it took all 20,000 pages of the Affordable Care Act to get around under a system that, according to doctors' estimates, has been costing America approximately 20,000 lives a year as a direct result of inadequate health care. The inability of Americans to utter the word socialism has cost more American lives than the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Add to this the unwillingness of the government to clamp down on a food industry that is destroying the country's health and a drug industry that prefers to control rather than eradicate diseases for reasons of profit, and to close down the tobacco industry entirely, and you can only conclude that the government has consciously chosen economic stability over human life.

Crime and poverty in America are higher than anywhere in the West – violent crime five times higher than in Western Europe and poverty twice as high. The two are of course linked. In America, African Americans are poorer than everyone else and consequently commit more crimes than anyone else. Their condition is the direct result of the way they have been treated by the white population, but no government will ever have the courage to assume the moral debt of the American people to African Americans and make real financial amends to them. In all, about 100 million Americans are hovering around the poverty line – an absolute disgrace in what is the richest country in the world.

It can therefore be stated unequivocally that America is not going to solve its social problems. Things can get much worse but not much better because even when things are at their best the main beneficiaries are a relatively small economic elite. The most that middle-class Americans can hope for is a slightly larger margin of comfort, a little less financial pressure. This is the underside of the American Dream, a region inhabited by the overwhelming majority of Americans.

America's great comfort in these trying years has been the collapse of the Soviet Union, perceived as representing the defeat of Communism and the triumph of Capitalism. But what has been gained? Russia is still the same Russia, a formidable enemy that nothing less than a nuclear holocaust will cause to go away, and in the meanwhile China has produced an economic model – relative entrepreneurial freedom, a mobilized population and centralized, totalitarian, undemocratic government – that is very likely to gain ascendancy over the American model within a very few years, while Western Europe has produced a social model that is considerably more equitable than America's. What America is left with is essentially what it calls its freedom, which comes down to saying whatever comes into one's head, in thousands of academic and popular journals, in the daily newspapers, in television studios, in blogs, and in the privacy of one's own home. None of this has the slightest effect on how the country is governed.

America is unfixable. It cultivates the illusion that it is the greatest country on the face of the earth, and maybe it is in terms of wealth and power, but it certainly isn't in terms of its social fabric and the way ordinary people live. To fix itself America would have to do something that is almost unthinkable: liberate itself from the American Dream, for what ordinary people in America have seldom realized is that they can live fulfilling and even exalted lives by simply being decent.

# WHO DO THEY THINK THEY'RE KIDDING?

The complaint of American conservatives that the mainstream media is “liberal” or even “leftist,” heard roughly every hour on the hour on Fox News and other right-wing outlets, highlights the inability of journalists to understand their own profession. The problem with journalists has never been their political leanings or biases. The problem has always been their competence. They are not, after all, historians or scholars or political scientists, or novelists or dramatists or film makers for that matter. Their ability to understand social or historical processes is limited, as is their knowledge of the world, given their inability to speak the languages of the countries they report from and comment on and consequently their ignorance of the culture, religion, history and politics of these countries. Their minds too, it must be said, are fairly commonplace, as evidenced by their use of language, which constantly falls back on platitudes in the absence of real perception. And yet, incredibly, it is they of all people who determine the way we see the world.

The biases of journalists, or the slant they give to their reporting and “analysis,” are really limited in the harm they do, as their audience is as biased as they are and at the most picks up arguments from them to reinforce these biases. Certainly they can sway public opinion from one day to the next, among “undecided” voters, for example, and in this way influence elections, though the end result of the voting process is to elect representatives with whom the voters are invariably dissatisfied and who are held in very low esteem. It is therefore not by swaying public opinion, and certainly not by creating an informed public, that journalists exert their real influence but by contributing to the public’s ignorance, that is, by presenting an extremely distorted picture of the world that the public uncritically accepts in the absence of any deeper knowledge. One might even say that the journalistic profession and the uninformed public deserve each other. If people really want to understand the world, they should start by reading books instead of newspapers.

The belief that freedom of speech and public debate is the cornerstone of democracy is one of the great myths of American life, a self-serving myth that journalists are forever promoting to justify their existence and their methods. The cornerstone of a democracy is its legal system and the traditions that sustain it. The guardians of democracy are the courts. Criticism of politicians in the media has next to no lasting effect on American life. The media may “expose” politicians but insofar as it is their criminal activities that are exposed, what is being exposed is almost always an official investigation, making the exposure superfluous. Insofar as the media exposes what it deems to be moral turpitude or simply goes with a headline grabber – adultery, perhaps a homosexual affair, something about marijuana thirty years ago – it is questionable whether it is anyone’s business. As for simple and common government mismanagement – waste and all the rest – the manner in which governments operate has not been influenced one jot by investigative reporting.

This is not to say that journalists do not occasionally hit a home run or take on needy cases and change lives by exerting pressure in the right places. That is fine, and if the media wish to invest their enormous resources in doing work that the police do infinitely better or pointing fingers and stirring up tempests in a teacup for no practical purpose or taking one out of a million Americans under their wing and solving his problems, that is their business. Admittedly they also manage to intimidate politicians, right up to the President, but the little dance that journalists and politicians do in no way improves the quality of government. In fact, the time and effort invested by elected officials in “spinning” stories represents an enormous waste of the taxpayer’s money – hundreds if not thousands of aides playing the press every morning, rooms full of people dreaming up excuses for the President’s latest mishap – not to mention often injudicious changes in policy or courses of action simply because of the way they might look in the press.

What is left at the end of the day is some drama and entertainment bought by the American public at an enormous price – the invasion of people’s privacy by an army of reporters who will expose anything that gets them a screaming headline. Into the hands of these reporters has been placed one of the most important functions in a modern society – the control of information. Neither in terms of morality or capability are they the right people for the job.

# WAR AND MORALITY

I happened to see Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* a few nights ago on cable TV and was surprised by how good it was, by the acting, the direction, the drama, the sheer power of it. It was in fact superb in every respect other than in its understanding of the Vietnam War.

The film is based on the autobiography of Ron Kovic. Tom Cruise, as Kovic, goes off to Vietnam as a gung-ho Marine and comes back paralyzed from the chest down. In the interval his unit accidentally wipes out a Vietnamese family and Kovic accidentally kills one of his own men during a Vietcong attack. Back in the States he is still a patriot but his conscience and his condition wear him down and in the end he becomes an antiwar activist. That is the story. Kovic and Stone thus have two things to say about the war in Vietnam: that it was terrible and that it was wrong.

Almost all war films show the horrors of war, but not all war films say that war is wrong. World War II films, for example, all say implicitly that the war was just, just as the Vietnam films say explicitly that it was not. This is undoubtedly true. One was a good war and one was a bad war, though the people who got America into these wars believed that both were good.

America's wars have in fact always been represented, in films and novels, in the media, in the protests, in terms of their morality as much as in terms of their horror (or their glory). This manner of representing wars is very much like putting the cart before the horse.

For the one question that must always be answered before any other question is asked, and certainly before actually going to war, is whether a war can be won. If it cannot, if its prosecution is ruled out on practical grounds, the matter of its morality becomes completely irrelevant or at best academic. It is when the high ground of morality becomes the focus of public debate from the outset that the issue of practicality is shunted aside and the advocates of war are able to advance their own moral arguments and therefore shift the focus of debate away from the real question, which is America's military capabilities and preparedness. There can be no doubt that the Vietnam war was prolonged by years because it was attacked on the grounds that it was wrong instead of on the grounds that it was unwinnable.



Certainly the makers of the war believed they could win it. They were of course mistaken, but no one was equipped or inclined to argue convincingly that the United States was unequipped to conduct an irregular war against an ideologically motivated enemy, just as it is currently unequipped to conduct its wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Though the United States has had at least 25 years to understand that the next world threat was going to be Muslim fanaticism, it has in fact done nothing to prepare for it. I mean to say that the United States has done nothing to develop a military and political doctrine suitable for fighting terrorism and insurgency at its source, or developed a cadre of Arabic speakers who understand the Muslim world, which is the basis for developing such a doctrine. Only then, when the United States is ready to fight and win such wars, should the question of *whether* they should fight them be considered. Until then, the greatest service that the opponents of these wars can do is to point out why they can't be won.

Oliver Stone thus does a great disservice to his own cause. He does not clarify the misguided military thinking that led to the Vietnam tragedy, namely the belief that the will and spirit of the North Vietnamese people could be broken by massive bombing. He does not point to the ignorance of the enemy that is at the core of this thinking, just as it is at the core of the failure in Iraq, which was an adventure that the United States undertook without the slightest idea what it was getting into. It is precisely this ignorance that should be exposed before the issue of morality is debated.

# WREAKING HAVOC

Every New Year and on certain other occasions, my Israeli cable provider opens up all its channels free of charge. The idea is to generate goodwill by appearing to be generous but also, of course, to tempt viewers to shell out a few more bucks every month on new cable packages. I don't know what results they get but at least for their film channels I think this generosity has the opposite effect, because instead of running quality films they show the usual crap. It may be that they themselves can't tell the difference between good and bad films, or believe their viewers can't, or that this is what Hollywood is turning out these days. Nonetheless, by the law of averages, among the thousands of films they show, there are bound to be a few worth watching, and when all the movie channels are open – seven of them simultaneously – you may even get a few being shown at roughly the same time. That's how it happened that I was faced with the dilemma of watching *Kramer vs. Kramer*, *Cold Mountain*, *Blazing Saddles* – all of which I had seen – or *Taken* with Liam Neeson, which I hadn't.

I chose *Taken*, but was able to catch a few minutes of the others before it came on. *Cold Mountain* and *Blazing Saddles* didn't really appeal to me this time around. In the case of *Cold Mountain*, I suppose it was because the framework of the film (and of the novel, which I had also read) – the Odysseus story – was etched so clearly in my mind that the film itself became anticlimactic. As for *Blazing Saddles*, I guess I wasn't in the mood for its craziness. *Kramer vs. Kramer*, on the other hand, was riveting, though I also had a very clear sense of it. This was of course because of the acting. Meryl Streep is always superb and Dustin Hoffman is always Dustin Hoffman, somewhat hyperactive, which can be annoying at times but which worked pretty well here. I watched a little of it and then switched over to the start of *Taken*.

Neeson is ex-CIA, a master of marshal arts and of getting things done. Reluctantly he allows his seventeen-year-old daughter to fly to Paris for a vacation, where she is promptly kidnapped by an Albanian human trafficking ring. Neeson is on the next plane to Paris, picks out the point man for the Albanians at the airport, who gets himself killed fleeing Neeson in a wild car chase. Neeson now gets onto the gang with a little help from French Intelligence, shows up where they are keeping some of the kidnapped girls on drugs and wreaks some more havoc, killing them all and rescuing a girl who gives him another lead. Next he shows up at an auction where the girls are being displayed holographically to a black marketer, does some more killing and finds out that his daughter is on a yacht, having been consigned to a fat sheikh. More mayhem, more killing, and Liam gets the girl.

I did not count how many people Neeson killed. Some he shoots, others he overcomes in classic karate style, one he electrocutes, and he even shoots the wife of a corrupt intelligence officer in the arm to get some information from him. This is heady stuff. Neeson is not Jean-Claude Van Damme or Steven Seagal or even Sylvester Stallone. He is a first-rate actor, that is, he is thoroughly convincing in an improbable story, carrying it off through the sheer force of his cinematic personality. The film grossed 230 million dollars and a sequel made 375 million. It is not surprising. Neeson is the indomitable hero we all want to be. He is resourceful, determined, forceful, invincible. Paradoxically, in order to enjoy such films we must depersonalize them, that is, repress the vicarious element and refuse to recognize that they play directly to our feelings of resentment and inadequacy. We would all like to be forceful and invincible ourselves but just as importantly we would all like to get back at people who occupy a higher station in life than ourselves and remind us of our insignificance by the very fact of their existence – the rich, the powerful, and even the criminals who prey on our weakness and make us cringe. Neeson does it for us.

It is not just America or the West in general that requires heroes. Everyone does, and therefore you have flourishing movie industries in India and Egypt too and eager audiences everywhere. Ultimately these movies tell us more about ourselves than a thousand sociological studies and all the Dr. Phils in the world. What they are telling us is something we do not really wish to hear, and hence the repression, leading us to affix some innocuous tag like “escapism” to these films so that we can watch them without having to think too much about ourselves. Even the movie makers don’t understand fully what depths they are plumbing. Intuitively, they have gotten on to the great mother lode of human fantasy and are content to mine it for all it’s worth.

# THE BLETCHLEY CIRCLE

*The Bletchley Circle* was an enormously popular British miniseries about four women who worked as codebreakers in World War II in Bletchley Park outside London and are able to put their skills and training to good use after the war to track down criminals outside police channels. The first of its two seasons, which premiered in the U.S. in 2013, had them going after a serial killer after picking up what the police had missed – the hidden pattern of the killings. Like many popular films, its interest is sociological as much as dramatic, for such films are popular precisely because they strike a responsive chord in the viewing audience. In the case of *The Bletchley Circle*, the chord is the patronizing dismissal by the police of the theories of the women about the identity and modus operandi of the serial killer, which of course turn out to be correct. This is a distinct subgenre in popular film making, one that taps into the universal resentment of authority among ordinary people and their feelings of satisfaction when one of their own shows the authorities up. As such, it is related to films that feature an invincible hero who overcomes the forces of evil, which feed off the same feelings of resentment and inadequacy in the viewing audience. In both genres the protagonist is a surrogate figure through which the viewer lives vicariously.

It is not specifically the police that we resent, of course. It is anyone who has the power to tell us what to do, to bully us, dismiss us, deny our requests – anyone, in a word, who reminds us of our insignificance and helplessness in the larger scheme of things. Popular film makers help us get back at them. They understand intuitively what people respond to, without ever giving the game away in any explicit way. It is also interesting to note that the series was equally popular in two very different kinds of societies – a class society like Britain's with its tradition of compliance and an egalitarian society like America's with its tradition of defiance. Both obviously breed resentment – totally repressed in Britain, where the idea or value of knowing your place lingers on despite the democratization of the country, and very near the surface in America, where ordinary people quickly learn to recognize the enormous distance that separates them from “successful” people and are given to understand that they have no one to blame for their failures but themselves.

Like advertisers, therefore, the film industry exploits the vulnerability of its audience, though the former acts cynically while the latter acts intuitively. Both therefore thrive on manipulation, speaking directly to our unconscious minds, which in the West has by and large replaced outright physical exploitation as the most effective way to make money.

# FAKING IT

I am always amused when Hollywood actors and directors talk about the complexity of their characters. Most often they are talking about a few striking characteristics arbitrarily tacked on to the single dimension of the character to give him a certain individuality or credible motivation and which has very little to do with what real human beings are like. Complexity in human beings is conflict, which may resolve itself into a certain mode of behavior or remain unresolved and yield inconsistent modes of behavior. In all cases the complexity consists of what is going on in the individual's mind. This the popular film does not know how to represent so instead it displays the opposed impulses side by side, showing now one and now the other and at best "unifying" them with a hackneyed "back story." A good example, which I caught on TV not too long ago, is *In the Electric Mist* (2009), directed by a Frenchman, Bertrand Tavernier, which in itself evokes the idea of *cinema*, though he is mostly a creator of thrillers, and starring Tommy Lee Jones, a very competent actor. Here is how Tavernier describes the "complexity" of the Jones character:

**Cineaste:** *What is it you like about Dave Robicheaux?*

**Tavernier:** The fact that he is such a complex character. He is somebody who has wounds, who has been hurt by life, but who still fights on behalf of what George Orwell called "the common decency." He typifies all the virtues of that expression: the sense of collectivity and idealism, generosity, the act of giving without receiving. Although he has a wife and family, Robicheaux is also very solitary. He is haunted by the idea of rediscovering the Louisiana of his childhood, he is willing to fight to rediscover it. He would like to change the world but he knows that the world won't be changed. He seeks to protect his moral integrity. He is alone because he doesn't want his wife to be involved in his work. His first wife was killed by gangsters. He is someone who has already paid dearly for his moral integrity. He tries to protect his house, which is a kind of oasis for him. But he has dark, somber streaks that make him complex and very human. When he has explosions of violence, he feels guilty about them. He suffers remorse. I like men who fight, who have shadows and who are not always right. I like them even if their battle is not likely to succeed. I have an enormous tenderness for Robicheaux.... I feel very close to that, to the violence and to his regrets for using it as he does.

All this is true of pretty much every other police detective seen on the screen, the most visible manifestation of which is usually a drinking problem, just as is the case with Robicheaux. The banality of Hollywood characterization is generally swallowed up and thereby masked in the persona of the actor, whose living presence deceives the viewer into believing that he is observing a real human being rather than an empty caricature. The actors themselves are completely taken in, as they have to be if they are to act credibly, and speak about their one-dimensional characters in the same solemn terms as Tavernier, as though these hard-drinking cops and Academy Award-winning stockbrokers and psychopaths had been lifted right out of Dostoevsky. It is precisely this hollowness that makes scripted speech sound so unnatural, unlike improvised speech, which comes from the actor and not the character. The actor acts out now one emotion, now another, first anger, then tenderness, then rage, then remorse, and this is meant to represent his complexity but is in fact manipulated to meet the demands of the “plot” and has very little to do with how real human beings acting out of inner necessity actually act.

Aside from their entertainment value, however, popular films do have their function, though it is not to depict actual life. Their function is to embody the society’s myths, and this, unconsciously, they do very well, however crudely vis-à-vis the Ancient Greeks and Romans. The central myth of American life is the myth of the hero, around whom are woven other myths, like the myth of perfect love. The old myths grappled with metaphysical and etiological problems. The modern myths, in the age of the individual, deal with our private dreams. Essentially, they address themselves to our feelings of inadequacy and offer us the chance to live vicariously through the characters on the screen. This is no small thing, and clearly necessary in societies such as ours. That is why they make so much money.

# DR. PHIL IS NOT A PILL

Dr. Phil is not a pill. Nosir. He is a voyeur. Voyeurism, as we all know, is like drug addiction. The user – in this case the viewing audience – needs stronger and stronger doses to get his high. You start with husbands cheating on their wives and you end up with daughters sleeping with their fathers. You start with kids stealing from their mothers' purses and you end up with rapists and serial killers. I have noticed this with Dr. Phil, who used to be quite tame, dealing mostly with everyday problems, but seems to be on a downward spiral, turning to the camera every minute or two to assure us that he is only doing this to help people out and not, God forbid, to make millions of dollars. He is quite articulate, despite the sleepy Neanderthal eyes in the big head, and always gives reasonable advice, though he is often predisposed to push guests in a certain direction, as with Octomom, for instance, whom he was determined to get to admit that she was irresponsible in order to get the show on high moral ground, even when it was clear that responsibility wasn't the issue. Dr. Phil of course has a website where he peddles his books and spinoffs like the megabuck TV preachers and other hucksters and like them cannot entirely conceal a certain cynicism beneath the veneer. The cynicism in his case consists in exploiting the grief and misery of real people to put together a good show, not that I doubt for a second that he really wants to help them. Of course, if you're not sitting on a shocker or don't have the right presence, aint no way Dr. Phil is gonna be lending you a helping hand on national TV. Nosir. For that you'll have to go directly to the website and shell out a few bucks for the magical self-help elixirs. The two impulses always mesh in this kind of environment – the desire to help and the desire to make money. You can say that all doctors are like that, medical or otherwise, as are lawyers, accountants, agents, architects, and so on, so what's wrong with it? I suppose that what is wrong with it is determined by how far you are willing to go, how far you are willing to play to your audience's worst impulses, how far you are willing to lower standards of modesty and decorum. Dr. Phil is starting to move toward the bottom. The next stop is Ricki Lake, and after that Jerry Springer.

Or do you just run out of problems after a while and start focusing on headline grabbers? Nowadays Dr. Phil likes to go to the press to get his sensationalized material. Half the work has already been done by the yellow journalists, who have created a monster ripe for the plucking like Octomom or the latest child killer. All Dr. Phil has to do is get them or their families in front of a camera, pull out the index cards where he stores the incriminating evidence

and fire away, solemn as a deacon. He pulls this off wonderfully well. That's why he's up there. The audience knows it's in good hands. He never falters. The words of wisdom are always forthcoming. Now a helping hand. Now a smart rap on the knuckles. It's all grist to his mill. Dr. Phil is not a pill.

Dr. Phil represents the worst in television, though many would call it the best. The difference is not very great. The reality and confession shows are an intermediate stage in the evolution of television programming. The dramas simulate violence and other horrors, using actors. The Dr. Phils talk about violence and other horrors, using real people. The next step is obviously to *show* the violence and horrors, using the same real people. Yes, my friends, if you hang in there, you're going to witness actual murders and even rapes in the next ten or twenty years. After all, where do you go from here? Today you only get a rare, fortuitous glimpse of live-action shootouts on the news. There is no Dr. Phil out there to set them up for us. But don't despair. It will start with man beating shit out of woman under the lights of three dozen cameras strategically placed around the house. Audience will gasp. You may get some rough sex too. Sooner or later you will get a rape or murder, tastefully edited at first, and with a great deal of rationalization: so that we can see the danger signs, as Dr. Phil likes to put it. Much discussion on the talk shows, for and against. That will be the beginning. Live sex and violence will have its own Hugh Heffner. You can bet on it.

What we are edging toward is of course the degeneracy of the Roman Empire, that old bread and circuses thing. With so much leisure time on their hands, people don't really know what to do with themselves. Western education has seen to it that people lack the inner resources to engage in meaningful leisure-time activities. The breakdown of family life and the alienation of the young have made satisfaction within the family circle almost nonexistent. Women watch daytime TV, men watch ballgames and the kids go to the mall or play computer games when they aren't texting each other. Entertainment fills the void. In Rome the rich often footed the bill. In America the public does, though sponsors too kick in their share in return for access to a captive audience. The idea of making a great deal of money out of entertainment is relatively new, historically speaking. The profit motive only serves to inject a lot more cynicism into the mix and the element of competition among producers ensures the public greater and greater extremes in what is served up to it.

Dr. Phil belongs to the pioneer generation of mass market voyeurism. He himself strikes one as a fairly decent individual who can't resist riding the wave, though he is also one of its pacesetters, bringing tastelessness to new heights. This is what you do when you get a daytime TV show with an audience of bored housewives. If you don't deliver you'll find yourself out on the street. That's show biz.



## GRISHAM

Once in a great while – every few years or so – I get desperate for distraction and jump into town to pick up a few thrillers. I usually buy them in threes, because my used book store gives you the third one for free. In this way I recently bought *The Racketeer* by John Grisham along with novels by Faye Kellerman and John Connolly. Though I'd seen a number of the movies made from Grisham's novels, I only remember having read one of them before, *The Runaway Jury*, which I'd enjoyed but did not find remarkable in any way. Consequently I was surprised, even astounded, by how good the writing in *The Racketeer* turned out to be, at least in the opening pages, which show Grisham at his best. I mean the quality of the prose, the clean, precise, perfectly measured sentences, or what might even be called the *manly* diction. In fact, if Grisham were to put his name to the opening pages of *The Sun Also Rises*, I wouldn't bat an eye. Here is what he sounds like:

I'm forty-three years old and halfway through a ten-year sentence handed down by a weak and sanctimonious federal judge in Washington, D.C. All of my appeals have run their course, and there is no procedure, mechanism, obscure statute, technicality, loophole, or Hail Mary left in my thoroughly depleted arsenal. I have nothing. Because I know the law, I could do what some inmates do and clog up the courts with worthless motions and writs and other junk filings, but none of them would help my cause. Nothing will help my cause. The reality is that I have no hope of getting out for five more years, save for a few lousy weeks chopped off at the end for good behavior, and my behavior has been exemplary.

In a nutshell, the narrator of *The Racketeer*, a disbarred lawyer, is serving time for his unwitting involvement in a client's money-laundering operation. About halfway through it he reads that a federal judge has been murdered, tells us that he knows who the murderer is, and contacts the FBI with an offer to reveal the murderer's name in exchange for his release. By page 60 or so, the deal with the FBI looks like it is about to be closed. If I were writing such a novel, I could see myself stretching it out for maybe another 100 pages, Simenonlike, and then tacking on a surprise ending, and that would be it. Grisham gives us nearly 400 pages, and the truth is, the novel becomes somewhat tedious and the prose loses much of its edge as it drags along; but still I have to wonder why someone capable of writing so well bothers to write such novels instead of trying his hand at something that has meaning or value.

I don't believe it's for the money or even the fame. Grisham had a successful career as an attorney before he started writing and even served two terms as a Mississippi state representative. It may seem natural for a literary lawyer to write about lawyers and end up writing legal thrillers almost exclusively but the option of writing serious fiction is always there for someone who enjoys writing and feels the urge to create a novel. One has to conclude, therefore, that if Grisham didn't choose that option it was only because he lacked the talent for it. Certainly he strikes one as a man who has reflected on life, society, the world. Certainly he has had all the feelings that serious writers experience when they contemplate the world. I would even imagine that certain stories have taken shape in his mind that have had the feel of real literature, but apparently he has backed away from them, lacking the confidence to undertake a literary venture that isn't propped up by a plot. It may be unfair to single out Grisham. He is like a thousand other thriller writers in this respect. But he writes better than most and therefore makes you ask the question.

There is an enormous gap between popular and serious fiction. My guess is that even today most young writers would rather be Tolstoy than Dan Brown, or John Grisham. But they can't, so they settle for a kind of writing that can only be called frivolous, something just a single notch above playing ball for a living, assured that the size of their bank accounts will end all arguments. I would have liked to see John Grisham and some of the others give literature a serious try. Who knows? In any case the adventure of such a journey, the adventure of artistic creation, is one of the most exhilarating experiences a human being can have. It makes the journey worthwhile even if it fails.

# HARLAN COBEN, AMONG OTHERS

Now that we have the Internet it is very easy to get at lists of the greatest things – movies, books, records, kings, criminals, snacks. Of course, we had such lists before, but now we have them in abundance and naturally enough they reflect the changing times. For example, while old lists of the greatest movies always included popular or Hollywood films alongside what we would call art house films – *Gone with the Wind* and *The Godfather*, *E.T.* and *Star Wars*, alongside Bergman and Fellini, Goddard and Truffaut – lists of the greatest novels did not, that is, did not include popular novels – no *Gone with the Wind* and *The Godfather* alongside Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, Kafka and Mann. Now they often do, and even the Harry Potter books. It is understandable why such a democratization of literature should have occurred in an age of declining standards where anyone can log on and say whatever comes into his head to a pretty big audience. But when things were different and a list was still a list, it did occur to me to ask myself why the movie lists were such a mixed bag while the book lists were pure gold. My simple answer at the time was that while it was literary critics and scholars who set literary standards, it was mostly people associated with Hollywood who set movie standards. Therefore, when all was said and done, popular films and “serious” films were spoken of by respectable critics in pretty much the same terms – as epic, powerful, moving, and so on and so forth. In the context of the Hollywood film, serious films were almost a genre, representing, like foreign films, which they were often thought to resemble, one category among many and judged in the end by the standards of the popular film. What the popular film and the popular novel have in common is that they focus on the telling of a story. Serious films and novels may of course also tell a story, but unlike the popular film and novel, where the demands of the “plot” dictate the actions of the characters, who exist solely to serve its requirements, narrative works of art grow out of the characters themselves, who determine the direction of the story and give it meaning.

It is therefore easy enough to distinguish between a novel by Joyce Carol Oates or Philip Roth or John Updike and a novel like *The Godfather*, which is as well written as a popular novel can be, with echoes even of D.H. Lawrence in the superb Apollonia section, but totally flat in the rendering of character and thematically as banal as a novel by Harold Robbins. Or are we being too hard on popular literature? Well, the fact is that people of discriminating or shall we say literary taste can be moved by popular movies just as they are moved by popular music, but are never moved by popular novels. This may strike one as odd. However, the popular movie has the advantage of being able to circumvent the banality of its text and achieve a measure of credibility by attaching itself to the persona of the actor, while popular music can hide the banality of its lyrics behind the art of the singer or a haunting melody. Popular literature, on the other hand, has no such props. It stands or falls on the quality of the written word. There is no Julia Roberts between the sheets, or covers, to lend credence to the improbable dialogue or a Celine Dion to give life to the lifeless prose. And once you lose confidence in the reality of the characters you naturally lose interest in their lives. Therefore popular literature only works for readers with low expectations, though genre writing – the thriller, for example – can occasionally be enjoyed by discriminating readers for the simple reason that it lays aside any pretence at depicting actual life.

I started reading thrillers in my twenties. I suppose it was because I had pretty much polished off Literature by then and was reading history quite intensively, so I needed something for relaxation. I read the James Bond novels first, discovering them in *Playboy* magazine, where they were occasionally serialized. From there I went on to the quality thriller writers: Eric Ambler, Nicolas Freeling, John Le Carré, and Graham Greene's "entertainments," and of course Dashiell Hammet and Raymond Chandler. Subsequently I became a fan of Ed McBain, Ross Macdonald, and the Martin Beck mysteries, with a little Simenon mixed in too. Along the way I also read whatever else looked promising. I kept this up for around ten years and then pretty much gave up on the genre, feeling, I suppose, that I had exhausted it. It was only around thirty years later that I started reading this kind of book again, looking as always for the best of the lot. The writers I stuck with for a while were Michael Connelly, John Connolly, John Sandford, and Scott Turow. Then I gave up on them too. Recently, however, I saw a TV interview with Harlan Coben, whom I'd never heard of, and decided to give him a try as well.

Thrillers or mysteries are of course read for their stories and nothing else. Occasionally you get the bonus of stylish writing but without the whodunit or suspense element there is nothing really there. Of the earlier writers, Greene and Simenon also gave you a real psychological dimension, but the two of them were the exception, belonging more to literature even in their genre writing. Of the newer lot, in terms of writing, the best, in my view, is Michael Connelly. The turns of phrase are, well, those of a real writer, and one feels that he could conceivably be one, but he has chosen not to. The failings are those of all the others, but most of all, the characters are not alive. They do not act out of any inner necessity but, again, in accordance with the demands of the plot, being typecast to fulfill a function, though they are given a certain individuality and motivation within their single dimension. This is not just true of the minor characters but, as can be seen in a novel like Connelly's *Void Moon*, where we accompany the two antagonists for the space of 450 pages, also of the major characters. In the case of *Void Moon*, they are very promising: a female hotel burglar and a psychopathic security chief. The burglar is given a "back story," she is a wounded creature, she is out for revenge. However, nothing else about her interests Connelly and therefore nothing else about her is represented in its own right. The security chief is a pure one-dimensional psychopath in the tradition of such psychopaths. Nothing else about him interests Connelly either. This is about par for the course. That is why I gave up on the genre.

But if Connelly represents the best, what of the worst, for they too produce bestsellers and laugh all the way to the bank, as Leon Uris used to put it, though admittedly they are bestsellers of the kind that are read by readers who expect a story to tear along at breakneck speed and characters to embody clear and simple virtues and vices. For the literary reader, on the other hand, what is decisive is the correlation between the quality of the writing and the effectiveness of the plot. As long as the story is good enough to override the bad writing, such novels remain readable. When it is not, they are thrown aside impatiently.

The Harlan Coben novel I picked out to read is the fairly recent *Long Lost*. The protagonist, Myron Bolitar, a sports agent, receives a phone call from a woman he had an affair with "nearly a decade ago," asking him to come to Paris to help her out. To get him there, Coben has to extract Myron from his current affair. This he does in three quick chapters, working in a confrontation with a bullying basketball coach to spice up the action. Then he's on his way.

These first three chapters reveal Coben at his worst, when his characters “interact” outside the framework of the plot, that is, when they are meant to engage in real human intercourse. He has also endowed his hero, quite unintentionally, I believe, with a simpering manner marked by lame sarcasms that call to mind the worst of sitcom writing. Here is Myron when the bullying coach confronts him and challenges him to a fight:

“Is this the part where I pee in my pants?”

“Tonight at ten. Back parking lot.”

“That’s past my curfew. And I’m not that kind of date.  
Dinner first. Maybe bring flowers.”

The reason Myron is summoned to Paris by his old flame, Terese, is because her ex-husband has gone missing after calling her and asking to see her on an urgent matter. Myron has been summoned because he is “good at finding people.” But right off, he is picked up by the police, with more “witty” dialogue:

“I want a lawyer.”

“And I want to take a bubble bath with Catherine  
Deneuve.”

And then:

We stopped in front of a door with a little sign next to it  
that read GROUPE BERLEAND.

“Your first name is Groupe?”

And later:

Police detective (in a “thick French accent”): “You are a  
lying sheet.”

Myron: “And you are a lying pillowcase.”

It turns out that Terese's ex-husband is in the morgue and the police want to know all about Myron's connection to them, as Terese is suspected of murdering him. And furthermore a strand of blonde hair and some blood have been found at the scene of the crime that DNA testing shows to belong to the ex-husband's daughter. But Terese and the husband do not have a daughter, or rather they had one who was killed in a car crash just before the divorce ten years ago, and then it turns out that the current wife does not have a daughter either by the ex-husband. The plot thickens, as they say. Myron is released. There follows a shootout at a café, a glimpse of a blonde girl in the getaway van, Myron arrested again, Myron released again, and now Terese missing.

But it is in fact Myron's partner, Win, coming over to Paris to do some investigating on his own, who has taken Terese out of circulation and now sends them off to London in his private plane to question the ex-husband's current wife. From here on in, with the characters seldom required to talk to each other but only to address the plot, they slip into standard disembodied thrillerspeak, which sounds as if it had been generated by a computer:

"How much do you know about her car accident?"

[Win] asked.

"Just what I told you now."

"Terese never saw the body. That is rather curious."

"She was unconscious for two weeks. You can't keep a body out of the ground for that long."

"Still. Didn't her now-deceased ex say that whatever he had to tell her would change everything?"

"There has to be some other explanation. Like I said, the DNA tests are preliminary."

And so on and so forth.

Everyone now suspects that the daughter is still alive. Myron, Terese and Win check into a London hotel, where there is some relationship stuff before getting back to serious business with a visit to a pub where the waitresses "were supposed to look like the models in that Robert Palmer 'Addicted to Love' video excerpt ... remade with the cast of *The Golden Girls*" and "He looked like he'd just walked out of a Spandau Ballet video," all of which is pretty bad Dennis Miller, and Dennis Miller at his best is bad enough. In any case, the first half of the novel ends after 200 pages with another big shootout.

The second half of the novel finds Myron back in the States recovering from the gunshot wound he received in the big shootout and with his memory of the shooting and its aftermath pretty much gone. We now get Homeland Security, Arab terrorists, the obligatory Mossad walk-on, cryonics, more relationship stuff, and the bang-up finish.

It is hard for me to imagine what pleasure a writer can get from writing this kind of novel when real life is just a step away. Is Coben pulling his punches to keep it simple, or is this the best he can do? I realize that he has millions of readers and I do not wish to insult them. *Time* magazine, which once heaped not a little scorn on writers of what it called “Irving” books (Irving Stone, Irving Wallace), now solemnly interviews the creators of vampire and werewolf books. It is said that the Harry Potter novels got kids to read again, but I suspect that what they will be reading is precisely these vampire and werewolf books, and then Harlan Coben, and that will be it, for this is where we are at, and it is a remarkable youngster indeed who will pick up Joyce or Proust. In a world where books compete with computer games, only a Harlan Coben can survive, and whereas in the past the Harlan Cobens carried entire publishing houses and enabled them to publish serious writers, today the Harlan Cobens only enable the big publishing houses to publish lesser Harlan Cobens. I am aware that here and there they still publish “prestige” books, but fewer and fewer people are reading them, unless they have somehow caught on through the same kind of hype that sells Harlan Coben’s books and the elevation of their authors to the status of celebrities whose private lives are of more interest to the public and to talk show hosts than their writing.

On the evidence of *Long Lost*, Coben is pretty much a run-of-the-mill writer in the thriller line, not quite good enough to engage the attention of a discriminating reader, though given his success it may well be that this is one of his weaker books and that he has produced more “riveting” plots in the past. At any rate I will not be reading him again. I have a novel by Ian McEwan at the top of the pile and I have been rereading the novels and essays of James Baldwin. I would also like to go back to Thomas Hardy. We old-fashioned readers are dying off and I am afraid that Literature is dying too.



# THE MUSTACHE

*La Moustache* (2005), directed by Emmanuel Carrère and adapted from his own novel, is an intriguing film. Call it surrealistic. But what is surrealism? Is it pure and meaningless fantasy, or is it anchored in reality like the dream?

Marc shaves off his mustache, or so it seems, for no one takes any notice of his new look. This is exasperating, but when he confronts his wife she insists he never had one, and his friends claim he hasn't had one for 15 years, though he finds a recent picture of himself wearing the mustache. Marc now finds a message from his father on his answering machine but his wife tells him that his father has been dead for a year. She also insists that she doesn't know who their two best friends are though they had just visited them. Marc then overhears his wife talking to another friend about having Marc committed, for clearly he is delusional, she says. He tries to see his mother but cannot find his childhood home and the familiar telephone number does not exist. Marc now retrieves his passport, which shows him with a mustache, and flies to Hong Kong, where he regrows it after spending some time in a Chinese village. When he returns to his hotel he finds his wife in his room as though they had been vacationing together all the while. She then asks him to shave off the mustache so that she can see what he looks like without it. He does so and she is pleased.

No one has really succeeded in deciphering the film. Some have called it symbolic. Some find the theme of identity in it, and there is indeed something to be said for an interpretation that revolves around the idea of the tenuousness and circumstantiality, the *fragility*, of human identity, which can be lost in an instant. I think, however that the film is more in the mode of Alain Robbe-Grillet, that is, meaningless outside its own reality and reference points. In effect, it obliterates the time of the world and demonstrates its disjunction vis-à-vis inner time.

For clearly the film plays against time. Marc and his wife inhabit two different temporal universes, even parallel universes. In Marc's universe he shaves off the mustache that he has always worn and his father is still alive. He inhabits a time that has passed, with a link to the present via the people who surround him. When he communicates with them it is from out of this earlier time. In reality, however, such a condition cannot exist unless someone really is delusional. This is not the film's intention. Marc is not crazy and his wife is not out to drive him crazy. Not being able to find his childhood home underscores the fact that he has stepped out of reality. His time is not really linked to any reality. It is residual in that it bears with it traces of an earlier time but not all of it.

Linear time, however, is not the only time there is. It is the time of the physical and historical world, but it is not the time of the inner world. The mind invokes temporal events in whatever order suits it, or associatively in a subconscious process. This is lateral rather than progressive or chronological time, where all events have equal temporal value. Surrealism never seeks to explain itself. It creates worlds that are an extensions of what we consider the real world and follow their own logic. *The Mustache* is such a film, intriguing only insofar as we wish to know what it *means*, but in and of itself it is nothing more than a demonstration of how two discordant systems of time are tenuously embedded in human consciousness.

# VIOLINS IN THE VOID: 3 BY NABOKOV

Do people still read Vladimir Nabokov? Do people still read anyone? Out here in the sticks, all I can say for certain is that the blockbuster movies keep raking it in and that Harlan Coben makes a pretty good living. But there was a time when people did read Nabokov. He was in vogue, and a few of his novels were even serialized in *Playboy* magazine. Certainly he had a way with words – English words and, I assume, Russian words as well. Recently I happened to buy three of Orhan Pamuk’s novels and was surprised to see the *Guardian* call another of them worthy to stand beside *Lolita*, *Madame Bovary* and *Anna Karenina* as a work about romantic love. I did not remember *Lolita* as worthy of that company at all. I remembered it as clever, entertaining, sly. In fact I did not remember any of Nabokov’s novels as particularly affecting, to be honest; but though I had read just about all of them I found only three in the house now: *Laughter in the Dark*, *Bend Sinister* and *Invitation to a Beheading*. I was certain that I also had *Lolita*, *Pale Fire*, *Transparent Things* and even *Pnin*. For a long time I have had the feeling that a carton of my books fell off the truck one time when we were moving, because occasionally I can’t find one that I know I had. In any case, I feel inclined now to reread the three Nabokov novels that I do have in the house to see if I remember them correctly.

I start with *Laughter in the Dark*. Nabokov originally published it in Russian in 1933 as *Kamera Obskura* and translated it himself into English a few years later while residing in Germany. Subsequently he settled in the United States and in the 1940s and 1950s taught comparative and Russian literature at Wellesley and Cornell, where he could disparage all the novelists he didn’t like, starting with “Tolstoevski,” while killing butterflies and playing chess in his spare time. He ended his life in Switzerland.

It is very easy to be seduced by the Nabokov style. The prose is sometimes limpid, sometimes lush, generally elegant and often brilliant, though from time to time the English is just a bit off (“The baby at first was red and wrinkled like a toy balloon on its decline”; and where we would write “got in touch” with someone, Nabokov writes “got into touch”; and instead of a blade of grass, a stalk of grass; and instead of the car backed up, the car “backed”). At the same time, however, if some overzealous copyeditor had gotten his hands on the manuscript and taken it upon himself to smooth out the Nabokovian diction and idiom, the extraordinary style would have been pretty much destroyed.

Albinus, the hero or protagonist of *Laughter in the Dark*, is a wealthy “art critic and picture expert” who finds himself a very young and somewhat common mistress – “a little harlot” – as a supplement to his gentle wife. Since we already know that things will not end well – Nabokov has told us so in the first paragraph of the novel – we are curious to see what happens and push on despite the slow going, which is enlivened only by the Nabokovian prose (“the corners of her eyes folded back like the ears of a rabbit”).

The story continues to meander along, told for the pleasure of telling it. Albinus sets the mistress up in her own apartment while she indiscreetly phones, writes and even visits him at his house. It is her letter, read by the wife, that gives the game away. The wife leaves, escorted by her angry brother. Albinus packs a suitcase and moves in with the mistress. This is the first third of the novel.

Enter Otto, the mistress’s brother, a roughneck demanding money. Margot, the mistress, resists him. She doesn’t want anyone horning in on her. Otto pushes her around a little and insists. We think we understand how the rest of the story is going to play out. Our guess is a shakedown and violence, something in the mode of Simenon perhaps. But it turns out that we are wrong; the brother is never heard from again, which makes one wonder why he is there in the first place. Instead Margot’s old lover turns up, her one true love in fact, an artist who had abruptly abandoned her but is down on his luck now. Albinus is their meal ticket. They get together behind his back when they all go to France for a vacation. Albinus is suspicious, hustles Margot away in his car but promptly wrecks it, losing his sight in the accident. The scene shifts to Switzerland, where Albinus is taken to recuperate, but Rex the artist turns up again, unseen but somehow sensed by Albinus, and together with Margot cleans out his bank account while mocking him to his face. Enter the brother-in-law, who has gotten wind of how things stand, reveals Rex’s presence to Albinus and whisks him away to Berlin. Now Margot turns up at Albinus’s house to clean it out too, The sightless Albinus tries to shoot her but is shot and killed himself.

Not everything is elegantly told. When Nabokov is forced to manipulate the plot like any good 19th century novelist and our own popular writers, he does this very clumsily, as when Albinus discovers, through eyewitnesses, that Margot is cheating on him in France. He also kills off Albinus’s young daughter, who is living with her mother at her brother’s house. We know the child is going to die the moment we hear the word “flu.” The expedient of killing children as a form of literary retribution is more than a little unsavory. Hardy does it in *Jude the Obscure* and Updike does it in *Rabbit, Run*, and it has been noted that this kind of cruelty in an author is the obverse side of sentimentality. Nabokov is of course anything but sentimental, nor can he be accused of dealing in retribution. He is just piling things on.

But why is Nabokov telling us this story? In his own way, he is very much like Alain Robbe-Grillet here, but while Robbe-Grillet sought to achieve an objective representation of the materials out of which his novels are constructed, without reference to the outside world, Nabokov overlays these materials with his own unique sensibility. Thus the novel is really not about anything – not society and not the human condition as such – becoming in effect art for art's sake, with the characters simply set in motion so that Nabokov can tinker with them.

From here I move on to *Invitation to a Beheading*, also written originally in Russian in the 1930s but only appearing in English translation in 1959 (the work of Nabokov's son this time, "in collaboration" with the author). This time the victim is Cincinnatus C., a condemned man in the age of the Communists and the Nazis. Is this then going to be a political novel? Not at all. Nabokov even scolds the reader in his Foreword for thinking it might, though it turns out that his crime is a lack of "translucence," an "opacity" that keeps people from seeing through him, not to mention his habit of speaking the wrong words and making the wrong gestures. What these words and gestures are, we are not told. They are not necessarily political. In an insane world, people who are more insane or less insane than everyone else are bound to get into trouble.

And it is certainly an insane world that Nabokov is describing, the world of *Alice in Wonderland* if not of Kafka and Beckett, "a world which seems not a bad example of amateur craftsmanship, but is in reality calamity, horror, madness, error ..." But unlike Kafka, who achieves his characteristic effect by writing about this world matter-of-factly, as if the insanity was perfectly normal, Nabokov writes about it as if it really is insane, letting his imagination run wild. *Invitation to a Beheading* is a comic masterpiece.

The insanity is exemplified by the upbeat and somewhat long-winded director of the prison fortress where Cincinnatus is held awaiting execution, who eats his food and tells him it's against the rules to mumble; the guard who feeds a mechanical spider and offers to dance with him, that is, with Cincinnatus; the executioner, a M'sieur Pierre, who pretends to be a prisoner in order to get Cincinnatus to like him; his unfaithful wife's family who arrives for a visit with its own furniture – a table and chairs, a sofa, a closet, household utensils, "a tricycle with orthopedic attachments" and even individual sections of walls. All of this is something more than just satire or farce. It is explicitly an exercise in imaginative writing, "a violin in the void," for as Nabokov once put it: what was going on in his head was infinitely more interesting than what was going on in the world.

Cincinnatus, for his part, spends his time ruminating and filling sheets of paper with his thoughts, when he isn't being pestered by the prison personnel. Here Nabokov produces a kind of credo, in a single chapter-long paragraph. First, an esthetic of language:

... how words are combined, what one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and to share its neighbor's sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbor and renewing the neighboring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence ...

Then a vision of life:

It exists, my dream world, it must exist, since, surely there must be an original of the clumsy copy. Dreamy, round, and blue, it turns slowly toward me. It is as if you are lying supine, with eyes closed, on an overcast day, and suddenly the gloom stirs under your eyelids, and slowly becomes first a languorous smile, then a warm feeling of contentment, and you know that the sun has come out from behind the clouds. With just such a feeling my world begins.

In the meanwhile, at a certain point in the narrative, Cincinnatus hears a tapping sound behind the wall of his cell and allows himself to believe that someone is digging a tunnel to get him out, but it turns out that the director and M'sieur Pierre are playing a little joke on him, as the tunnel leads back to M'sieur Pierre's cell. On the way back to his own cell on all fours, Cincinnatus somehow finds himself outside the prison walls, where he runs into the director's young daughter, a precursor of Lolita, who leads him by a circuitous route back to the director's apartment in the fortress, where the family and M'sieur Pierre are enjoying dinner. Subsequently, on execution day, which is abruptly announced to him, Cincinnatus is taken to the execution site in the middle of town and made to lie down on the chopping block, but then, with "sudden clarity ... suffusing him with joy," he asks himself: "Why am I here? Why am I lying like this?" and "answers his own question" by getting up and walking away while behind him the entire town begins to crumble, everything collapsing and coming apart and borne away by a swirling wind as Cincinnatus makes his way toward freedom where he might find "beings akin to him."

If one insists on appending a message or meaning to the novel, it may be that totalitarianism cannot shackle the free spirit. But this does not really seem to be what Nabokov is getting at. It would perhaps be closer to Nabokov's intention to say that death may be conquered by art and reality by the imagination (just as seriousness may be conquered by whimsy). Nonetheless, the Nabokovian sensibility was created by Revolutionary Russia and the privileged dream world that preceded it, at least for Nabokov. I enjoy *Invitation to a Beheading* as I did not enjoy *Laughter in the Dark*. It is often hilarious, and occasionally I found myself laughing out loud.

The third Nabokov novel that I read is *Bend Sinister*, the second of the novels that he wrote originally in English, published in 1947, six years after *The Real Life of Sebastian Knight* (the first) and eight years before *Lolita* (the third).

*Bend Sinister* takes us right back to the insane world of *Invitation to a Beheading*. We are now in the midst of a revolution, clearly a preoccupation of Nabokov's, and this time it is Professor Krug, a world-famous philosopher, who gets into trouble. His wife has died during an operation and he now wishes to get back home to his young son but is stopped at a bridge by some illiterate sentries. Fortunately he runs into a grocer and they end up signing each other's passes and continuing on their way. In this upside-down world, buses only stop if at least three people wish to get off and passengers without the exact fare (17 cents per mile) can only get a refund at some remote post office up to 33 hours after getting off the bus. Summoned to the University, which has been closed down by the revolutionary authorities, Krug is then beseeched to act as a go-between and petition the Ruler, a certain Panduk, also known as the Toad and now head of the Party of the Average Man, whom Krug had gone to school with and upon whose fat face he had occasionally sat. Krug refuses to sign the obsequious loyalty oath or meet with the Ruler. Krug's friends and colleagues now begin to be arrested as the regime tries to get his endorsement. Then he is separated from his son and promises to sign in order to get him back but the wrong child is mistakenly brought to him while his real son is being killed. In the end, Nabokov steps in and mercifully allows Krug to lose his mind.

*Bend Sinister* is much harsher than *Invitation to a Beheading*, which was fairly jovial in its craziness. But though in the later novel Nabokov takes us out into the totalitarian world that had destroyed his idyllic childhood life and which he had also encountered in Nazi Germany, the tone remains sardonic, turning everything into a species of black comedy, and the writing of course sparkles (“his false teeth rattling in his head like dice”; “a billion is a million with a bad cold”). This is the Nabokovian voice, joined to a temperament that keeps him from writing about this world with any degree of solemnity. The displays of erudition, the verbal pyrotechnics, the flights of imagination are as breathtaking as a highwire juggling act with a few somersaults thrown in for good measure. Nabokov is a performer in the way that dozens of formidable writers whom he habitually ridiculed are not. Consequently, readers of these novels will necessarily remain uncommitted to them and ultimately also untouched by them, because the characters are not really alive but figments of Nabokov’s imagination in too blatant and fantastical a way to elicit sympathy, though he asserts (in his Foreword) that the relationship between Krug and his son is the emotional center of the novel. I imagine Nabokov felt that it was beneath him to solicit sympathy for his characters by means of conventional literary devices. We will do things my way or not at all, one can hear him saying. And who can argue with him? The writing is brilliant, even too brilliant, seducing the writer as well as the reader. Perhaps this was the only way he could be what he was.



# EINSTEIN ON THE BEACH AGAIN

It was only in the early 1990s that I came to know the music of Philip Glass. I had heard his Violin Concerto on the radio and was immediately attracted to it, so at the first opportunity I went out and bought *Music in 12 Parts* after finding it noted with high praise in a CD guide that I had in the house. After a few minutes, however, I realized that what I was hearing, which had the effect on me of a broken record, was what I would be hearing for the next three hours and found myself thinking, “My God! what have I gotten myself into?”

This, I imagine, has been the experience of a great many of Glass’s admirers, not to mention his detractors. Nonetheless I forged ahead, and lo and behold! – the music began to draw me in, for it is mesmerizing and takes you out of yourself until you are riding along with it as on a train or a plane or a giant wave. Ultimately, then, the music is not assimilable like a literary text but must be entered into to be felt. Glass himself spoke of the composition as the culmination of the first phase of his musical career, what he begrudgingly agrees to be called the minimalist phase, in which he had created a new language, a kind of lexicon of motifs, harmonies and rhythms from which he could always draw. “I had worked for eight or nine years inventing a system, and now I’d written through it and come out the other end.”

The masterpiece of the next period was *Einstein on the Beach*, which has been described often enough as being virtually indescribable. First staged in France in July 1976 (and a few months later at New York’s Metropolitan Opera House), it was revolutionary, breaking the mold of the traditional opera. There is no story and there are no real characters but singers, dancers and actors who recite random numbers, solfège syllables and mostly nonsensical texts, like this one:

I was in this prematurely air-conditioned super market  
and there were all these aisles  
and there were all these bathing caps that you could buy  
which had these kind of Fourth of July plumes on them  
they were red and yellow and blue  
I was tempted to buy one  
but I was reminded of the fact that I had been avoiding  
the beach.

Nonetheless there are images, motifs, symbols, and Einstein himself, that allow you to get your bearings. Einstein is the central figure. Glass has him playing the violin, though all the performers are dressed like him and are themselves Einstein too, in many dimensions, but more importantly, what is unfolding all around him, and them, is an Einsteinian universe, culminating in nuclear holocaust. This ties in with the social or political aspect of the opera. An Einsteinian universe, however, is also deterministic, when all is said and done, and there is an inevitability too in the repetitive structures of Glass's music, though at the same time, set against it, there seems to me to be a human dimension in the opera that seeks to liberate itself from the rigid laws of this universe, paradoxically, by embracing them, by finding oneself in the eternal movement of things like the waves in the sea or the dancers in Lucinda Childs' wonderful choreography, or, ultimately, in love, which is the note on which the opera ends.

Glass collaborated with Robert Wilson, who designed and directed the opera, and with Lucinda Childs, who did the choreography and would later work with Glass on *Dance* as well in the same free-flowing, repetitive style that is perfectly attuned to his music. Thirty-eight years later, they were still with him, all three of them accompanying the Philip Glass Ensemble and the Lucinda Childs Dance Company in its two-year revival tour, with Childs even reading some of the texts. I saw the January 7 performance live on France's Mezzo TV from the Théâtre du Châtelet. (The tour is slated to end at the Berliner Festspiele in early March 2014.) It ran for something like four and a quarter hours. I'm sure the French audience knew what it was about to see but nonetheless the applause tended to be a little lukewarm compared with the almost hysterical enthusiasm with which the French, like the Russians, and unlike the Americans, greet anything that is perceived as Culture.

Glass and Wilson had decided to collaborate on a theatrical work based on a historical figure. Wilson wanted to use Charlie Chaplin, or even Hitler; Glass wanted Ghandi. In the end, they settled on Einstein, who had been one of Glass's childhood heroes. Wilson produced a series of drawings – “a kind of visual libretto,” according to Glass – and then Glass set them to music and Wilson constructed the sets.

The opera has four acts and nine scenes, beginning with the motif of a 19th century train – model trains being loved by Einstein as a child and trains being used by him to illustrate his theory of relativity – and ending with the motif of a 20th century spaceship, with five “knee plays” bridging the four acts and serving as the prologue and epilogue, the knee being “a joint that links two similar elements,” as Wilson put it. The actors move almost robotically. The music is pure Glass, though in the midst of the repetitive structures, there is one surprise, and that is a thoroughly incongruous tenor saxophone solo that is pure John Coltrane, soaring into the heavens – Glass’s tribute to a major influence on his music.

Essentially, in the absence of a plot and characters, the opera consists of the music, the thematic stage sets, the stylized movement of the performers, and the rifflike or repetitive or whimsical texts. Yet it is a masterpiece, an almost philosophical vision of the universe and the human drama taking place inside it. I think, again, that ultimately it is about freedom. It might be said then that to be free is to come out of oneself and embrace the harmony of the universe.

# THE ART OF DREAMING

When it comes to dreams, I am a Freudian. Ten thousand hours of “scientific” experiments on sleeping volunteers to tell us in which part of the night we dream most intensely is just not good enough; and while I am not too keen on psychoanalysis as a therapeutic method (leaning in the direction of existential analysis), I am convinced that Freud described the dream process correctly, and with surprising simplicity (leaving aside the whole business of wish fulfillment): repressed thoughts and feelings (the latent dream content) trying to force their way into consciousness when our defenses are down (in sleep); a censor posted at the threshold of consciousness to keep them out; distortion of what slips through, often using recent experiences (the manifest dream content) to build a narrative that disguises the repressed material and thereby shields us from what we cannot bear to know; and as a further precaution a tendency to forget dreams very quickly.

The idea of the censor is admittedly problematic. Sartre ridiculed it, evoking a little customs clerk at the threshold of consciousness with stamps and visas, and pointing out that in order to “censor” harmful thoughts and feelings the censor must first recognize them, which means he must know in order not to know. But the censorship is of course not a conscious act. It is reflexive: everything gets distorted, whether or not it is potentially harmful, just to be on the safe side.

How does such a mechanism come into being? You would have to call it an evolutionary aid, calculated to help us survive. But evolution itself is somewhat problematic, at least for me. Bergson spoke of the thousands of coordinated elements that go into the making of the human eye and could not believe that this was a random process, so he posited a guiding principle, an *élan vital*, something that one might describe as next to godliness but not quite the same thing.

The complexity of evolution is indeed a stumbling block for many. It is too fortuitous. Too many things have to come together to produce a viable organism. One is therefore inclined to say that there are genetic predispositions, whether guided from above or guided morphologically from within. But then again there is no guarantee that just those mutations that create advantages will prevail. It is not as if the human spine straightened itself out overnight and gave us an immediate edge. The evolutionary process that made us stand tall involved countless physiological changes, none of which in itself created an advantage that guaranteed their perpetuation or prevalence. It must

always be remembered that whenever we speak about evolutionary changes we are speaking about a single line or branch that bears the change. Mutation *a* produces an individual with an advantage that enables him to survive better or mate better or maybe just mind his own business and pass on his improved gene. But then one of his offspring must undergo mutation *b* to take the next step and carry the change forward, creating a new line or branch, unless his brothers and sisters undergo the same mutation, and so on and so forth almost ad infinitum.

Or can we say that one mutation invites another, from within, and that once the “eye” series commences, the mutations follow naturally, without any external agent? In such a case the brothers and sisters bearing the initial mutation will generate identical series of mutations or changes and the evolutionary line will thereby be fixed from the outset. For it should be understood that unless a great many individuals undergo the same mutations, then each time an individual with the next mutant gene in the line does not reproduce, the line dies out and you have to take one step back and hope for the miracle of an identical mutation, as in the case of the eye, making it almost inconceivable that such a complex organ would ever evolve.

In the case of the “censor” as an evolutionary aid, then, we cannot believe that some mutation or series of mutations established the mechanism. It seems more likely, again, that some predisposition, itself evolutionary, established it across the board, for everyone, as a necessary adjunct to the survival instinct. Once the thinking brain came into existence, however primitive it may have been, it genetically adapted itself to ensure its own survival, necessarily responding in an identical way in all individuals of the species. I would imagine that even the dreams of dogs are distorted.

Evolution, I believe, does not rely on countless mutations to create a line of development, but on a kind of big bang that kicks things off. Everything else follows naturally. That, in any case, is my opinion.

# Acknowledgements

The essays in this collection were originally published in the following journals:

- State of the Union – *Ragazine*, July 2014 (under “American Notes”)  
Who Do They Think They’re Kidding? – *Ragazine*, July 2014 (under “American Notes”)  
War and Morality – *3:AM*, Feb. 2015  
Wreaking Havoc *Perspective*, Nov. 2014  
Faking It – *Cultural Weekly*, June 2014 (published as “In Film, Complexity Isn’t Reality”)  
The Bletchley Circle – *Gadfly*, May 2015  
Dr. Phil Is Not a Pill – *Ontologica*, Issue 4.1, Summer 2012  
Grisham – *Piker Press*, Sept. 2015  
Harlan Coben, Among Others – *Wilderness House Literary Review* vol. 7, no. 2, July 2012  
The Mustache – *Ragazine*, vol. 10, no. 6, Nov.-Dec. 2014  
Violins in the Void: 3 by Nabokov – *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, vol. 7, Issue 2, Summer 2015 (writing as Fred Skolnik)  
Einstein on the Beach Again – *Word Riot*, Feb. 2014 (writing as Fred Skolnik)  
The Art of Dreaming – *Ragazine*, vol. 11. no. 6, Nov.-Dec. 2015 (writing as Fred Skolnik)

# SHORT TAKES II

Fred Russell  
*2016 chapbook*

scars publications  
<http://scars.tv> 

Writing Copyright © 2016 Fred Russell.  
Design Copyright © 2016 Scars Publications and Design.

**Magazines:** Children, Churches and Daddies (a.o.d magazine), founded June 1993, Downs in the Dirt, conceived 1994, founded 2000

**Books:** *Hops Chant in the Artery, the Window, Chess Game Before Striking, (Woods), Autumn Rain, Contents Under Pressure, the Average Guy's Guide to Football, Changing Over, the Key to Believing, Domestic Violence, etc. Overexposed Years, Vario, The Other Side, The Bone Lady's Ribcage (regular and 2005 Expanded Edition), Wholly, Saying Things Differently, Camp/Romance Death Games in Three, Moving Performance, Six Stars, Life at Cole Adams, Coos, Rough Mitten, The Entropy Project, The Other Side (2006 Edition), Stop, Stay Your Life, The Beauty and the Destruction, and #17.5 (Mating to Honor & Check, other edition), Miter & Dam (the Karpovs edition), S&L, c&d #170.5 Distinguished Writings after edition, Living in Glass, Silent Screens, Taking It All In, It All Comes Down, Being to the Surface, Outpacing, Chapter 38 (v1, v2 & v3), *Flinty, Overturn for the Beauty and the Beast (v1, v2 & part 1), a Walk-Up Call From Tumbler, (Inventory), Dark Matter: the Mind of Janet Karpov, Evolution, (Dread), Get Your Buzz On, Janet & Ann Together, pe-on, Taking Poetry to the Streets, the Cam-Deba Old-over Under, the Withen Word, Dead, Prepare Her for This, Unexcused, Living in a Big World, Pelled the Tiger, Venture to the Unknown, Janet Karpov: Enticed, She's an Open Book, #40, Section and Over Section, the Stealer of Women, Prominent Post (Karpovs edition), Hounded, the 2012 Databook, Prominent Tempus, Classic Elements, Fashes, Stability Stability Still Still Still, a Picture's Worth 1,000 words (other art book and other art book), Life in Color, Post-Apocalyptic, Run Through Me, Under the Sea (photo book), Partial Reality, Revealed, 100 Hitters, Give me the News, Let me See You Stopped, Part of my Path, Rape Suckers Life & Death, Say Nothing, Tumbler, when you Dream tonight, the Poetic Table of Poetry, a year long Journey, Don't Forget, Infamous in our Prime, Anita Nix: an Understanding of her Art, the Electronic Windmill, Changing Women, the Swan Road, the Significance of the Frontier, the Svevatorevator Unpoisoned, Harvest of Genes, the Little Monk, Death in Malaga, Memento Mori, In the Palace of Creation, R.I.P., Bob the Bumble Bee, Remnants and Showdowns, I Saw This, the Drive, Thomas & Tea, Coming Down Nineteen, Blue Collar Ballet, no-man, In Your Heart the Apostrophe's Footprints of God, the Adventures of the Key to Believing, How, Anita Nix: an Understanding of her Art (second printing), *Bedford Blues / Charlie Newman, 12 Times 12 Equus Grass, a Marble Walk Padma Borches with a Marble Apple in her Marble Hand, Challenge of Night and Day and Chicago Poems, Lighten Up, Not Far From Here, Watershed, You Have Finally Won, Avenue C, Salsuban Rhythms, Down Syndrome, the Dark Side of Love, the girl is a man's best friend, Angel's Syllable is Good Boss of Devil's Spine, Poems and Stories from The Blue Collar Book of the Dead, Cat People, Death of an Angel, Ghost Science: A Carmudgeon's View, Ghost Dancers Leaping from a Tone, the 4-D Window, Open Wounds, Amine Junkie, Interstice, Gunther, Cats, Screen Cloud Island, When the World was Black and White, a Petal Under Pavement, The Holy Sea of CEE, Book 15 - Thailand to Volcanoes, Lost in an Echo, I Was Charles Bronson's Secret Hostage, Erzatable Royal, Royal Donor's Death Scene 'tis of Thee, Understood, Alaskan Shotgun, Champagne - Hot Water, How a World Behaves, the Thing in the Lounge at WagonWheel (I Come in America), Postcards from Exile, the Five Stages of Madhubi, Stay in Formation, Shadowing Other Footprints, the Girl Next Door and Other Poems, Major Arcana, Sine Poetrie Nite est Gloria, Short Takes, Seeing Strangers, Re-Viewing Anita, The Tribes Joshua Drove Out of the Land, Butchery of the Innocent, Hammer-Chaind, No Rest - No Ocean, Donding at the Abyss, a nation of assassins with guns, the Blazing Hands of 100 Drummers, Make the Wind, / The Planner, the Pyre On Which Tomorrow Burns, Cowboy Hats and Realways, Give What You Can, Come Fly With Me, Out of the Web, Don't Tread on Me, Entering the Ice Age, Entering the Ice Age, the Line to Power, Four the Forsaken, Falling Into Place, Unknown, Forever Solid, Exploding on the Scene, Moving the Dirt, Aurora Argo, Up to Smoko, No Return, Wrapping It Up, Talk to Me Chino, Start out of a Cannon, Inevitable Ink, a new one, Mids, Friction, Sea Devil, and Then to Move, Approaching Front, Beyond the Gates, the Curve of Arcs, Hi, Mids, a Mid Snaps, Testament, the New Deal, the Captive and the Dead, When the Walls are Paper Thin, Nighttime City, Suggested Torture, Down in the Dirt #684, Clearing the Debris, Shaded Remains, When the World Settles, Along the Surface, Into the White, Life - from Walking, Down to the Wake Up and Small the Flowers, Looking Beyond, See the World, Burn America, The Catch Fire in the Treetops, Wisdom in Broken Heads, Symbols Manifest, Grounded, Perfectly Imperfect, I Pull the Strings, an I really exist, Home at Last, Spinning, a Rural Story, Treading Water, Black Cat, a Bad Influence, Too Many Miles, the Path of Least Resistance, hello goodbye goodbye hello, When the Walls are Paper Thin, Planets Apart, Planets Apart, Nighttime City, the Breaking, Suggested Torture, New moon, a Perfect Solitude, 6 Feet Under, The Hive, the 23 Enigma, Salsuban Beds, Being Real, the Blind Eye, the Reik, the Effort the Yell, Sulphur & Swardst, Slate & Marrow, Blister & Barn, Rinse & Repeat, Survive & Thrive, (not so) Warm & Fuzzy, Torture & Triumph, Oh, the Elements, Side A/Side B, Balance, Chaos Theory, Writing to Honour & Cherish, Distinguished Writings, Breaking Silences, Unlocking the Mysteries, the Book of Sars, We the Poets, Life on the Edge, Revealing all your Dirty Little Secrets, Decrepit Remains, Chared Remnants, Hope & Creation, Bending the Curve, Layers of Creation, Dark Matter: Survival of the Fittest, Crawling through the Dirt, Laying the Groundwork, Weathered, echo, ink in the blood, (second 4th editions), Enticed Poetry, c&d Enticed Press, Enticed with Dirt, An Open Book (2nd edition), Prominent Post (2nd edition), 100 Words, the 2012 Literary Date Book, It Was All Precedented, Cultural Touchstone, the Mission (first edition and chapbook edition), Purpose, Falling, Cheap Thrills, After the Apocalypse 2013 date book, After the Apocalypse (poetry edition), Entertainment, Gull by Association, don't forget it, don't forget, read, here minimum, Post as Scapology, Drawing, Art is not Meant to be Touchd, the Broken Path, a New Pen, Not to Know Best (revised edition and extended edition), the "need to know" 2015 literary date book, one Solitary Word, What Must be Done, Adrift, Salvation, the 2016 literary date book anthology, the Chosen Few, Sunlight in the Sanctuary, from Smoke, the Intersection, a Stormy Beaming, Clouds Over the Moon***

**Compact Discs:** *Man's Favorite Wife the donna tape, Karpovs the Trail (MP3 Inclusive), Woods and Flowers the beauty & the desolation, The Second Acting Something is Something, The Second Acting Live in Alaska, Petrus & Karpovs Live of Cole Adams, Position (October through March), Karpovs Seeing Things Differently, CD/CD The Book, Karpovs Changing Arrangements, Order From Chaos, The Entropy Project, Karpovs Six One One, Karpovs Stop, Karpovs Historical Performances mp3 CD, Karpovs Death, Games in Three, Karpovs Changing Games, Karpovs Dreams, Karpovs How Do I Get There?, Karpovs Cantata/Cantata/Cantata, the DMJ Art Connection, the DMJ Art Connection, Karpovs Questions in a World Without Answers, Karpovs SM, Karpovs WEED Radio (2 CD set), Man's Favorite Wife and the Second Acting These Truths, assorted artist's Singing Theory, Oh You're CD, Life at the Cafe (2 CD set), the DMJ Art Connection Indian Flux, the DMJ Art Connection Music Depression or Something, Classic Radio Classic Radio Work #1, Classic Radio Classic Radio Work #2, Classic Radio Classic Radio Work #3, Classic Radio Classic Radio Work #4, Classic Radio Classic Radio Work #5, Classic Radio the Chaotic Collection Collection #01-05 (5 CD set), Audio CD (2 CD set), Classic Element (2 CD set), Chess in Motion (4 CD set), CD/S/Smoothing to a Hob (EP), PR#2 Two for the Price of One (EP), R&K, Jake and Haystack an American Portrait, Karpovs No Better (v1/Paul Baker), the Johnson Powers Trio Fusion (4 CD set), the Evolution of Performance Art (13 CD set), Karpovs Live (14 CD set), the DMJ Art Connection the Things They Did to You (2 CD set), Karpovs Seeing a Psychiatrist (3 CD set), Karpovs St. Paul's (3 CD set), Karpovs the 2009 Poetry Games Show (3 CD set), Karpovs and the H&Mann of South Africa Burn Through Me (2 CD set), Karpovs #40, Karpovs Section and Other Stories, Karpovs the Stories of Women (amazon.com release), Karpovs "Dubia VeCh" (4 CD set), Karpovs "imm" (4 CD set), Karpovs "Letting it All Out", Karpovs "What We Need in Life" (CD single), Karpovs "Make Any Difference" (CD single), Karpovs/Enticed "Across the Pond" (3 CD set)*