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WORLD LITERATURE IN REVIEW

## Fiction

Jean-Yves Cendrey. **Honecker 21**. Paris. Actes Sud. 2009. 223 pages. €18.50. ISBN 978-2-7427-8537-7

Honecker, a sales representative for a mobile phone company, has a low opinion of his own worth; he thinks he is "often broken down for someone who isn't even thirty." His wife married him in order to make him over into an intellectual who reads the classics of German literature, accompanies her to Italian classes, and goes to the gym to improve his physique (an activity he enjoys with "the enthusiasm of a galley slave").

Honecker's picaresque adventures are rather like those of Grimmelshausen's Simplicissimus, to whom he sometimes compares himself. He is often unsure how to act. He gets confused in the aisles of a "do-it-yourself" shop. Because of his "paranoiac instinct," he drives a car that was withdrawn by the manufacturer. He buys an apartment but can only arrange to move in on New Year's Day, after a snowstorm; then he finds that the former owners have left their tasteless furniture in his living room. He is subservient to a boss who makes outrageous demands, summoning all the staff to a meeting on New Year's night on the Polish border. He thinks halfheartedly of suicide. Even his erotic fantasies lead nowhere.

He observes life around him in Berlin with irony. When he arranges a dinner in a restaurant-brothel for his boss, he hears about a claustrophobic stripper who refuses to be encased in a birthday cake. His incompetent dentist has a syringe "so large that simply seeing it would have made him admit to belonging to a terrorist network." He devises an advertisement for a mobile phone encased in a condom, for "privileged communications."

An amusing and perceptive portrait of a natural loser and of contemporary life in Berlin, *Honecker 21* differs from Jean-Yves Cendrey's earlier, more serious novels, set in France.

Why the title *Honecker 21*? There are in fact chapters numbered 1–21, but chapter 20 is missing. In chapter 19 Honecker picks up two hitchhikers on the Polish border; they direct him to a deserted beach, where they leave him. Chapter 21 begins: "There is a hole in his life," a hole he fills in from memory as he lies on a hospital bed after three days in a coma. Perhaps the missing chapter 20 is what he remembers in chapter 21. Lost on the beach, he tried to read his copy of *Simplicissimus*, found what he mistakenly assumed to be a toy gun left by the hitchhikers, and shot it at himself. His last conscious vision was a woman's face—not that of his wife, or any of the women to whom he has been attracted, but rather that of a nasty saleswoman to whom he returned his espresso machine.

An amusing and perceptive portrait of a natural loser and of contemporary life in Berlin, *Honecker 21* differs from Jean-Yves Cendrey's earlier, more serious novels, set in France.

*Adele King*
*Paris*

Sampurna Chattarji. **Rupture**. New Delhi. HarperCollins / The India Today Group. 2009. 350 pages. Rs350. ISBN 978-81-7223-779-0

*Nothing appears as it should / in a world where nothing is certain. / The only thing certain is the existence / of a secret violence that makes everything / uncertain.* Sampurna Chattarji's use of this crucial opening quote by Lucretius (as well as T. S. Eliot's

"The Hollow Men" elsewhere) sets up the mood, mental landscape, and suggested street directions on a map—a map that is at least three-dimensional, one that uses the "z" axis to great effect. After all, it is this axis that gives depth to any physical space—be it psychological or merely external.

The black and red color scheme on the novel's cover paints the aura that we may encounter inside—that of terror, the dark side, emotional and internal bleeding, and more. The white of the author's name acts as a gauze bandage—the white of the medical world, and salving as an achievable metaphor.

The entire novel takes place over a twenty-four-hour time period. In this tight time frame, nine characters unravel their varied psychological strands. Each tissue is exposed with care, allowing the reader to calibrate the player's specific blood count, allowing them to map the bipolar involutions and undulations of their brain space.

We can see that the "rupture" points in this novel are subtle—they are not obvious and spectacular like the media-fed visual horror of, say, the 9/11 episode (though I am sure that event and those in India have had a quiet effect on her). The rupture points are dark and internal and everyday in nature. The rupture points are also consciously buried or appear in soft focus, especially when they are used as structural devices. These subtleties ultimately give the novel its unassuming weight, texture, and strength.

Many things about this novel are inventive and brave, apart from the Forsterian standard "aspects of the novel" that include story, people, plot, fantasy, prophecy, pattern, and rhythm. These aspects act as mere initial anchors for a canvas on which other elements are sketched out—that of the pastiche and the use of mosaic-like narrative units, that of using clock time and place names as chapter separators, epistles as asides, the use of literary and linguistic puns, font changes from serif to sans serif and back, and the bravest of all, the use of boldface type (something that one cannot get away with easily, just as in poetry the use of the exclamation mark or the ellipsis is a token of weak, ineffective punctuation). In this novel, compressed phrases are contrasted with stretched-out elastic lines, and comma use is akin to a poem's line breaks. The author is a published poet, and the comma-aided phrase breaks provide the perfect tenor that highlights the controlled recitative quality of the text. It is clear that the author has planned out the engineering and aesthetic grid carefully for this book.

Sampurna Chattarji's novel is a quietly ambitious book. The narrative voice is modestly confident, the characterization competently handled, and the language is perhaps her greatest strength. *Rupture* is one of the best first books of fiction I have read in recent times.

*Sudeep Sen*
*New Delhi*

Sietse de Vries**. Potstro Fongers**. Ljouwert, Netherlands. Friese Pers. 2009. 207 pages. €17.50 ISBN 978-90-330-0835-1

Readers of *Kûgels foar Kant* will appreciate this latest detective novel from Sietse de Vries. *Potstro Fongers* is a worthy successor. The three main characters and the tensions that fuel their actions are introduced early on. Marten Bok, a hospital pharmacy assistant, has the main role. He harbors deep-seated resentments that go back to his childhood frustrations of being on the bottom of the social ladder. His superior and nemesis is Siger Kalsbeek, the arrogant and filthy-rich hospital director, who's always been on top and intends to stay there, always in full command of himself and others. And there is Cor Fongers, a snack bar owner who has always dreamed of having his own restaurant and can be persuaded to throw all caution to the wind to realize his dream.

When one early morning Marten Bok's body is found, an obvious victim of murder, detective Arjen Witteveen, trying to make his way back from a case of burnout and a failed marriage, is eased into action. To his chagrin, the chief gives him the softest assignment on the team, one that has little promise of leading to the murderer. Yet he is nothing if not persistent and thorough.

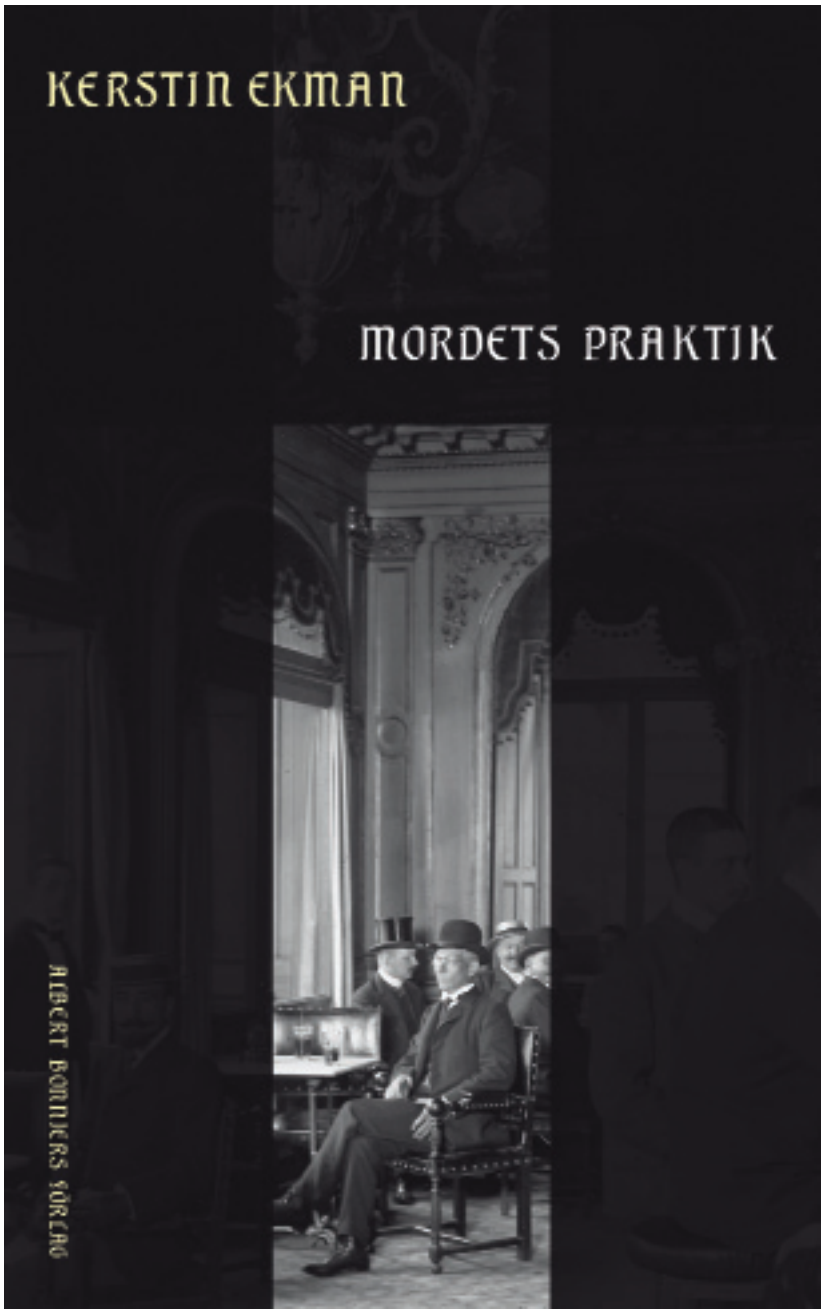
There is indisputable evidence that Kalsbeek was present at the murder of Bok, but neither the real motive for the murder nor its actual perpetrator is found out. Kalsbeek maintains his innocence, but he chooses not to make a case for it, and perhaps because he has more to lose by telling the truth, he goes to jail.

De Vries lays out the book like a giant puzzle, each piece marked by day, date, and year, in seemingly random and disconnected order. Thus the novel works by cumulation, simulating the process of the detective team. The challenge to the reader is, of course, to determine how each piece contributes to the answer of the unifying question of the *who* and *how* and why any character may be connected to the murder of Marten Bok. But some unintended questions remain for the critical reader: Why did the

affluent Kalsbeek not hire the best defense lawyer, one who would question the prosecution about the missing murder weapon, the presence of a potential murder weapon on Bok, and who would call on the possible testimony of Fongers, who also became implicated in Bok's financial collapse?

Still, Sietse de Vries admirably achieves a much more focused detective story than his earlier *Kûgels foar Kant* (*WLT*, Oct. 2003, 126). What is especially rewarding is his layering of fragments from constantly shifting times and places that shape a reader's growing understanding of the intrigue as well as shaping characters into persons with histories, dreams, conflicts, virtues, and vices that give them individuality and depth. All this creates a complex structure not only of a murder case but also of each main character's life.

*Henry J. Baron*
*Calvin College*




Kerstin Ekman. **Mordets praktik**. Stockholm. Bonniers. 2009. 208 pages. 175 kr. ISBN 978-91-0-012386-4

*Mordets praktik* (Murder in practice) is and is not a crime story; this novel is shot through with ambiguity, some of which originates in its construction as a series of occasional entries made by a compulsive but not very trustworthy diarist. Doctor Revinge is a mediocre medical practitioner and a haphazard murderer, but a very good writer. As he admits: "I am rather proud of my ability. At least, I find it easy to imagine scenes from life and to write about them." Not that he finds life particularly edifying. Here he is, speculating moodily on the lucid prose of his famous contemporary Hjalmar Söderberg: "Writing . . . is like the arts practiced by alchemists of old. . . . It causes the drab reiterations of everyday life to precipitate out like so much dirty lather around that indestructible matter which has been purified."

Söderberg, who also exists in the real world of the early twentieth century, wrote *Doctor Glas*, an elegant, morally ambivalent novel about an introverted, melancholic physician, who is a compulsive diarist and a murderer.

Revinge has met Söderberg, whom he admires and envies for his social assurance as well as for his skill in extracting literature from life. When the novelist asks him

about cyanide as a means of murder, the ever-aspirational Revinge tries too hard to be helpful and prepares a few poison pills. Later, he reads *Doctor Glas* and is mesmerized: Glas has filled his diary with intense speculations about the rights and wrongs of killing. He finally decides to act and administers a cyanide pill to the odious husband of a beautiful patient. Strangely, once the deed is done, he feels little more than indifference and reflects: "Life passes me by."

The insecure Revinge identifies with this "tragic figure" and feels that he too must "act." When he kills his odious colleague and employer with one of the cyanide pills, it is partly because the two men share a somewhat unhealthy interest in a fair schoolgirl, the victim's stepdaughter, Frida, but partly—largely?—because Revinge craves social advancement. Smartly marrying the widow, he takes over the dead man's practice with its clientele of middle-class substance addicts. Meanwhile, Frida turns out to be perfectly able to look after herself. She trains as a nurse and befriends Ida Tjerning, a pioneering woman doctor. Tjerning's battering-ram personality includes an unfeminine fondness for crime stories. She suspects Revinge of foul play and an echo of a thriller plot develops, but both medics are as rash as they are unscrupulous. Exasperated, Revinge tries to kill Tjerning, but things go horribly wrong. As a problem-solving approach, murder is messy and ineffective.

This masterly novel is daringly referential to another masterpiece of witty speculation about the relationships between fiction and fact, between thought and action. Where Söderberg is elusive, Ekman is precise, and while his characters live in unquestioned ease, hers chase comforts in a harsher, nastier world. Both writers have created hypnotic central characters: two anxious, fanciful human beings, each sheltering inside the carapace of a medical man.

*Anna Paterson*
*Aberdeenshire, United Kingdom*

Diana Evans. **The Wonder**. London. Chatto & Windus. 2009. 314 pages. £12.99. ISBN 978-0-701-17797-3

Detail is key to *The Wonder*. People, place, and time are all meticulously penned with care and a tremendous sense of justice. The novel looks at the lives of a family of four, including occasional appearances from the grandmother, Toreth. Carla eventually marries Jamaican-born Antoney. Denise is born first, Lucas follows. Toreth, the mother of Carla and the widow of Dominica-born Freddy, is a presence throughout the turbulent lives of all these characters. We move between a 1960s London and a London at the end of the twentieth century where Tupac and Biggie have made their exits and Lucas is wondering about his own identity, living with his sister on their canal boat in Ladbroke Grove. *The Wonder* is certainly about dance, about music, and about London, but it is also about self, life, and inheritance.

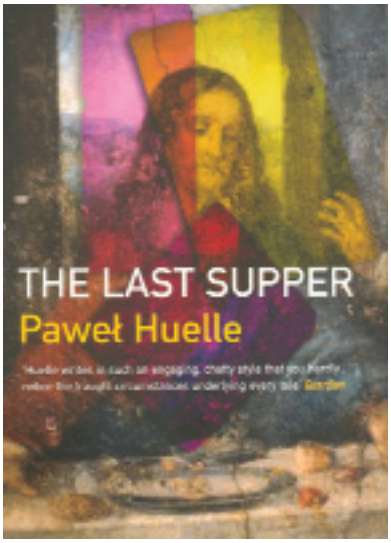
Canal boats and buses punctuate *The Wonder*, which is otherwise concerned with the trials and tribulations of coordinating a dance troupe, the "Midnight Ballet." Antoney seems to be at his happiest on the road, whether this is on the number 52A to Victoria or on the Midnight Ballet's European tour. In Amsterdam, Antoney looks longingly at the moored boats on the Singel canal and thinks to himself: "How right, how right and wide it must be to live like that, in solitude, detached from the burdens and interferences of land, free to move off whenever you felt like it, with no one to answer to but yourself."

As with Diana Evans's novel *26a*, *The Wonder* is not a surface narrative; it digs deep into the thoughts and feelings we would prefer to ignore, the ruminations we would rather disregard. As things break down within the family, Antoney becomes less clear about what his life meant—the dance troupe, the baby boy he hardly knows, his biographer Riley. Evans cleverly weaves in Riley and his biography of Antoney and his Midnight Ballet dance troupe. This metanarrative is explored in particular at the end of the novel to close the lives of Antoney, Carla, Denise, and Lucas. It's a proffered conclusion, and we are left choosing to take this or to imagine ourselves, otherwise, how and where Antoney finished his life and if he thinks of the family he left floating, literally, in the Grand Union canal in Ladbroke Grove.

*Emma Dawson*
*Keele University*

Paweł Huelle. **The Last Supper**. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, tr. London. Serpent's Tail. 2009. 256 pages. $14.95. ISBN 978-1-85242-980-5

If there is one thread that lends linear development to *The Last Supper*, it is the lead role played by Roman Catholicism in Polish society. This role has been the subject of both celebratory and condemnatory responses. Inspired by the celebrated papacy of John Paul II, Catholic writing has established an important place in literary life. But where there is a thesis, an antithesis inevitably emerges, as Marxism—




Catholicism's principal institutional and intellectual adversary in Poland for half a century—contended. The antithesis is—anticlericalism.

In this novel, Paweł Huelle advances the case against the Catholic Church's aggrandized role in Poland since communism's demise in 1989. He does this in two ways. First, by introducing characters who will be attending a photo shoot in Gdańsk of a postmodern version of the last supper, he injects biblical commentary questioning the story of Jesus widely accepted today. Huelle asks: Why have we settled on the authority of four evangelists and not others? Why do we gloss over the inconsistencies and contradictions found in the scriptures? For good measure, the author throws in the historical skepticism that may possibly have troubled the conscience of Scottish artist David Roberts as he meandered through the Holy Land in the mid-nineteenth century.

A second line of attack takes a more concrete shape. It is centered on key personages of the church in Poland. Chief among these is Father Monsignore, who acts as if he were plenipotentiary of Gdańsk. A series of bombings targeting the city's liquor stores may be the work of terrorists, but, Huelle suggests, they are more likely to be a Mafia-orchestrated shakedown seeking to boost sales of a wine associated with Monsignore. Any Pole with a passing knowledge of recent history will easily identify this odious, arrogant, anti-Semitic, nationalistic Monsignore as the confessor-priest to Solidarity founder Lech Wałęsa.

The novel's twelve chosen "apostles," together with several minor characters—or are they all minor?—are segues for Huelle to discuss a host of topics in addition to the scriptures: wars in Yugoslavia, traffic jams in Poland's tri-city region on the Baltic sea, literary allusions to Joyce's *Ulysses*, among others. The spoof of Polish Catholicism is, however, the one compelling thread. Most of the figures in the novel are readily forgettable and, try as he might, Huelle also offers little serious philosophical inquiry in the telling of the stories. Moreover, even as bombs blast buildings and police cordon the city off, there is nothing apocryphal in the plot. The steady hand of the translator prevents the novel from altogether decomposing. (*Editorial note:* To read Huelle's story "Depka and Rzepka," see the November 2009 issue of *WLT*.)

*Raymond Taras*
*Stanford University*

Ben Igwe. **Against the Odds**. New Rochelle, New York. African Heritage. 2009. 311 pages. $19.95. ISBN 978-0-9790858-3-3

Ben Igwe's *Against the Odds* has joined the growing body of Afro-diasporic fiction in which relationships are built around characters descended from old African American families and new African immigrants, thus giving rise to exciting new interpersonal conditions, and, sometimes, ambivalent and problematic situations.

In this novel, Jamike Nnorom from the southeastern Nigerian village of Alaudo, after a brilliant academic career at Regius State College in rural Pennsylvania, falls in love with and marries Linda Johnson, a college girl from Pittsburgh, in preference to the village belle, Chioma, chosen for him by his widowed mother from a nearby town in Nigeria. Predictably, all hell is let loose. Subsequently, the crisis is contained but not before some of those involved have been emotionally bruised.

This simple plot description masks a tremendous wealth of socio-cultural detail that has gone into the making of this complex novel. Nor does it adequately reflect Igwe's adroit control of the narrative structure and subtle exploration of the many characters that people the novel, characters strong in their individualities and bringing with them enriching personal and often idiosyncratic qualities.

For example, a major focus of the novel is the growth and development of the central character. Starting life with so many handicaps, Jamike matures into a strong, dependable and almost exemplary hero. He evolves from an ignorant village boy raised by his widowed mother under conditions of grinding poverty. Naturally, he has a lot of catching up to do. Also, coming from a primarily traditional-patriarchal background he has to undergo considerable adjustments in attitudes and orientations to fit into a postmodern, progressive world.

But the core thematic concern of the novel remains its exploration of the prickly relationship that sometimes arises between the so-called old and new African "diasporas" in America. The main character's open-minded relationship with Africans and African Americans alike proves that good, viable relationships between Africans and their brothers and sisters of the Diaspora in America are not only possible but a major imperative. The novel provides a mature and convincing treatment of this theme. With appropriate attitudes, the chief character succeeds where others are stymied in negativity, and this makes *Against the Odds* a successful "bridge-building" novel.

*Emmanuel Obiechina*
*Harvard University*

Kazuo Ishiguro. **Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall**. New York. Knopf. 2009. 221 pages. $25. ISBN 978-0-307-27102-0


As the title suggests, music and night themes color these fictions. They feature musicians whose careers have stalled, some with aspirations still alive, others with acceptance, if not contentment. While the characters may try to make something of today, their lives do not project much beyond tomorrow. One is often left with little more than a perspective, mood music sustained as much by minor phrases as major events.

The opening story, "Crooner," seems a rather engineered disillusionment. An aging popular singer and his beautiful wife, both of whom married for the sake of the trophy the other partner represented, have fallen genuinely in love over the years. Unfortunately, they feel that to stay at the top of their respective career paths, they must divorce so they can marry someone more suitable. Enter an admiring narrator whose incredulity buffers our own.

"Come Rain or Come Shine" is darker and more effective, made so when the narrator's somber self-assessment is reflected and assumed by his two best friends. Though he doesn't realize it, their marriage seems sustained by his failures, some of which they contrive. The song of the title and the slow dance at the end seem to indicate a melancholy but lasting friendship. This is a story that gets under the skin, summoning memories of betrayed trusts that are best forgotten.

Time and again, a musician meets someone whom he feels had a career or success he might have had. In "Malvern Hills" and in "Nocturne," one doesn't know whether success will come as a result of the encounter. Something will result for the protagonist, but no great turning point seems to have occurred. Even in the middle of change, one can't predict the future. As in "Cellists," one may even *see* the subject of a story years later, without knowing how things turned out.

It's a view of life that admits considerable irony, even comedy, whether one is trying to hide a trophy inside a turkey or attempting to imitate the actions of a large dog to cover an accident in a friend's apartment. Finally these stories explore what can sustain people—artists or anyone, maybe most of us—who depend on the approval of others to measure success.

*W. M. Hagen*
*Oklahoma Baptist University*

Alvin Levin. **Love Is Like Park Avenue**. James Reidel, ed. John Ashbery, pref. New York. New Directions. 2009. xxvi + 196 pages. $13.95. ISBN 978-0-8112-1799-6

Like Mr. Keen, hero of a mid-twentieth-century radio program, John Ashbery has become a Tracer of Lost Persons, or those nearly lost, renewing interest in the poets Joan Murray (1917–42) and David Schubert (1913–46), among others. Ashbery's curiosity about a writer he read as a teenager has now led to a New Directions volume of all that can be found of Alvin Levin's work.

Novelist Alvin Levin (1914–82) began writing while in law school. His prose appeared in New Directions annuals and little magazines in the late 1930s and early 1940s, drawing interest from William Maxwell at the *New Yorker* and Nicholas Moore in England. Simon and Schuster found Levin's book-length manuscript *Love Is Like Park Avenue* "too 'experimental'" and hoped for something "more conventional." For whatever reasons, Levin stopped writing. The complete manuscript of *Love Is Like Park Avenue* has not been found.

What we have of Levin's work reveals a startlingly innovative observer of urban life, of what New Directions' James Laughlin called "all that Bronx stuff." "Main characters and central plots are out," Levin wrote to Laughlin in 1939. Little happens: a girl sits at a window listening to the radio; a man watches his wife feed their son. From Levin's perspective, lulls in the action are also the action: "The watch on Sid's bony wrist beat out loudly; the only other sound was a couple of pairs of shoes making their way down the Terrace to the Eighth Avenue station."

But Levin is no patient documentarian. His sentences carry surprises, moving forward, sometimes steadily, sometimes not, seeming to rush and stumble into saying more than they had intended, looking for a place to stop and sit down. They move, again and again, into unforeseen territory. A piece about the appointment of a male president at a women's college in New England begins with mock-journalese, shifts to the interior monologue of a lonely letter-writing student on campus, pulls away to focus on the life of the postman collecting the campus mail, follows a mail train to New York, and ends in the New York apartment of an alumna who has mailed an angry letter to the college. The effect is magical: How did we end up here? Simon and Schuster could not find a place for Alvin Levin. But we can.

*Michael Leddy*
*Eastern Illinois University*

Pierre Michon. **Les onze**. Lagrasse. Verdier. 2009. 137 pages. €14. ISBN 978-2-86432-552-9

Since inaugurating his career with *Vies minuscules* in 1984, Pierre


Michon has built a reputation for minute scrutiny of phenomena that play themselves out within a dramatically limited arena. His latest novel confirms that reputation abundantly, for it is devoted to a close analysis of François-Elie Corentin's painting of the Comité de Salut Public during the French Revolution. Entitled simply *Les onze*, it is perhaps the most immediately recognizable work in the Louvre, indelibly inscribed as it is on both the collective and the individual imagination. You know the painting I mean, don't you? If not, you will undoubtedly feel a bit benighted in the early pages of this novel (as did I, I must confess), fretting about such a massive lacuna in your cultural literacy. Until the nickel drops, that is, and you realize that Michon has invented both Corentin and *Les onze* out of whole cloth. Yet even then, the hyperrealism that characterizes his narration is enough to shake one's faith in easy distinctions between fact and fiction.

Michon's conceit, which recalls that of Georges Perec in *Un cabinet d'amateur: Histoire d'un tableau* (1979), is that under certain conditions, figments can be made to seem more real to us than objects in the material world. That imagined reality fuels, in turn, a text where a baldly constative tone coaxes the reader into a labyrinth of doubt. *Ut pictura poesis* indeed. Michon is a very canny and subtle writer; it is thus reasonable to assume that the multiple ironies which circulate in this novel are not merely otiose, but are intended to *signify* in some manner. Quite apart from his reading of Corentin's masterpiece (which is in itself welcome, of course), Michon is trying to get at another kind of reading here, I think. Vigorously rubbing history against fiction, hoping thus to make sparks fly, he asks us to reflect upon narrative and its uses. More particularly still, *Les onze* invites us to savor a story so well told that it deserves to be true, in a world where nothing of real consequence can be taken for granted.

*Warren Motte*
*University of Colorado*

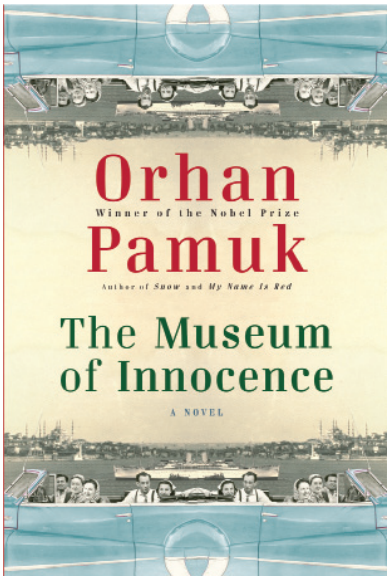
Orhan Pamuk. **The Museum of Innocence**. Maureen Freely, tr. New York. Knopf. 2009. xi + 535 pages. $28.95. ISBN 978-0-307-26676-7

Like Orhan Pamuk's first novel, *Cevdet Bey and His Sons*, *The Museum of Innocence* portrays the economic and ideological sympathies of the Turkish upper class in a panoramic way. Unlike his 1982 family novel, however, *The Museum of Innocence* has a more limited chronological scope and takes place in 1970s and '80s Istanbul. The protagonist, Kemal Basmacı, is a thirty-year-old wealthy Istanbulite who works as an executive manager in his father's company, Satsat, and is engaged to Sibel, the daughter of a retired ambassa-

dor. Shortly before the engagement ceremony, Kemal falls in love with Füsun Keskin, an eighteen-year-old distant family member from a lower-middle-class family who works at a shop called Şanzelize Boutique. Their passionate love affair ends abruptly when Füsun disappears after Kemal's engagement ceremony. As Kemal realizes the extent of his infatuation with her, Füsun has already been married off to an aspiring young screenwriter and director, Feridun, and in the meantime, Sibel and Kemal's engagement crumbles under the burden of Kemal's ever-growing obsession with Füsun. Thereafter, the novel revolves around Kemal's romance-like quest for the subject of his desire, their celibate/chaste relationship for 1,593 nights, a brief reunion before Füsun's tragic, Grace Kelly–like death, and ultimately Kemal's mourning via his museum project.

What is woven into this clichéd love story between a wealthy businessman and a beautiful, poor (but proud) young girl is the protagonist's profound and at times satirical depiction of the upper class in Istanbul, their consumer habits, sense of fashion, and ideas on love, sex, and marriage. While Kemal's "westernized," upper-class scopophilia reveals his objectifying of Füsun, the novel makes it clear that economic factors and class differences determine the "Western" or modern identity of the Turks and ultimately segregate them.

Interspersed with nostalgic allusions to Pamuk's previous novels, *The Museum of Innocence* once again makes a rather traditional association between East and West. Kemal doesn't develop an understanding of the poverty and lower-class sociocultural habits of Füsun and her family. Füsun's agony in the novel is eclipsed by Kemal's portrayal of her purely as a subject of desire, love, and affection. Identified with the museum of innocence is that classless space where all constructions/divides of Western/Eastern, modern/traditional are shed and Füsun and Kemal can indeed be happy. This space created for the happiness of Kemal and Füsun, however, is created, ideologically, if not ethically and economically, in questionable terms. This museum that will represent the desired unification and affectionate love affair of these two people is constructed of objects that are mostly taken from




Füsun's household—objects that have use-value and practical importance for the family, or more importantly, emotional value. (After all, how can Kemal know that the same objects he adores were not adored by the family members for a similar reason? These objects may constitute their familial history as well.) In this sense, the museum of innocence and its method of construction parallel the typical Western colonial ideology that dominates or exploits the East. The bridge Kemal tries to build from Nişantaşı to Çukurcuma doesn't allow for the "non-westernized" Füsun to cross to the other side. Viewed from the perspective of class and poverty, Füsun and Kemal's tragic love story is therefore reminiscent of, if not analogous to, the problematic and unresolved relationship between the East and the West.

*Iclal Cetin*
*SUNY Fredonia*

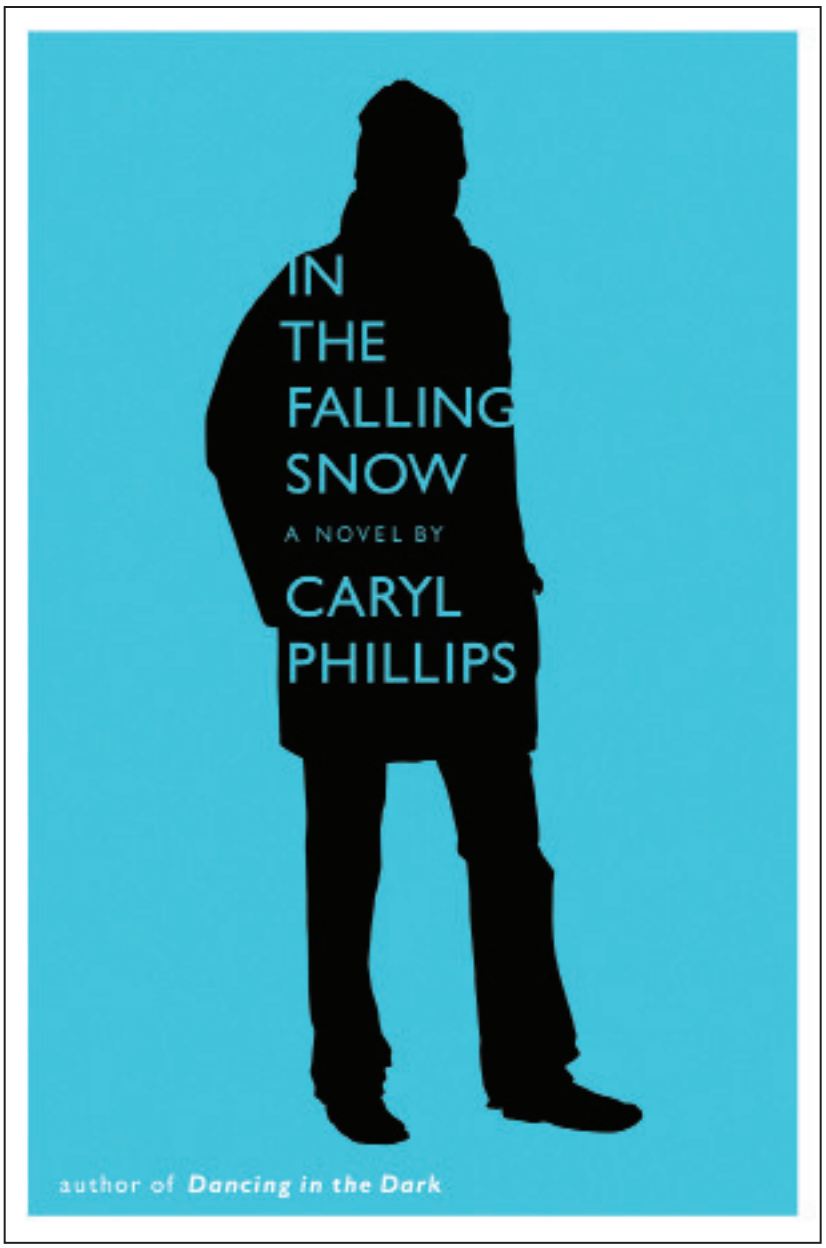
Caryl Phillips. **In the Falling Snow**. New York. Knopf. 2009. 308 pages. $25.95. ISBN 978-0-307-27256-0

At the end of Caryl Phillips's recent somber novel, *In the Falling Snow*, Keith, separated from his wife, awakes, disoriented, in his former bedroom. After his father's death earlier that day, Keith has learned that his teenage son's girlfriend is pregnant. A return to his wife's bed could provide welcome relief from the troubles Keith has experienced, but Phillips astutely withholds comfort. "There is no reason for him to spend a night here. . . . He will tell her this when she comes back upstairs. He lies back on the pillow and . . . hears her footsteps as she begins to walk slowly up the stairs." Throughout Phillips's fiction and nonfiction, he focuses on people who, like Keith in the novel's final sentence, are caught between places, desires, and circumstances of history. As a black man, Keith sometimes feels out of place in England, but more profoundly he feels out of place in the life he finds himself living. Steadily and convincingly, Keith's ordered and successful life falls apart. Charged with sexual harassment after he ends a consensual relationship with a coworker,

Keith resigns from his job, half-heartedly attempts to write a book on black American music, develops "an unbecoming obsession" with a much younger Polish immigrant, and struggles unsuccessfully to connect with his son. Standing in the London neighborhood where he and his wife moved twenty years earlier, Keith thinks, "the truth is, he liked the area better then; in fact, he liked his life better back then."

Occasionally, Phillips goes astray. The role of Danuta, the Polish woman, is underdeveloped. While Phillips includes incommunicative men in most of his fiction, his solution here—Keith's otherwise taciturn father narrates his life in lengthy monologues—is unconvincing, and the details of the father's story are overly familiar. Phillips is at his best when he sticks to the quiet moments and small details of Keith's life. He elegantly handles a complicated time scheme, shifting smoothly between Keith's present and memories of his past. Time in general seems to preoccupy Phillips. Keith, in his forties, seems stuck between the energy and purpose of youth and an aimless and resigned middle age. With appealing melancholy, Keith wonders "if indecision really is a sign of ageing," nicely suggesting Caryl Phillips's recurring interest in ambivalence.

*Jim Hannan*
*Le Moyne College*




Matthias Politycki. **Jenseitsnovelle**. Hamburg. Hoffmann & Campe. 2009. 126 pages. €15.95. ISBN 978-3-455-40194-3

As the title *Jenseitsnovelle* indicates, Matthias Politycki (b. 1955) has appropriated German literary tradition, with the "unheard-of event" (per Goethe's definition) taking place even before the action of the novella proper begins. A woman who has spent her life fearing death, who married a man because he promised, should he die first, to accompany her to the other side (*Jenseits*)—a promise renewed on each wedding anniversary for going on three decades—has died. One autumn morning Hinrich Schepp, in his early sixties and still a Privatdozent in ancient Chinese philology, enters his study, troubled by an unpleasant smell. Perhaps Dora, his wife, forgot to change the water in the vase of flowers? Dora, herself a sinologist who gave up her career to be wife and mother, appears to have fallen asleep at Schepp's desk while editing one of his manuscripts.

No, something more alarming has occurred: Dora is dead. The

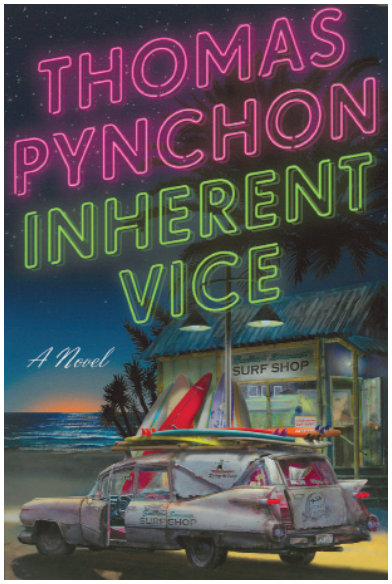
papers on the desk are a settling of accounts, an indictment against Schepp for his neglect of her. In particular, several years earlier, the nearly blind Schepp had undergone laser surgery; able to see clearly, he joined the world, became a frequenter of bars, and became infatuated with a low-life Polish barmaid on whose neck, moreover, was tattooed the twenty-ninth *I Ching* sign "Kan," representing the abyss and also the great divide between life and the other side. (*Dingsymbol*, anyone?) Schepp spends the entire afternoon, as her body goes through stages of decomposition, reading the philological revenge that Dora has spent the night writing. He learns that Dora, who has been consulting the *I Ching* her entire life, had known of this infatuation and had been enjoying a friendship with the Polish woman. Moreover, she had been planning to leave Schepp when she was struck down.

Sounds complicated and even grotesque? Well, maybe none of the foregoing happened, and it was only Schepp's imagination that supplied the details of Dora's death and his infatuation. Perhaps Schepp resented the bargain he had struck with Dora, whose fears he had impulsively taken on while they were both, in their younger years, viewing Arnold Böcklin's *Island of the Dead*? Perhaps, Walter Mitty-like (Politycki refers often to Schepp's comb-over), he yearned for life and escape from the daily focus on death Dora imposed on him?

Politycki, a "promovierter" academic before becoming a full-time writer, knows his metafictional conventions. Besides texts within texts (Dora's commentary is appended to a fragment of Schepp's attempt at a novel from before their marriage), Politycki has also supplied an alternative ending to his novella. Or rather an alternative beginning. The troubling smell is still in the air when Schepp enters his study in the morning, Dora is in the same position at the desk, with her head on a pile of papers before her. This time around, however, it is a Hinrich Schepp who is only contemplating laser surgery and who cautiously makes his way into the room without his glasses, and Dora is only sleeping. As for the smell, Dora is offended at the suggestion that she has neglected her domestic duties. Schepp cautions her against becoming upset, because of her headaches. Though the two of them do not discover the source of the smell, perhaps it is their rotten marriage? There is much here that leaves one unsatisfied, but Matthias Politycki's ambitious novella shows there is still life in this classic genre.

*Elizabeth Powers*
*New York*

Thomas Pynchon. **Inherent Vice**. New York. Penguin. 2009. 370 pages. $27.95. ISBN 978-1-59420-224-7




Graduate students across the land are undoubtedly outlining the obvious similarities in theme, style, and structure between Thomas Pynchon's 1966 novel, *The Crying of Lot 49*, and *Inherent Vice*. Both have mysterious, perhaps nonexistent secret organizations conspiring to do something not entirely clear; characters who disappear or are disappeared; comic names that would embarrass Ben Jonson; a general atmosphere of malaise; central characters on a reluctant quest to find the truth; mazes of speculations, hints, and cryptic revelations that often dead-end for both characters and readers; and governing principles (entropy in the first, the title syndrome in the second). Both have Wiki sites with indices of characters and page-by-page annotations.

What graduate students may not realize, or admit—and some early reviewers like Louis Menand in the *New Yorker* were reluctant to say—is that while *Inherent Vice* is more than twice as long as *Lot 49*, it is exponentially duller, and any effort used to compare the novels is wasted. The energy of *Lot 49*'s prose has settled into a bland uniformity. Unlike Oedipa Maas in the earlier novel, who has a vision of what America might have become before it is threatened by the mysterious Tristero, *Vice*'s detective Doc Sportello is "caught up in a low-level bummer he couldn't find a way out of, about how the Psychedelic Sixties, this little parenthesis of light, might close after all, and all be lost, taken back into darkness . . ." Oedipa prepares to confront the possibility that Tristero is real, life-changing though possibly malignant. Doc discovers only that "Agencies of command and control"—read rich white guys—have managed the action and prevented any revelation. This may


be more accurate than the vision of Tristero—compare the Dubya years—but it's hardly news.

For someone notoriously reclusive, Pynchon has made considerable effort to hype the new novel, voicing over a promotional video and releasing a playlist of songs mentioned, downloads available from Amazon.com—not, from a jazz-lover's point of view, a keeper in the lot. Years ago I heard a rumor that Pynchon tried to halt the release of *Lot 49* because he thought it wasn't good enough. Now he's pushing a far worse book in as many media as he doesn't have to face.

*Robert Murray Davis*
*University of Oklahoma*

Philip Roth. **The Humbling**. Boston / New York. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. 2009. 160 pages. $22. ISBN 978-0-547-23969-9

A reader looking forward to a new Philip Roth novel (this is his thirtieth) is forced to ponder whether the newest of these very slim Roth novels and their protagonists will once again feel like a parody of earlier, more vibrant and complex novels and characters. Could *Everyman*, *Indignation*, and now, *The Humbling*, simply be abbreviated meditations on what it means to be a contemporary man, once vital and vibrant, moving inexorably toward inevitable destruction? Or could these characters, named or nameless, be stripped-down ideas of what might have been had Nathan Zuckerman and "Swede" Levov not been explored, contextualized, and fully fleshed out? Whatever the answer, the reader misses the rounded characters Roth has so long been capable of delineating Simon Axler in *The Humbling* is the latest of Roth's less than successful sketches. A once famous and talented actor who has lost his nerve, Axler, emotionally paralyzed and close to self-destruction as a result of his lost power, seeks to isolate himself, first in a mental hospital and then in his country house. These sites become the venues for Axler's adventures, small triumphs, and eventual demise.

In a sense, this is a novella of potency and agency recovered and restored, although not in the sense most readers might expect. Of course, there is plenty of sexual frisson—and Roth still has the skill to create scenes that resonate with the reader. But there is much that lends itself to parody—the lesbian made heterosexual, at least for a while, by the much older man who is a friend of her parents; the older lover who likens himself to Pygmalion; the love triangle (man and woman vying for the same woman); and the "artist" who is blocked and moans to his agent, "Okay, all right, I have a modicum of talent or I can at least imitate a talented person. But it was all a fluke, Jerry, a fluke that talent was given to me, a fluke that it was taken away. This life is a fluke from start to finish."

Sadly, even the sex scenes here have a certain affectless quality because they are not essentially connected with the characters. There is a paint-by-numbers quality, and although Roth's prose has its moments of sparkling clarity and humor, the characters, aside from Axler, are rarely more than cartoons.

It is fairly difficult to shock readers these days—the era of Portnoy is long gone—and child sexual abuse, salty language, or even green dildos won't raise too many eyebrows or libidos. Unfortunately, even for Roth aficionados, the eyeballs under those brows are liable to involuntarily roll at the clichés that abound in *The Humbling*.

*Rita D. Jacobs*
*Montclair State University*

**Tell-Tales 4: The Global Village**. Courttia Newland & Monique Roffey, ed. Leeds, England. Peepal Tree. 2009. 212 pages. £8.99. ISBN 978-1-84523-079-1

*Tell Tales* volumes are published by a UK-based arts collective sponsored by the Arts Council of England committed to promoting the literary form of the short story and providing a forum for established and emerging short-story writers. The *Tell Tales* series attempts to address this neglect, and evidenced by the twenty-six stories in the fourth volume, the result is a mixed bag. There are a few exceptionally well-written stories with fascinating characters and events that stick in your memory long after reading—Jonathan Holt's sardonic allegory "The Experiment of Life" and Adam Thorpe's eerie and atmospheric story "Pressed Flower," in particu-

lar. These stories powerfully evoke the kernel of a lingering emotional effect, as successful short stories do; a form of postmodern psychosocial malaise in the case of Holt's story, and the old-fashioned unrest and disquiet of a subtle ghost story in the case of Thorpe. But the same cannot be said for the majority of the stories.

All twenty-six stories, by writers as well known as Olive Senior and some being published for the first time, as in the case of Holt, deal with the volume's theme of the "global village," a phrase that evokes simultaneous visions of expansion and contraction. Most of these stories directly or indirectly address cultural migration and the experiences of contact zones between different cultures; almost all of them are stories of doom, with characters affecting what is not quite despair and yet is more than mere self-absorption. Sometimes the results are genuinely affecting and tragic, as in the case of Sara Hsai Tung, the Irish-Tibetan activist in "Pressed Flower" who is killed in Tibet, and sometimes they are banal, like the characters in Foluke Taylor's "Power Trip," in which a tourist ends up killing a native woman by accidentally pounding her head with the heavy pendant of his necklace while having sex with her. Are these the sort of warnings that are left out of the *Lonely Planet* guidebooks?

The gratuitous sex scenes in a few of these stories are troubling, not least because of a new old-fashioned objectification of women, but also because they seem to cast many of these women characters from Africa or the Caribbean as simply interested in vapid sex and money yet trying to appear serious while doing so. Yes, to be sure, as the editors emphasize in the introduction, such things happen all over the world—crude sex, violence, war, rampage—but there is no real substance hiding inside mere salacious details; there are no lower depths, nothing much to plumb, discover, or learn.

At least one story in the collection deliberately seems to be about the origins of the collection itself: Amran Gaye's "Estrangement," in which a struggling writer attempts to write a short story about the "global village" for a competition. Perhaps some of the dissatisfaction that one feels on reading this collection comes from the fact that some of these stories feel more contrived than spontaneously evolved. The best and the strongest stories still feature characters with depth; unfortunately, many of the stories in this collection sacrifice character depth and development to conceptual commentary about the global village, a definite drawback.

*Gayatri Devi*
*Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania*

## Verse

Barbara Carle. **Tangible Remains / Toccare quello che resta.** The author & Antonella Anedda, tr. Formia, Italy. Ghenomena. 2009. 119 pages. €15. ISBN 978-88-95857-04-6

Barbara Carle's third book of poems, *Tangible Remains*, collects fifty untitled texts inspired by common objects, which are identified only on the contents page at the back. Carle's explicit goal is to make readers "avoid reducing the poem to its title," which works if we enter into her playful gambit. However, this speculative dimension would be a trivial gesture if the poetry were not so evocative and imaginative.

The third poem, perhaps among those difficult to guess, is as lithe and deft as most of these remarkable texts: "Fitted hollow / accommodates / bodies for / intimate / epiphany. // Nests with / sheer curves. / Imperturbably / absorbs weight / creates lightness. / Frees dreams / with pleasure." The Italian translation is even more sensual in alluding to this *vasca de bagno* (bathtub).

Number 22 is easier to identify, but its insights are clarifying: "Holds water / without clouds. / Rolls sleekly / over the tongue. / Passes what it keeps / between lips / yet remains complete. / Inclines to be tipped. / Stands / without a hand." (Yes, a glass.)

In a few instances she tips her hand, but usually we must grapple with these charming mysteries of the everyday. Number 32 begins with: "Plane of expectancy. / Cleanly cut / clearly indispensable." This object "Rustles, tears, crumples, folds / but holds more than any window." Also it "Assumes all shapes / yet retains a blankness / that eclipses the limits / of possibility." Expectancy that eclipses our limits? What is it? Your eyes are looking upon it: a piece of paper.

The final poem, consisting of only fifteen words, reads: "Frames light. / Filters death. / Closes. / Slams. / Opens. / Damns. / Silences." Perhaps it suggests a door or a gate, until we read the simple and brilliant closure that "Draws you / out of your mind."

It turns out to be a window (*finestra*) through which these meditations draw us beyond conventional mindsets toward actually contemplating objects generally taken for granted. Throughout the collection,

highlighted by lucid observations and fresh perspectives rather than mere descriptions, Carle has created a poetic vision of the overlooked things of our world.

*Robert Bonazzi*
*San Antonio, Texas*

Mahmoud Darwish. **If I Were Another**. Fady Joudah, tr. New York. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 2009. xxviii + 201 pages. $28. ISBN 978-0-374-17429-3

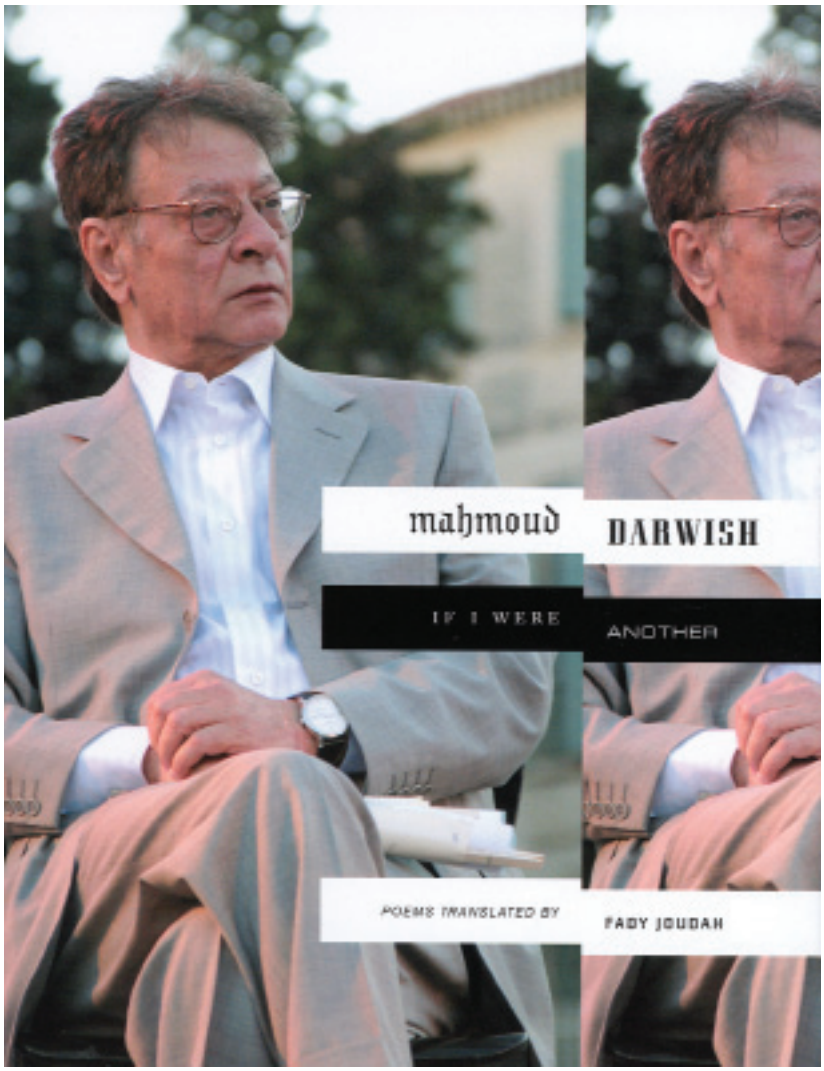
*If I Were Another* is Fady Joudah's second book of translations from Mahmoud Darwish's poetry, the first being the award-winning *The Butterfly's Burden* (2007). Joudah, a Palestinian American physician and poet, offers selected translations in this collection from four of Darwish's recent volumes of longer poems: *Ara ma urid* (1990; I see what I want), *Ahada 'ashara kawkaban* (1992; Eleven planets), *Jidariyya* (2000; Mural), and *Exile* (2005). Moreover, he introduces them in an excellent twenty-two-page literary study entitled "Mahmoud Darwish's Lyric Epic."

The translation is quite faithful to the original Arabic. It retains Darwish's different forms ranging from loose quatrains to free verse, with intervening prose paragraphs, and is conveyed in lines of varying lengths. Above all, it authentically renders Darwish's moods and feelings as well as his fantastic imagery of mental musings on life and death.

The former two books of Darwish belong to his "middle period," still struggling with the effects on his soul of the devastating historical and political events that made his Palestinian people homeless, but using allusive references and metaphors and eschewing the direct language of his "early period." The latter two books belong to his "late style" period, suffused with Sufi inspiration and aesthetic, and replete with questionings of the self and the other, conjectures on presence and absence, memories of love and desire, and aspirations to fulfillment and perfection.

*Mural*, a book-length poem written by Darwish in 2000 after surviving cardiovascular death for the second time in 1999 (the first was in 1984), is a life-affirming poem that is as personal as it is universal in its vision of the poet's encounter with death—the human being in it is valued for being human and able to accomplish immortal feats, especially in the arts. Addressing death, Darwish says: "Death, all the arts have defeated you, all of them." Darwish died upon his third encounter with death in Houston, Texas, on August 9, 2008, after complications from cardiovascular surgery.

One correction of a translation error in *Mural* is perhaps in order here. It is on page 136 where Dr. Joudah translates: "The Song of Songs / or the university's wisdom?" Dr. Joudah translates *al-jami'a* as "university," when the poet meant



Ecclesiastes of the Bible, who is the son of David and who is called al-Jami'a in Arabic, from whose book (Ecclesiastes 1.2) Darwish borrows the idea: "Vanity, vanity of vanities . . . everything / on the face of the earth is a vanishing" (p. 137). However, *Mural* remains, as Dr. Joudah says, "the one magnum opus of which he [Darwish] was certain."

*Issa J. Boullata*
*Montréal*

Eunice de Souza. **A Necklace of Skulls: Collected Poems**. New Delhi. Penguin. 2009. 119 pages. Rs199. ISBN 978-0-143-06815-0

The title of Eunice de Souza's collected poems, *A Necklace of Skulls*, bears the typical biting edge that forms the subtonal layer of much of her verse. With its obvious allusion to Goddess Kali and a certain strand of feminism, her poetry is suffused with an inverted sense of irony and humor. The "skulls" act as a repository of three decades of poetry that garland her four collections—*Fix* (1979), *Women in Dutch Painting* (1988), *Ways of Belonging* (1990), and *Selected and New Poems* (1994)—into a necklace. But this necklace is hardly cosmetic, if anything just the opposite—meant to be worn like a badge of thorns that highlight the hypocrisy and conservatism of the Roman Catholic community she grew up in.

Her language is skilled, terse, often conversational, and has a quiet sense of economy. Her words carry an air of ease and unsentimental élan—but that does not mean her poetry excludes the elements of love, hurt, or joy.

De Souza is very conscious of reviewers' possible responses to her poetry. She writes in the preface: "The poem 'Alibi,' which should have been in *Fix*, was left out at the time, mainly because I had this vision of reviewers using one of the phrases from the poem as their title, 'a sour old puss in verse.'" Here is the poem, that appeared nearly a decade later, in full: "My love says / for god's sake / don't write poems / which heave and pant / and resound to the music / of our thighs / etc. / Just keep at what you are: / a sour old puss in verse / and leave the rest to me." Non-inclusion and inclusion, chronology of appearance, order and context of the poem within that volume are things that subtly speak of the poet's sense of self and how she wants to control the way her poetry ought to be viewed, read, and remembered.

The volume contains a wonderfully wrought theatric six-part poem, "Pahari Parrots," from *Dangerlok* (2001), one of her two novellas (the second being *Dev and Simran*), in addition to some fine early unpublished and more recent poems. She has edited anthologies, written for children, taught for over thirty years at Mumbai's St. Xavier's College—taken together, her latitude of verse reflects her wide-ranging experiences.

Ultimately, it is irony, comic timing, wry sense of wit, social comment, and a pointedly oblique urban stance that characterize what is best in her poetry. A recent poem, "To a Naturalist," which closes the book, is a good example; but one of her early poems, "Conversation Piece," is a classic case in point: "My Portuguese-bred colleague / picked up a clay shivalingam / one day and said: / Is this an ashtray? / No, said the salesman, / This is our god."

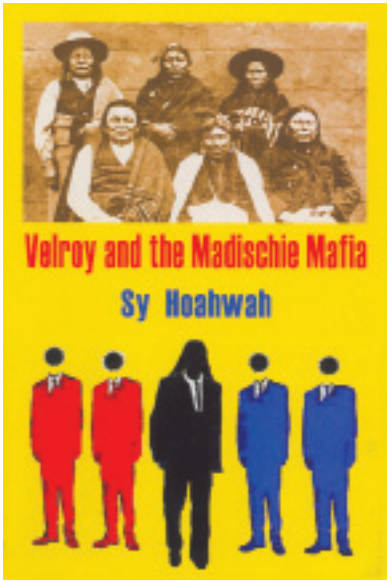
This volume is a fine testimony of what is best in both the subgenre of Indian women's poetry and the broader field of modern English poetry in India. *A Necklace of Skulls* is an important book.

*Sudeep Sen*
*New Delhi*

Sy Hoahwah. **Velroy and the Madischie Mafia**. Albuquerque, New Mexico. West End. 2009. 58 pages. $12.95. ISBN 978-0-9816693-7-3

"The community of Madischie was named after the 110-year-old Comanche woman who only knew how to say in English: I do not speak English." Sy Hoahwah's collection opens with this epigraph, which surely is intended not only to supply information, but also to signal the many interwoven layers of history marked with irony and contradiction that make this poetry unlike anything readers have encountered before.

To say that it is Native American poetry might give the wrong impression. Although one finds the usual elements, such as tribal stories, traditional symbols, and a deep



identification with nature, it might be more accurate to call it "tribal post-avant." Fractured narrative is one of the markers of post-avant poetry, and Hoahwah's poems certainly mess around with narrative time—the difference is that, rather than inventing a language practice to do so, Hoahwah draws on tribal concepts. Many tribes understand physical places to be layered in time, so that when one stands in a particular spot, all the history of that place is there, interpenetrating with the present.

Sense of place, in these poems, is also sense of history. The interpenetration of history and the present force an ironic perspective and a tolerance for contradiction. For example, in "He was a Rollin' 20," which might initially seem to be a straightforward narrative of two men's rivalry, the speaker says that "The Lakota gangsta and I, / from the distances of yards to centuries, / have shot at each other, / and chased each other / from Indian reservation to Indian reservation." "Yards to centuries" is not (just) a figure of speech; it expresses the multitemporal reality of tribal history. The diasporic experiences of Oklahoma Indians multiply the discontinuities.

Although most of the poems in the collection do not display the erratic typography and obscurant syntax of some post-avant poetry, several poems require the reader to piece together a paratactically presented event or to recall a reference in another poem. However, the collection as a whole works like the community of Madischie does—fully understanding the poems requires that you take the time to listen to everyone's stories. In this way, among others, it is truly tribal poetry. Since it is probably impossible for an early-career Native male poet to publish a book without enduring comparisons to Sherman Alexie, let us make this first comparison critically useful. If Alexie's poetry is tragicomic magic realism, then Hoawah's is tragicomic surrealism. Sy Hoahwah's *Velroy and the Madischie Mafia* is edgy, smart, compelling, powerful, haunting, funny, and disturbing; it is a bruising evocation of contemporary Native life written in a style that is both sophisticated and lucid.

*Jeanetta Calhoun Mish*
*University of Oklahoma*


Khaled Mattawa. **Amorisco**. Keene, New York / Port Townsend, Washington. Ausable / Copper Canyon. 2008. 77 pages. $14. ISBN 978-1-931337-44-1

Khaled Mattawa is a poet whose lyrics spin prismatically in the "between." This Libyan-born poet is clearly between worlds, but it is his willingness in his latest collection, *Amorisco*, to grapple with a space that is neither this nor that, which draws us into the work—a work, Campbell McGrath writes, with surfaces whose "solidity erodes or fractures or flowers unexpectedly." It is not just the desire to reassess the between; Mattawa calls us to understand the importance of this space and to embrace it. In a contemporary world that is constantly fragmenting, *Amorisco* stands as a collection full of admittance, but also of hope.

*Amorisco* opens with a sequence poem in fragmented form, aptly titled "Against Ether," that begins: "With my certainties, I assemble the elements / A burned suit / the earth's gloved hand / a book made of petals / Daylight's answer evaporates before our eyes." The poem serves as a perfect example of the surprising language in *Amorisco*, and also illustrates the poet's enduring desire to find meaning in the fragmented, while also showing that truth is constantly shifting—a book can disassemble like petals—thus, meaning will constantly need to be reevaluated.

Mattawa's fascination with the human desire to make sense of the world—and, surely, the immigrant's desire to find a balance between two worlds—is further embodied in the last stanza, where the poet speaks about his father growing crops according to the season: "He takes off his hat / and lets the rain talk to him / he holds a fistful of dirt / and pleads with it." It is this human negotiation between hope and the inevitable inability to control the world around us that figures so prominently in *Amorisco*.

Mattawa constantly admits the difficulty of remaining hopeful in a world that is unavoidably disintegrating. On the other hand, however, the poet is asking us what could be more alluring and even delightful than a world of change, especially when one reaches out to embrace

the shifting. The poem "In Praise of Praise" lauds this beautiful, complicated world: "Praise praise—I throw myself into your orbit / chanting, chanting, and when I pause / you'll know your horizon's edge / Praise that good . . ." Similarly, the book concludes with "Poem" (for what else is a poem but an act of attention and love, an act of praise?), where the poet asks: "What else can I do but love what fades? / Having seen it gone and having seen it return / what else can I do but see the elements / in your blood and skin?" Indeed, this is Khaled Mattawa's call in *Amorisco*, to "see the elements," to accept their mutability, to hope and to keep reaching for a truth that eludes, and above all to love and praise, despite the flaws.

*Alicia Case*
*Washington, D.C.*

## Miscellaneous

Andrei Codrescu. **The Posthuman Dada Guide: Tzara and Lenin Play Chess**. Princeton, New Jersey. Princeton University Press. 2009. 235 pages. $16.95. ISBN 978-0-691-13778-0

At the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, a Roumanian, Tristan Tzara, an Alsacian, Hans Arp, and two Germans, Hugo Ball and Richard Hülsenbeck, founded the Dada movement. Its chaotic experiments with language, form, public performance, and the like were an affirmation of radical irrationality and futility, as a protest against all bourgeois notions of meaning and order. Their performances consisted of public demonstration verging on exhibitionism, collage in art and poetry, and poems and manifestoes that appeared in their official journal, *Dada*, and other periodicals. They waged war against clichéd imagery and standard syntax, and they invested the metaphor with elements of absurdity and irony.

In 1921 they considered *Dada* to have outlived its usefulness and thereupon buried it, making way for surrealism. Elsewhere, particularly in Germany and America, under the initiative of Hülsenbeck and Arthur Cravan, respectively, and with the cooperation of many artists, dadaism has survived as a trademark.

Andrei Codrescu, poet, essayist, and a distinguished professor of English at Louisiana State University, has created his own brilliantly dadaesque guide to Dada, written in a rich ricky-ticky ragtime prose. *The Posthuman Dada Guide* is arranged alphabetically for quick reference, with entries such as "dada-the word." Tristan Tzara's claim that he found it is backed up by its existence as the word *da* in Romanian and Russian, meaning "yes," thus "yesyes." Hülsenbeck claimed that he discovered the word by opening the *Petit Larousse* and finding the word *dada*, a French word for a children's hobbyhorse. Tzara and Lenin play several games of chess in a row. As the poet faces the future mass murder over the chessboard, neither realizes that they are playing for the world. The battle between radical visions of art and ideological revolution lasted for a century and may still be going on, although communism appears dead and Dada stronger than ever.

We also learn a fair amount about "eros," "jews," "creativity," "money & art," "communist bestiary," "nonsense," "human, posthuman, transhuman," etc. Andrei Codrescu is an immense digester, a bringer of news from afar. For now, we have a literary event, a spectacular splash of intelligence and erudition, of clean style and magical impressionability.

*Nicholas Catanoy*
*Bad Wildungen, Germany*

Irena Lukšić. **Dnevnici, snevnici, rječnici**. Zagreb. Meandarmedia. 2009. 315 pages. ISBN 978-953-7355-43-2

*Dnevnici, snevnici, rječnici* (Diaries, dream books, and dictionaries), the new book by noted Croatian writer Irena Lukšić, is built on a paradox: it defies genre by stylizing its texts as the three genres mentioned in its title. This aesthetic principle turns the book into something it is not and yet not what it is. The volume is personal yet universal, contemporary yet historical, realistic yet fantastic, serious yet humorous, fictional yet documentary. It is the old Lukšić who loves to play, yet a new Lukšić who has invented a novel artistic game. Page after page, people and things, signs and interpretations surge and fall in an undulating continuum, which the reader is invited to join whenever he or she wants, and to leave in the same way.

The book comprises two parts: "Diaries and Dream Books" and "Dictionaries." The first part contains diary notes about various times in the life of the book's persona (let's call her Irena). A set of entries speaks at length of the scholarly anthology edited by Irena, *Egzil, emigracija – Novi kontekst* (2002; Exile, emigration: The new context). Another group of entries details Irena's scholarly plans for the future: research on Russian émigré literature, understanding Europe before and after the disintegration of communism, and her work with scholars and writers in other countries. The cycle on dreams often parallels nocturnal dreams and diurnal events. For instance, in her

childhood, in an act of defiance, Irena refused to greet the Soviet delegation with flowers on a visit to the textile plant where her father worked; as an adult, in a dream, she saw a snow statue of Lenin that melted in the sun. Or, in a series of semidocumentary and semifictional sketches entwining real and fantastic events, Irena ruminates on her past and the winding paths of her parents, friends, and lovers.

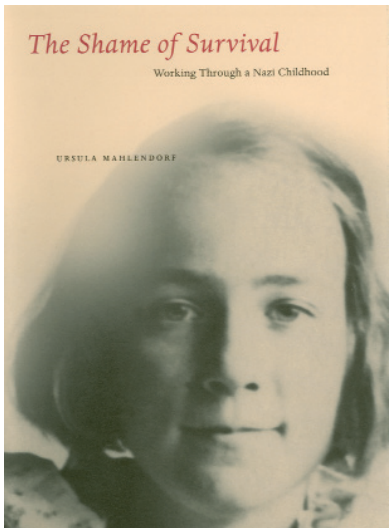
The second part, "Dictionaries," is a string of short essays in which, tongue in cheek, Irena defines her favorite words. The scholarly etymologies and definitions, however, swerve into all sorts of digressions and analogies, which interweave ideas, memories, expectations, and quotes from literature and art to narrate how the world, time, and human lives are, have always been, and will always be one.

*Nikita Nankov*
*Gallipoli, Turkey*

Ursula Mahlendorf. **The Shame of Survival: Working through a Nazi Childhood**. University Park. Pennsylvania State University Press. 2009. 365 pages, ill. $29.95. ISBN 978-0-271-03447-8

Born in 1929, Ursula Mahlendorf belongs to the generation often referred to as "Hitler's Children," a generation robbed of its childhood, subjected to mass indoctrination in Nazi youth organizations—the Hitler Jugend (HJ) and Bund deutscher Mädel (BDM)—and inadvertently implicated in the Nazi regime. The young, naïve Ursula relished the sense of community fostered by the BDM and became an ardent Hitler supporter, something she regretted shortly after the war and has spent a lifetime coming to terms with.

As the subtitle of her autobiography implies, *Shame of Survival*




is part of an ongoing process of mourning. Published at the end of a successful career as a professor of German Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara, Mahlendorf's memoir is a relentlessly honest self-examination of her childhood under Nazism and its psychic afterlife, an enterprise that is of a piece with her research and pedagogical agenda. Throughout her academic career, Mahlendorf felt obligated to teach students about German culpability and responsibility. Although too young to have participated in Nazi atrocities, she rejects Helmut Kohl's apologetic notion of the "Gnade der späten Geburt" (fortune of belated birth). Haunted by the specter of how narrowly she escaped becoming a perpetrator, she takes up Jürgen Habermas's call to Germans to "keep alive the memory of the suffering of those murdered by German hands." "I felt that as a teacher of German literature, I had a special obligation to speak to my students about what we Germans had participated in and what had happened to us." Years of therapy working through the trauma of her childhood and a career of reading literary and cultural texts through the lens of psychoanalytic theory make Mahlendorf well poised to undertake this impressive work of *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* (struggle to come to terms with the past).

Her memoir is compelling reading for anyone interested in learning what it was like for a sensitive girl to come of age in Hitler's Germany and how a morally responsible woman has dealt with that legacy. Ursula Mahlendorf's self-consciously feminist perspective, her attention to gender and class, and her awareness that the private is political make *Shame of Survival* an important contribution to our understanding of fascism in everyday life.

*Anna K. Kuhn*
*University of California, Davis*

Vesna Maric. **Bluebird**. New York. Soft Skull / Counterpoint. 2009. 227 pages. $14.95. ISBN 978-1-59376-258-2

Among the memoirs of the Bosnian War (1992–95), *Bluebird* possesses a distinctive voice that remains close to the consciousness of a bright, reflective teen displaced from Mostar to England. Vesna Maric was sixteen when her mother sent her with her older sister by bus convoy from Croatia through Europe to England to protect them from the violence unfolding in Bosnia. Belonging neither to England nor to the adult world around her, the younger Vesna remains slightly distanced from her experiences, a keen observer who sharply etches portraits of Bosnians and English alike. In a supple English of fresh similes, sharp details, and irony, Maric shapes an odyssey by turns tragic and comic, horrific and mundane.

Exile plunges Vesna into confusion: "Should I leave my family, my language, my culture, my child-

hood, my friends, my everything?" Her passport confiscated, she cannot leave Britain until she receives official "refugee" status four years later. Once her sister returns to Croatia to study, Maric must relocate repeatedly. Initially rejecting the new places, where she is always "once again a foreigner," the resilient teen builds a life and finds beauty in each. When her mother comes to England, Vesna, immersed in her new world and language, starts "to doubt the reality of my memories and my identity." Relocated again when her mother returns to Bosnia, isolated "from everything—my former life in the Former Yugoslavia, my present, my empty life in Hull, my possible life everywhere else," she finally decides to engage fully in her life and studies, and volunteers to translate for newly arrived Bosnian refugees. After she becomes an official "refugee," eligible to apply for British citizenship, she finally visits Bosnia, only to discover the exile's truth, that what was left behind is gone, that "everything is different."

Her exile teaches Vesna the complex host/exile relationship, with its differing expectations. While suddenly homeless middle-class Bosnians wear their elegant dress "like armour," kind but orientalizing British volunteers anticipate poor souls in rags. The convoy organizer thus praises the only exile who insists on dressing badly for "reflecting the true tragedy that has gripped our country . . . who can make us look better in these English eyes." A comic scene unfolds in a church full of used clothing when the Bosnian women bypass more practical garments for fur coats; the wary teenager rightly predicts, "Too many Slavic women and too few furs." On the other hand, Jack and Myra, apparently well-meaning British volunteers who dine weekly with various Bosnian families, never return after Vesna's mother suggests that in Bosnia, friends reciprocate visits.

Ironically, war periodically disrupts Vesna's quotidian reality through stories from those she encounters—other Bosnians, her family, and those asylum-seekers for whom she unofficially interprets. Mediated by her dispassionate "translator" voice, these tales acquire a special horror. Thus, while tracking Vesna Maric's growth, this slight, well-crafted memoir conveys the surreality of both her experience and of the Bosnian War itself.

*Michele Levy*
*North Carolina A&T University*

Monika Maron. **Bitterfelder Bogen: Ein Bericht**. Jonas Maron, photographer. Frankfurt am Main. S. Fischer. 2009. 172 pages, ill. €18.95 ISBN 978-3-10-048828-2


Monika Maron, whose work in recent years has included more and more essays and other nonfiction, became famous in the 1980s as an East German novelist and dissident. Her 1981 novel *Flugasche* (Eng. *Flight of Ashes*, 1986) is a paragon of environmental, dissident, and women's writing and remains one of the finest post–World War II novels from Eastern Europe. Now, in this new book, Maron revisits the site of the industrial nightmare from that novel, Bitterfeld, a small city in Sachsen-Anhalt. Her goal is to explore the changes wrought to the economy, landscape, and people of the area since 1989. What she has produced is an urbane accounting of the ebb and flow of post-unification business and ideas and, ultimately, another demonstration of her irrepressible instinct for asking how the big issues of the day affect ordinary people. The book also offers some insights into the origin and reception of *Flugasche*.

The author had had little contact with Bitterfeld after researching her novel in the 1970s. Upon her return, though, she immediately notices that the industrial grime is gone and many new buildings are in evidence. Maron then tracks the growth of the region's most successful high-tech company, Q-Cells. An idealistic young engineer named Reiner Lemoine, who had founded an alternative electronics company in West Berlin, spearheaded a movement to find sources of sustainable energy in the 1980s. Eventually, to expand production, Lemoine and his colleagues needed a factory, workers, and better infrastructure; their move to the Bitterfeld area in 2001 inaugurated the growth there of "Solar Valley," because they manufacture solar power components and systems. Many other companies—most small but some huge, like Bayer and Guardian Industries—also made wise use of government subsidies and relocated or opened in the area. There is little

discussion of the ups and downs of the *Treuhand* administration, but in general Maron eschews facile vilification of that instrument of privatization and takes issue with Günter Grass's assertion that a gradual convergence and then confederation of the two German states would have served East Germans better; in terms of her reporting, Maron's story emphasizes biographical and personality sketches obtained through interviews and brief historical glances backward.

In the German Democratic Republic, Bitterfeld certainly was "the emblem of a ruined land." Even if globalization and recession gnaw today at its prosperity, if spring floods threaten to decant decades of discarded toxins, if hopes of turning old strip-mining pits into vacation lakes came to naught and the settlement of new industry failed to reverse the population decline—nonetheless, the emergence of "green industry" in the region orients Maron and her reader toward the future. Many of the *Ossis* she mentions remain skeptical of democracy and uncertain about their future, but, like the massive new sculpture atop a nearby hill (the Bitterfeld Arch of the title), the recent economic changes offer new perspectives and present us with a (qualified) East German success story.

*John K. Cox*
*North Dakota State University*

Ivan Vladislavić. **Portrait with Keys: The City of Johannesburg Unlocked**. New York. W.W. Norton. 2009. 203 pages. $14.95. ISBN 978-0-393-33540-8

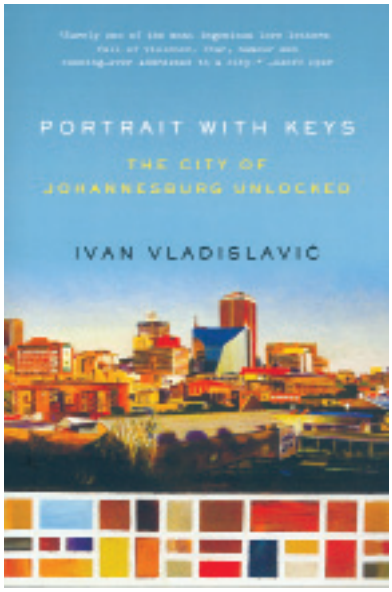
Sixteen years after the end of apartheid, the new Johannesburg has been fictionalized, editorialized, and re-imagined. And it deserves the limelight. In South Africa, it is São Paulo, Shanghai, New York, and London wrapped up in one place. It is the center of industry and the center of fashion. It is the fulcrum of the judiciary and the great patron city of the arts. There is, in short, a lot happening in Joburg.

Ivan Vladislavić's *Portrait with Keys* is a sensitive, contemplative work that meanders with the allure and glitter of the gold reefs that underlie his city of origin. The book is comprised of over 138 short chapters that depict everything from the life of cobblers to the slaying of a gorilla in a zoo, from personal musings about purposeless street objects to tips about buying a reliable anti-theft device for your car. The assembled passages may be seen as a rich tapestry of South Africa's booming commercial capital.

Vladislavić begins the book with nostalgic passages about the cafés and eateries that he haunted as a child. The work seems like it will become just another elegy for a paradise lost—the kind of paradise that we now know was accessible to the very few, and which is best acknowledged and dismissed.

Thankfully, *Portrait with Keys* is much more complex than that. As Johannesburg evolves with the "Rainbow Nation," the author attempts to change with it. While crime and petty theft wrack the streets, so too do countless new forms of artistic expression and ingenuity. Old ways die hard, but new ones are welcome—and if not welcome, inevitable. The European oaks on Vladislavić's street are trimmed and "savage[d]" by the municipality to "remind them that they're in Africa." Yet he also delights in the planting of indigenous saplings of "melkhout, ash, yellowwood, ironwood, umbrella tree."

The book is not an easy read. The restrained, detached voice of




the narrator and rapid shifts of tone in the microchapters can become soporific. Only the phenomenally beautiful precision of Vladislavić's prose saves it. Entire paragraphs could stand alone as finely crafted stanzas of poetry: "Now you must go into the veld—don't forget your walking shoes—slowly, there's no rush. Crystals of black ash and charred stalks as brittle as the wing bones of birds shatter under your soles. Already assegais of new grass are thrusting through the scorched earth, prickling your eyes with their pointed green. The black crust crackles underfoot like remembered flames."

Despite these lovely passages, a gulf seems to remain between Ivan Vladislavić and the new Joburg. It feels like he has been born too late—or too different. He doesn't convincingly imagine the city from the point of view of its "newer" inhabitants, nor does he offer the razor-sharp engagement of a writer such as Kgbetli Moele in his seminal novel *Room 207*. But he is involved enough to make you turn the page.

*Deji Olukotun*
*Brooklyn*