

KEVIN KILLIAN:

Selected Amazon Reviews, Volume 4

Selected by Ted Rees & David Buuck

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Dedicated to the memory of Kevin Killian, 1952-2019.

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How Did It Happen?

Kevin Killian on the Origins of His Amazon Reviews

Edited by Dodie Bellamy

Kevin began his Amazon reviews project not long after he had a heart attack in 2003. Between then and his death from a catastrophic reaction to chemo in June, 2019, Kevin wrote thousands of Amazon reviews, subverting and reinventing the genre, queering the divides between fact and fabrication, between spoof and serious critique. In the process he perverted Western rationality into a carnivalesque What the Fuck. Amazon, sadly, does not post their reviews forever, and many of Kevin's have been lost. Will Hall has archived those that remain in a massive 3280 single spaced page pdf, and is editing a substantial volume of the reviews for Semiotext(e), due out later in 2022. If there is a beyond, this will thrill Kevin. But Kevin was a champion of the local and the ephemeral, and from his throne in the beyond, he will also be thrilled with this, the fourth chapbook selection of his reviews. Ted and David both held special places in his heart.

Kevin told various, sometimes contradictory, versions of how he came to write the reviews. I'm including three here. I have my own version. Maybe I'll write that down some day.

—Dodie Bellamy, 2021

I had a heart attack about ten years back, and the doctors put me on a regimen of drugs so strong that it was like my mind had been removed and I was only happy (and safe from death). I couldn't find my way to the end of a sentence, just drifted off, continuously happy, like a warm heroin or mescaline high. Thus I gave up writing, reasoning that I had done a helluva lot of writing already, had a small shelf of books nobody really gave a fuck about anyhow, and maybe it was time for me to hang it up and rest on my laurels. I spoke the word out loud, "ex-writer." And I was fine with being one, for about a year.

I don't know if the medications wore off, if I got inured to them, or what, but slowly an urge to write began to creep around, underneath my skin, like the red ants in that Night Gallery episode. Damn it, I had "Novelist" written on my passport. If it wasn't maybe in my DNA, I had worked so long to rebuild that as my identity that I couldn't see myself without writing. I began to think of myself, instead of a lazy happy walrus on a glacier, as one who wanted to write but couldn't. Well, as many know I found my way back to writing through assiduous application to brief (sometimes only a few words) Amazon reviews, but within a few more years I was back. So I have been that person who no longer cared to write, and that person driven to it, both—like the Tiresias of this particular set of parameters. All in all, the one who doesn't want to write has it easier, I think, so long as his or her pleasure centers are being otherwise stimulated.

Both before and since my episode, I've thought often about the cases of writers who have stopped production, perhaps to resume it again, perhaps not. Joe Brainard, Leland Hickman, George Oppen, Tillie Olsen, Katharine Anne Porter, Zora Neale Hurston—there's actually a lot of us, in fact some of the most interesting writers of all. (Or is that my pride talking?)

Lorca had been dead only 19 years when Jack Spicer, a poet from a warm climate, alone and cold in New York City, wangled psychic communion with him. The work flowered in Boston and was gathered together in Berkeley and San Francisco in the spring of 1957 (in *After Lorca*, White Rabbit Press). Spicer knew many languages, but Spanish not so much, and only the bilingual *New Directions Selected Lorca of 1955* (edited by the poet's brother and by Spicer's college friend, Donald M. Allen) got him through the long months of poetic intercourse with a dead man. Spicer left unfinished this translation of one of Lorca's most famous poems, ending it on a note sardonic and cold. "How did it happen," he asked later, in a letter to Lorca, "that an officer and a gentleman were buried in the same grave?" But which was which, I wonder.

JF: Why review so much and do so for free? Even with the Vine program, Amazon seems awfully lucky to get so many to labor for them for free.

KK: Not sure what the Vine program is. When my first book of Selected Amazon Reviews came out from Hooke Press in 2006, it caused some controversy both on the left and right. The question of user-generated content has been the dirty secret at the bottom of many internet-related practices. They call it UGC, like an acronym for some hideous drug. Basically it's unpaid labor, and basically it's what has put freelancers (like you?) out of business or scrambling for their next paid gig. I can see why you hate me.

I started writing on the Amazon website I don't know when, but with Amazon's fatal tracking skills I'll look up when first I posted under my present e-mail address. For my birthday on Christmas Eve (2001), the artist Arnold Kemp gave me a book and I wrote about it to him, as one will writing a thank you note—then I figured why not publish it on Amazon? Double dipping. To my amazement 2 out of 5 people found it “helpful.” I wrote other squibs when I found the time, always playing it so that people would find me “helpful.”

And then, in November 2003, a heart attack weakened my defenses and forced me onto a regime of very few fun things except for the prescription drugs they gave me to stop this or that. I lost the need to write. And I was fine with that. The Wellbutrin made me permanently happy: I could carry very little, not even a grudge. Dodie did my writing for me. I figured that, hey, I had written a whole shelf full of books, did the world need to hear more from me? If they wanted to read something by me, they could just pluck a volume off the shelf. In the hospital a friend, the poet Rodney Koeneke, bought me the new novel by a detective writer we both enjoy. And somehow I managed to write down what I felt and put it up on Amazon (December, 2003). However I couldn't do much more than that, I was feeling too giddy. Criticism seemed stupid, beneath me. Is this how people felt in the 1960s? I went back to work, spooking everyone around me with my insensate grin and reduced frame.

But little by little I started to fret. What I was feeling, I think, was the desire to write, snatched from under the coverlet of feel good drug happiness. Or was it the desire to criticize, as I sometimes suspect? Whichever, writing for Amazon was the key (for me). By April 2004 I was writing away, often twice a day, commenting on this, that, or the other, whatever book I was reading, whatever DVD was in the machine. It's surprising how many texts you can actually experience in a lifetime, or say, in the span of a year. This was my regimen, therapy, if you will, and I kept

it pretty quiet, not telling anyone what I was doing, though I wasn't exactly hiding under a cloak of anonymity. I was signing my own name—which isn't always the smartest thing to do I guess. And after a while, I built up the strength in my writing muscles and continued to work in other areas (completing a novel, etc, writing plays, poetry, different sorts of critical work).

And then people started to notice, respond, write back, send me things, and I suppose I got a little self-conscious. I don't know, what do you think? The later reviews get more bulky, but is that just me being able to write longer sentences and, in fact, think more thoughts about a given subject? Or am I on stage like Moira Shearer—forever poised between the man she loves and the public that gasps at her spinning nimblity?

I was pleased and touched that the editors of Hooke Press wanted to make a selection of my work in the genre. I would have done it differently, but that's the great thing about selection, as I learned long ago, walking the seashore with my grandfather, and he'd pick up the shells I discarded, and I only liked the ones he didn't. The day we both wanted the same abalone or whatever, is the day I stopped doing it with him.

JF: Is it possible for something to be the “best” of anything? I remember being seduced as a young person by the Hammacher Schlemmer catalogs my grandmother left on her breakfast table that offered the “tested” security of knowing “the best inflatable bed.” Now I feel like, with the Internet, and especially on Amazon, large wars are waged over “the best” Wagner ring cycle recording or “the best” novel, etc. (I once saw a long, angry thread for and against naming *Anna Karenina* the best novel). So do you think it might ever be possible to name something the best of anything, or is this merely an unnecessary fight waiting to happen?

KK: This seems pretty absurd. It is evident to me that Kylie Minogue is the world's greatest entertainer of all time, but I know that in this regard, and in every other, we all of us have our own opinion. There was a recent issue of *Entertainment Weekly* that gave us the top 100 movies of all time, pop records of all time, TV series of all time, novels of all time. It was the most ludicrous idea ever—no, now I'm falling into their trap. Not the most ludicrous ever, but a very ludicrous one.

Speaking personally, it's not even that something is the best that makes it my favorite. My pantheon includes Faulkner, Dickens, Agatha Christie, John Cowper Powys, Proust, and any one of them has gigantic faults, goofy traits that make me giggle, mixed in with the genius.... What today they call “epic fails,” and these of course are the most interesting. Maybe it's being in California, where the partial and the contingent are more precious than the complete and the perfect. I don't

need Julianne Moore, not while there are still Lana Turner movies to be seen. So no, that line of pursuit is not for me. I don't see it happening on Amazon as much as you've seen it, John. The only thing I can think of is the calumny heaped on my head for suggesting that the inept film *The Caine Mutiny* Court Martial with Humphrey Bogart isn't exactly a masterpiece of cinema. I nearly lost my Hall of Fame status over that one, and in the minds of some, I've been branded a "hater," and believe me, John, nothing could be further than the truth. So I do agree that passions run high. I just haven't seen this race to crown the best of everything.

3

With Cam Scott (2017)

CS: So maybe this is an odd segue, but where your criticism is concerned, maybe this is a good spot to register that you are perhaps one of the most prolific and authoritative Amazon reviewers of all time.

KK: Thanks, I was in the top one hundred reviewers at one time. And once you're in that, you get booted into the Amazon Hall of Fame and you don't have to maintain your number status anymore, because I don't do nearly as many reviews as I used to. I wrote them as a kind of therapy after an illness, when I had abandoned writing because of a program of medications I was on that was making me too happy to go on writing. I was an ex-writer, but after about two years of happiness I started wishing I had my old identity back, but because I was unable to come to the end of a sentence, it didn't seem likely. And Dodie said, "You should write some articles for Amazon, write reviews. You can write one word and they'll publish them. It's not like you don't have your opinions, you just don't have the vocabulary to say anything. So just write it, like Horrible, or Great." And that made me feel like there I am, expressing myself. And I got up to two words, and then a sentence. And those were happy times for me, when I was learning to write again. And by the time I reached what we used to call the three-paragraph essay in composition, I was back. It took maybe two or three years—back to my full strength as a writer—and I could do those theoretical-critical essays I used to write before my collapse. So I looked back and I'd written 1500 of these reviews for Amazon. And you know Cam, the funny thing is that Amazon changed their policy, and they no longer permit reviews of under twenty words. So I would have been screwed; I couldn't have written twenty words.

CS: The therapeutic potential would be lost.

KK: They're cutting off a lot of people who are trying to learn to write.

CS: That's beautiful, though. I had no idea that it was that sort of a training course. Because I think of this absolutely lovely moment in *The Buddhist* where Dodie stops to register surprise at your obsessional output. Is that familiar to you? She's writing about how she hardly recognizes this side of you.

KK: I don't remember that part.

CS: I thought it was really sweet.

KK: Well, I don't know why, but some people reading Amazon would see my name as a reviewer, people who knew my work, and then they'd see it in another context, and if you click the name you can see other things that person has written, and that's where they got the idea to publish them as books. So the first edition of my *Selected Amazon Reviews* was a success and people were writing about it. It had problems, you know, the obvious philosophical problem is that I was doing this without being paid, in the service of a huge multinational corporation that was killing bookstores and perhaps writing itself. But some defended me and said, "He's torquing the system from within; they're not actually reviews, they're poems," so it was a poetic project. And I have written quite a lot in that style. And one of my things that I did, because I'm from San Francisco, and a lot of the poetry world is based on knowing French and constant travel back and forth to Paris or Europe in general, and then coming back home and writing poems about it. And maybe it was from a class perspective, but I thought that this was the worst, that travel writing is not poetry. And so in my Amazon reviews I could pose as a person who was actually kind of French, so a lot of them start out "As an American boy growing up in France." Now a lot of people think I am from France.

CS: But you're not, you're from Long Island.

KK: And I've never been to France, but I'm going there; they're bringing me to Paris to translate my work, and I'm so excited about it. It's a group of French poets and translators who bring in three or four poets a year and go to work on you, and in a few weeks they translate a whole book by you. I'm doing that in December, as an American boy, returning to France.

The Reviews

The Toaster Oven Cookbook

by David DiResta

★★★★★

Looks Faded, but It Was This Way Brand New

September 21, 2015

It took me only a few minutes to plug in my new toaster oven and perhaps twenty to read the revised edition of David DiResta and Joanne Foran's "The Toaster Oven Cookbook." Ever have half an hour in your life where you had nothing to do but do the thing you always wanted to do? I was getting ready for the monthly meeting of my Bicoastal Mask group, and thought to myself, "I'll just make something out of the Toaster Oven Cookbook" the way I had always wanted to do.

For too long this book has lain on my formica counter, handy to my cooking station, but somehow the time never seemed right. Now, with the meeting coming on, I flipped open the cookbook and tried to find some of the recipes I had salivated over during previous reads. There was one with shrimp and broccoli that sounded right. (Why is it, I ask parenthetically, that I find the word "broccoli" so hard to spell? Early childhood aversion to green, wiry, tough vegetables?) I grabbed the book and looked at it guiltily, it had lain in the sun so long that the cover looked all faded, even the hot orange cylinders of the toast filaments seemed dim, like candy corn. But now as I compare it to the illustration on the book cover, I can see, it hadn't faded, it was just printed with a sort of sepia finish. The very first recipe was what I wanted (and indeed it is the one on the book cover), shrimp and broccoli pizza. While the authors advise the readers to get little pizza pans, and even tile ramekins on which to place your pizza slices, but not me. I was willing to risk the inevitable disappearance of some of the crumbs, dropping off into the hot hell of the lower levels of my toaster oven—i.e., the drip tray—what my wife calls the crumb tray. Some of your food is going to be lost, that's a given. That's toaster oven cooking, you might even say, that's the heartbreak of toaster oven cooking.

But there are many rewards. The smiles on the face of your friends in the Bicoastal Mask group when you bring out tray after tray of Toaster Oven pizza, with that shrimp and broc combo spiced with oregano and store bought pizza sauce! The curious, envious questions your guests will be peppering you with. The sheer joy of the heavy, viscous scent of the pizza, bringing back memories to all of days spent eating heartier fare at Domino's or Little Caesar. Each page in the cookbook contains one recipe, and by the time you've finished one, you want to try the next

one, which is just perfect for one or two person meals. It's intense, this craving to go on, turning the pages, dialing up the fun.

8 people found this helpful

Smelling Salts 17 ml

by Mackenzies

★★★★★

The answer to deep grief

December 31, 2013

My Irish grandfather used to keep a bottle of MacKenzie's smelling salts next to his desk. He was the principal at Bushwick High School (in Brooklyn, NY) in the 1930s and 1940s, before it became a dangerous place to live in, and way before Bushwick regained its current state of desirable area for new gentrification. And he kept one at home as well, in case of a sudden shock. At school, he would press the saturated cotton under the nostrils of poor girls who realized they were pregnant in health class, before he expelled them. Or, when the policy of corporal punishment had allowed him rather too much paddling of the sophomore boys, he would apply smelling salts to their faces till they recovered from passing out.

For me, 2013's a new era, and the salts themselves seem way more organic than they used to when first I sampled them in the 70s. I was a typical teen raiding my grandparents' medicine cabinet, trying a little of this, a little of that, you know... I took a whiff of the MacKenzies and I was like, whoa! It was the feeling when your face has been "stuffed up," and reality has blurred your vision, your passages clogged, the doors of perception jammed shut. And one infusion of this magic ointment opens all of them up within a fraction of an instant, you can't even get a syllable out, you're just yourself again, your very best self.

Nowadays, with my ongoing heart problems, I use them only when I'm in a deep grief or have had a shock. I was so sad when Paul Walker died. And then again one day I came staggering down the stairs, having been passed over for inclusion in the 2014 Whitney Biennial by a troika of careless curators, I simply collapsed out of grief, and it took my wife a minute or two to locate the MacKenzie's, but passing it under my nose, as though she were my grandfather ministering to the pregnant girls of yore, or the sore-bottomed "tough guys;" and suddenly I snorted and came awake, shot to my feet, still grieving for my disappointment but at least able to function and go back to making my art, feeding the cats, etc., being a man. In time of deep mourning thank goodness for small miracles!

52 people found this helpful

The Big Builders, a Whitman Learn About Book

by E. Joseph Dreany

★★★★★

and I loved seeing things go down

October 19, 2015

The Big Builders came out the year I started the fourth grade, and it became an important book to me. As an adult I can see what appears to be an ideological message I never really understood as a kid. But what kid would? Or do I mean, what boy would? I still don't understand why I was so fascinated with builders and junkers both, could stand for hours watching construction crews erect even the smallest of buildings, and I loved seeing things go down, too, as they often were in the Robert Moses-dominated Long Island of my youth. I hear from my grandchildren (now grown themselves, starting families of their own) that their own kids love videos involving big trucks and that they are the best babysitters around, these videos. You can leave the house for hours and your kids will literally not know you are gone.

That's how I was with this Whitman "Learn-About" book by the utterly strange and compelling immigrant figure, E. Joseph Dreany. The back of my tattered copy of *The Big Builders* reads, "In that part of northern Canada where log cabins and tar-papers shacks are still plentiful, and where winters mean deep snow, long icicles, and temperatures that tickle the sub-zero mark—that's where E. JOSEPH DREANY, author and artist, was born and raised." I wish I could show you some of his illustrations but they are quite fanciful and cinematic. On the front cover a crew of four hard-hats reach out to each other from opposing red-gold girders as they lasso the Golden Gate Bridge, above the raging waters of Hoover Dam while above soars the then-new United Nations Building. It turns out these workers are Mohawk Indians, who have the "iron nerve" it takes to stand without safety belts with only a steel beam to stand on in heavy winds. "Once they came from an Indian reservation in Canada. Now they live in Brooklyn." Dreany doesn't talk down to kids, exactly, and it was from this book that I found out that the iconic Lever Building was the first NYC building to be erected without setbacks, from the third floor up. A giant slab on its end, like the UN Building that followed it. Now we see these buildings and don't even appreciate the power of the Mohawk Indians that made them—like the artisans who created Mont Ste. Michel and Chartres, they are forgotten balancers.

The chapter on the building of Hoover Dam likewise is written and illustrated with real force. My total knowledge of Hoover Dam comes from a gay amalgam of Dreany's *The Big Builders* with memories of Elvis and Ann-Margret touring the

dam for kicks in the splenetic dreamworld of George Sidney's Viva Las Vegas! It was from Dreany that I learned that the construction of Hoover Dam was larger and more difficult than the building of the Great Pyramid of Cheops, or, to look at it in another way, imagine a grand pyramid erected upside down within the walls of a western canyon, and then flooded with water, and you can see how the chariots of the gods isn't just a fanciful Canadian idea, it may be a real thing, and that is why this extraneous scene of Elvis and Ann-Margret was inserted into the film in question, to announce the endorsement of the thing by actual 20th century gods of music, beauty and dance—a "dam that tamed a wild mustang of a western river," to be colorful about it. The book also answers the questions, "What is a 'Gismo'?"—"Can you bounce a ping-pong ball on water?"—"Who eats 'wood-burgers'?" and many more attractive propositions that every child yearns to know.

This cover shows just half of the visual excitement that the legendary Dreany brought to us Whitman Learn About books. You'll learn about colors and capitalism in *The Big Builders*.

1 person found this helpful

223 Multi-Purpose Duct Tape: 3 in. x 60 yds. (*Dark Green*)
by Polyken

★★★★★

Duct Tape Special

April 20, 2010

I was impressed by the manufacturers' claim that "This product's actual size is 72mm x 55m. This tape is typically cut to width from log rolls so most sizes ship on a plain white core." I've used enough duct tape in the past to know that, although many manufacturers claim they're cutting to width from log rolls, it's not always the case. Duct tape's a funny thing, isn't it? No matter what you're using it for. I like Polyken as a brand and I always like products cut from logs... When I was in shop class in high school they used to call me, the Log Lady, and one time it was my birthday they brought me an ice cream cake shaped like a log! So I ordered several rolls of the dark green 223, as you see here, and when it came I went a little crazy with the back of my refrigerator...

And also I had the common problem of having three cats (of my wife's) who run around the kitchen sometimes knocking down the upright broom and dust mop much to my annoyance. Problem licked with Polyken! I just applied a few inches of that thick, log-derived polymer on either side of the broom handle, basically taping it to the wall. Mop too. One caveat, but this is something all duct tape users know, if you are actually taping yourself, or another human being, watch out, that tape stings when you peel it off, so save the bare skin by inserting strips of linen or cotton underneath, and save yourself some swearing down the line.

It has a nice aroma just sitting in my shop cellar. I keep thinking it wouldn't be inappropriate in my top dresser drawer, if I ever run out of potpourri—again, a nice mixture of clean, sweet, unearthed log, and maybe something a little chemical like air freshener.

3 people found this helpful

Garth Williams, *American Illustrator: A Life* (hardcover)

by Elizabeth K. Wallace & James D. Wallace

★★★★★

Fascinating Ogre

September 1, 2016

If you thought that children's book illustrators live lives of no drama, this book will come as a complete and utter shock. I was one who thought it would be placid stroll in the park but it was like walking into the life of King Lear, if Lear had been married four times and couldn't stop having children in every country of Europe. I mean, when I was a boy Garth Williams was at his peak of fame and could do no wrong, but we read him as life-affirming and not scary. Now based on the intimate documents uncovered by a pair of Boston College-based biographers, the truth comes out and it's not all that pretty.

I do admire the Wallaces for knowing how to entice a reader. In their introduction, they tell us that Williams knew most of the great children's authors of his time, but they go on to say, "Williams' life also intersects with a remarkable series of twentieth century figures: artists like Rosario Murabito and Mark Rothko, editors like Harold Ross and Ursula Nordstrom, musicians like John Sebastian of the Lovin' Spoonful, politicians like Winston Churchill, and celebrities like Elizabeth Taylor." After that, I am so there!

Trained in the fine arts, Williams (born 1912) apprenticed as a sculptor and won the Prix de Rome—the most prestigious honor a British artist could then achieve. In Rome he met the unusual Gunda Lambiton, whom he married and sired two daughters on. His next move was to bring on Dorothea, a nanny for the two girls and just like Robin Williams' nanny wound up married to the boss and having children by him herself. A weary Gunda made her way to Toronto where she created a new life for herself and became an experienced farmer and memoirist who lived till a great old age—100? Dorothea was from a wealthy, stylish family of Hungarian Jews who was fleeing Hitler, and Garth Williams fell in love with her as she foolishly went into a snowstorm barefoot and coatless, and he ran after her to rescue her from a possible influenza. Eventually they settled together in New York City. There Williams met Rothko and other bright lights of the New York art world. And then came along the great break of getting to illustrate E. B. White's "Stuart Little," which made him enormously famous, though it embittered him that he didn't get to share in the royalties White was making.

Soon enough his beloved editor, Ursula Nordstrom, hatched a plan to have him illustrate all of the Little House books, and he and Dorothea drove to the Midwest

to visit the aged Laura Ingalls Wilder and her ten years old husband Almanzo. The Wallaces are very good about describing what makes Williams such a superb illustrator and they are never better than in touching on the way his drawing style is slightly different in every book, to match the continuing maturation of little Laura into a teen girl and then a young lady and then a married woman, so that just as Laura sees life, the drawings reproduce for young readers her varied visual experiences. If *Stuart Little* made Garth Williams popular, the *Little House* books made him a legend and still to come was *Charlotte's Web*. Soon the Williams family was living the high life in Aspen and mixing with people like Thomas Mann and Stravinsky. Then he got it in his head to move to Mexico, and sure enough, a young beautiful Mexican girl from the neighborhood took him away from wife #2 and became wife #3 in the blink of an eye. It was at about this point that I began to realize the Wallaces really don't know, or can't explain at any rate, what made Garth Williams tick. Their biography becomes an account of a privileged old man getting more and more whimsical and self-centered—like Lear, but without the poetry.

At the end of his life it broke his heart that White, fed up with Williams trying to take credit for the success of *Stuart Little* and *Charlotte's Web*, told Nordstrom to hire someone else—anyone else, to illustrate his third children's book, *The Trumpet of the Swan*. Time was catching up with the Garth Williams brand, as younger, hungrier artists like Ezra Jack Keats and Maurice Sendak started infecting children's books with themes of darkness and uncertainty—and fear—and anxiety. Williams illustrated Randall Jarrell's first book for children, but the other ones were given to Maurice Sendak because he was edgier.

Oddly enough, in 1964 both Jarrell and Williams came down with hepatitis. Wonder how they both happened to catch it at exactly the same time. The Wallaces do not speculate on what seems like a coincidence, but was it?

I read Garth Williams now as a late modernist artist at a time when artists were given the benefit of the doubt all over the place. Picasso was his model, and like Picasso he went from one woman to another, and like Picasso, one of his wives wound up a suicide. Fittingly enough, we learn that Picasso's son Claude dated Garth Williams' daughter, Jessica, a jewelry designer like Paloma Picasso. It is a book filled with mirroring images and jolting shifts in perspective—a sad book, but one that won't let you put it down.

9 people found this helpful

Dummy Full Size With Hands

by C4L

★★★★★

Used Again and Again

November 22, 2013

Like most of the other reviewers, I first bought this dummy in 2011 as a prop for a haunted house me and my mates were operating in Oakland, just across the Bay Bridge from San Francisco. We were running a nonprofit artist run space that hosts poetry readings and meetings of like-minded people into poetry and the verbal arts. For years, ever since the shutdown of government support for poetry, Halloween has been a big money making time for us, but in 2011 as I recall we were especially wary of other competition, breathing down our necks, because a good spooky house is something every artist wants to have at his disposal this time of year. With increased competition everybody has got to boast more gore, more carnage, more fake blood and most of all, more corpses, and realistic looking ones particularly, otherwise a jaded audience gets weary and bored easy, just as if we were presenting two Language poets, say, while the other guy down the street could boast Mary Oliver and Billy Collins. Thus in 2011, we were totally up against it, and we wound up going wholesale and buying dummies, where once we could count on our friends acting crazy in homemade costumes—Jack the Ripper, the Human Blockhead, the spider with ten legs, the Hypnotic Eye, Jayne Mansfield without her head, Tarzan, and many more.

Alas those once unemployed poets had landed good tech jobs at Twitter and Google and were no longer amused by nor available for the long hours and unpaid lifestyle of a spooky house volunteer for poetry. Amazon came to the rescue so I bought one of these guys as a treat. We planned to employ “Dummy Full Size with Hands” as a mummy, sort of a Frankenstein mummy with a meat knife sticking out of his chest, a mummy that would greet the terrified pilgrim who opened the door to the back room with a maniacal recorded cackle easily downloadable from numerous sources on Spotify or iTunes. And it worked.

It worked so well that our competitors from other poetry groups protested that we were stealing all of their thunder. They didn't realize we were trying to raise the money to start off 2012 with a bang and we needed the extra dough to be able to afford Christian Bok and Dottie Lasky to come together onstage for our Valentine Ball. The only question was what to do with our dummy till the next year, 2012 Halloween? None of our members had an extra bedroom for the

fellow so, even though he was fairly heavy and nearly my own height, I wound up taking him home back to my place where he remains today. My cats love him, they sit in his lap all day and shroud his crotch with hair (I should say, it's not really anatomically a crotch). He went back to work just this past Halloween in a new costume—Manson! And when I'm feeling lonely and my wife has gone out of town on business or pleasure, I hate sleeping alone, so I shoo the cats away and drag my guy into the bed with me to spoon with. You know, he's stuffed, and his spine comes with extra holes into which you can feed more stuffing, be it grain, acorns, or styrofoam, and I like to move my fingers up and down its spine looking for the holes and sealing them up if necessary. His hands are fully operable and will wrap themselves around any elongated object.

9 people found this helpful

Kylie Fashion (*hardcover*)
by Kylie Minogue

★★★★★

Gift of a Lifetime

January 3, 2014

Hail to my friends David and Sara for bringing me this book for my birthday! They are beyond belief sensitive to a fellow's needs and wants.

I had my eye on this book from the beginning. It's not that every book on Kylie is good, though I never read one I didn't enjoy. For me the first and still the best was, oh I don't know what they call it but it's known as Kylie Evidence, from the late 90s? Came in a box? That book showed off the extent of Kylie's collaborations not only with top designers but with the *crème de la crème* of British and international artist, from Pierre et Gilles to Wolfgang Tillmans to, ah what's her name, she made that film about a teenage John Lennon and then married its teenage star. Well, the anagram for "Kylie Minogue" is "I like em young," and this woman artist underlined that in red! I know, I'll Google her name, oh here you go, Sam Taylor-Wood, the one who's directing *Fifty Shades of Grey*. Anyway, Kylie Fashion is pretty cool. At first I thought, they're not giving enough space to the pre-Light Years era, but that was heavily covered in "Evidence," and perhaps in the splashy, vacuous, "La La La," and though I feel that the 90s were the decade in which Kylie was the most glamorous, there is still enough greatness in the 2000s, the cancer years, and the Aphrodite rollout to make the act of reading "Fashion" a pleasure from cover to cover.

As other reviewers have noted, there's not too much of Kylie's longtime stylist William Baker in this one and for that we can all be grateful. I don't know about you, but I was sick of him from the minute I saw the videos for "Please Stay" and "Your Disco Needs You." Now and then he lets Kylie wear something suitable for her, but so often he brings her to the ateliers of the world's greatest designers and then picks out their worst costumes for her, cough, Dolce&Gabbana. I only like him because he stuck with her through the cancer period, but even Olivier did that, who would desert her in her time of need. Why make a movie about what a good friend you were, William Baker, with her all hugging you and crying on your shoulder? On the third hand, there's no denying the greatness of the Body Language campaign, nor the way you dressed Kylie at the Brit Awards when she did *Can't Get You Out of my Head* with tiny braids and a robot dress. Nor the videos for *Slow*, *CGYOOMH*, *Get Outta My Way*, *Wow*, *All the Lovers* or *Santa Baby*, so I'm still rooting for you to a certain degree. On the fourth hand, it was a great idea to have sidebars through "Fashion" consisting of interviews of the

designers to show how they first met Kylie. I could read them all day. Gaultier seems like Wittgenstein, he's so acute. On the fifth hand, those hot pants were not your idea and I'm glad you're finally admitting as much.

2 people found this helpful

Memoirs of a Hypnotist (*paperback*)

by Marcos Lutyens

★★★★★

Hypnosis then, and now

June 8, 2016

If ever you wanted to know how the artists invited to big European shows like Documenta, survive the months-long and often arduous toil of basically singing for their supper, I can think of no better guide than Marcos Lutyens's lovely little book, "Memoirs of a Hypnotist: 100 Days."

The artist was approached by a Lithuanian curator, Raimundas Malasauskas, in Los Angeles, and asked if it were possible for him to hypnotize someone—literally. Malasauskas had already made an agreement with a San Francisco gallerist who had given him *carte blanche* to stage a show at her new gallery on whatever topic he wanted. Interested in hypnosis, no doubt because of his early experience behind the Iron Curtain in the days of the Soviet state. However, he didn't have a hypnotist so the beloved arts activist Ronni Kimm reached into her Rolodex and found him one, young Marcos Lutyens, then living in LA with his wife Yi-Ping and a young son, Jasper Tian-Huu. His memoir reveals him as the perfect artist for the show, and once the Silverman Gallery show was held, it became clear that curator and artist had it in them to expand a modest pop-up exhibition into first, a touring show, and then finally an attraction at the most famous art fair of them all, Documenta 13 in Kassel.

Kassel is a town in Germany and there, we gather, Lutyens devised a mirror cabin for his installation. (To "mirror" the mirror theme, the book's introduction is laid out in a footnote scheme in which we see the numbers on the right hand page (say 23), but on the left hand we see the number "23" reversed as if seen in some sort of dim, reflective mirror.) There was an unease built into the show, and happily Lutyens has pages and pages on anecdotes of what it was like, hypnotizing visitors into vague "narratives" devised by participating artists for an experience that would leave them feeling interpersonal but singular. Celebrated artists came too, and like all good sports sat in and let themselves "go under," like the American performance legend Joan Jonas. We watch as Lutyens watches Ron Athey undergo genitalia stapling surgery without pain, due to his ease with hypnosis, while in another sequence a friend grants him access into a private hospital in which operations are performed on actual patients to be witnessed by spectators in their underwear, like some fantastic futuristic Eakins painting nobody knew he painted.

I didn't go to Documenta but I was there, hypnotized, at the American gallery in which the Hypnotic Show debuted. I append my contemporary notes from 2008. I relished my time spent with both Lutyens and Malasauskas. I think they implanted suggestions in my brain like the shadowy brainmelters in Heinlein's *The Puppet Masters*, or Condon's *The Manchurian Candidate*, so that every time I think of either of them my cares melt away and I drift between smiles and sighs and erections.

My 2008 notes begin here: At the door of the Silverman Gallery you had to sign two releases before being allowed entry. "Basically this one says you waive liability in case you get possessed by a demon while within these walls," explains the gallery girl, "and this one's stating you won't sue if the dream machine gives you an epileptic seizure." Possessed? Dream machine? We were positively fibrillating by the time we took seats in the dimly lit gallery space on Sutter Street. Job Piston and I sat warily, cameras in our laps, ready to snap any sign of ectoplasm or wrathful spirits, but apparently this was just part of curator Raimundas Malasauskas' Barnum-like showmanship, and when he promised a "séance of hypnosis," he was using "séance" as a metaphor, as one might say, "a whole bunch of hypnosis," or, a "quiet evening of hypnosis." I don't know how they say it in Lithuanian, but the philosophy of the studio heads of Hollywood's golden age was, get those asses into the seats by any means necessary. Malasauskas might well be the William Castle of modern curatorial projects.

[I might have the prophetic streak, for here I was, calling on the name of the US schlock horror master William CASTLE, not knowing that the project was going to wind up in KASSEL Germany, the Castle homonym! Nevertheless let me go on:]

I never felt that I was actually going to be possessed by an incubus, but artist slash hypnotist Marcos Lutyens certainly had us all going pit a pat as he entered and prowled through the space, dividing the audience into two groups, those who were volunteering, and those like myself afraid to participate, who wanted merely to watch. Malasauskas had commissioned hypnosis scripts from a group of international artists, and Lutyens had worked four of them into a running spiel. The ring of chairs was soon deep in a trance, the sitters nodding and blinking like rabbits, while he spoke on in a velvety, Michael Ondaatje baritone redolent of summer, with a poignant tang of autumn surprising some of his labial consonants. Like I say, he worked the space, reaching out here and there to clasp shut a pair of hands a –trembling on a knee, to touch a supplicant's forehead with his thumb, all the while counting us down, five, four, three, two, one. At one we were in the deepest possible trance state, and then he'd have us count down yet again, from ten to one, deeper still. One girl wound up so out of it her hair touched the

ground in front of her, I've never seen anything like it, not even back in college when we took massive doses of animal tranquilizers to get over the outrage of having Nixon as president.

Meanwhile Lutyens was droning on in that intimate, simpatico way, walking us into Joachin Koester's script about a park, a sidewalk, a civic building called the "Department of Abandoned Futures," after which we crossed the threshold and descended a stairway, entered a hall, found a box filled with—with what? We each were invited to imagine what lay within. Deric Carner's script was more ominous, I thought, a dark, cloudy horizon along which an unimaginable object began to evince itself—in a color we could not name, as it was not a color we had ever seen before—and the name of the large object came to us little by little as its Lovecraftian shape began to struggle in shadows and gleams across the sky. I called my object "Zephyr." I don't know why. You'll gather that my status as a spectator did not prevent me from joining into the general trance; Marcos Lutyens' voice is so seductive that, were you in that room that night, you too would be dreaming these dark visions. He leaned on some catchphrases that, perhaps, judged objectively, he used too often ("went back to the well one too many times," as my dad used to say), but I never got tired of hearing him say, "And you're drifting and dreaming—drifting and dreaming." Indeed I'm now engaged to Marcos Lutyens and cheerfully I am bearing his children without anesthesia. I'll just be drifting and dreaming in a bower of erotic bliss somewhere, bent to the floor, my hair soapy and washing his high-instepped feet.

Before I knew it we were waking up, one, two, three, four, five. Kylie Minogue had that song on her LP, *Body Language*, which I should have listened to before exposing myself to *Hypnotic Show*.

Count backwards 5, 4, 3, 2, 1

Before you get too heated and turned on (and turned on)

You should've learned your lesson all in times before

You've been bruised, you've been broken

And there's my mind saying think before you go

Through that door that takes me to nowhere (yes boy)

I stopped you all romantic crazy in your head

You think I listen, no I don't care . . .

The truth is, I do care, and when Raimundas Malasauskas proposed hypnotism as an avenue of total interaction, a room full of mirrors in which objects create themselves from the swept floorboards of the Silverman Gallery—the birthplace of the golem—I went there. You know how Susan Sontag coined that expression, "Don't go there." Well, I went there, ignoring Sontag, thrusting myself in a post-Sontag

space of risk, interpellation, and impending childbirth, drifting and dreaming, drifting and dreaming, in the Alterjinga of the Australian aboriginal people—the dreamtime.

2 people found this helpful

I Loved Her in the Movies: Memories of Hollywood's
Legendary Actresses (*hardcover*)
by Robert Wagner

★★★★☆

The Carl Andre of American pop cinema

April 28, 2017

Robert Wagner strikes me as a nice guy though and it's hard to believe he's still up and at 'em having been around so long. I know there are many who suspect the worst of the man and to tell you the truth, the events that took place that night on the *Splendor* have cast a long shadow over the past thirty years, not only for me but for every Natalie Wood fan. But I came to this book hoping to start a new page clean.

He tells us at the beginning that the book will be free of negativity, but has to eat his words over and over again, especially when thoughts of Betty Hutton cross his mind. Or Raquel Welch, of whom he says that the eight weeks they spent together shooting *The Biggest Bundle of Them All* chafed more than an "eight week long session with a proctologist."

It's hard to believe he's still up and at 'em having been around so long. He worked for Carmel Myers, for goodness' sakes. OK, he's 88 now and still active, thanks to the ministrations of the beloved Jill St. John. When he appeared on TV to roast Robert Osborne on a "This is Your Life" segment, he looked fit as a forty year old man (maybe because poor Osborne was sinking in front of our eyes, poor guy).

Wagner still has plenty of insight into Natalie as a woman and an artist, as Carl Andre probably has plenty of insight into Ana Mendieta. Wagner tells us that she won the role of Deenie in Elia Kazan's *Splendor in the Grass* due to a strange Wood quirk. Jane Fonda had the inside edge, but Kazan chose her over Jane Fonda because "Natalie admitted to him that she was ambitious, and Fonda wouldn't. Kazan wanted an actress who wasn't afraid to be great. Natalie wanted to be great, so she was."

When Natalie was alive, she had Wagner wanting to be great too, though they made rather a botch out of playing Brick and Maggie in that awful version of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*. Now he is playing lackluster comedy parts, like the poor man's Leslie Nielsen.

Wagner's good at both inductive and deductive reasoning. For example, he followed his friend Ida Lupino through her acting career and her pioneering work as the 1950s premiere female director. When she makes the transition into TV roles, she was able to get good gigs directing "tough" shows like *The Fugitive* and *Have Gun, Will Travel* and, he says, this was lucky for her because the few women who had their own shows like Donna Reed and Loretta Young wouldn't hire Lupino to direct them. It's all "ironic," Wagner claims, but he makes connections between this behavior and the male dominated Hollywood world in which every woman had to fight for herself. Even the greatest female star had at most a ten year-run of box office gold—then she was yesterday's dog's dinner. Who else would know the tawdry details of the feud that split apart Hollywood's oddest friendship, that of Barbara Hutton and Rosalind Russell? Only RJ Wagner, who was there when it all happened.

He knows who had the greatest jewelry collection in Hollywood. No, not Liz Taylor, but a three way tie between Merle Oberon, Paulette Goddard, and ice skating goddess Sonja Henie. Why them? Because they cared about jewels, seeing them as objective tokens of the love men gave them. "Jewelry MATTERED to them—it was a way of keeping score." Rosalind Russell's obnoxious husband was called behind his back "the Lizard of Roz." Why? Wagner asks. "How to put this delicately?" he muses. "Because he was an arrogant a\$ \$ h 0le." Amazon won't even let me print the things RJ gets away with, because he's so cute that even Barbara Stanwyck wanted him, when she was 44 and he was 19—and she got him.

2 people found this helpful

A Taste of Broadway: Food in Musical Theater (*hardcover*)
by Jennifer Packard

★★★★★

It was like my brain died and went to heaven

October 26, 2018

Jennifer Packard's book caught my attention in a Venn diagram of new books about vintage Broadway shows and another section of books about food (including cookbooks) and this book teeters on the edge of both. I was surprised and shocked to find out that so many of our classic musicals apparently use food in one or more of seven distinct ways, and often it advances the plot but sometimes is just there to highlight the texture of the musical in question.

She has me persuaded even before she gets to Lionel Bart's *Oliver!* and its paean to "Food, Glorious Food!" Packard has done a great job researching the personal food foibles of some great songwriters and librettists—there's a whole chapter about what Oscar Hammerstein II liked to eat and how this showed up, or didn't, in the musicals he did with Richard Rodgers, whereas Lorenz Hart had little interest in food perhaps and you don't hear much about food lyrics in Hart. In Hammerstein the cattle are standing like statues and corn is as high as an elephant's eye, then at the state fair people sing, "On Ioway corn I'm bred," then there was a real good clambake, and believe me there's lots and lots about chop suey in the controversial "Flower Drum Song" (1958). Packard doesn't mention *The Sound of Music*, but by now a Packardite, I can cite the crisp apple strudels of "My Favorite Things," rhymed cleverly with "schnitzel with noodles," though the non-food terms "doorbell" and "sleighbells" separate them.

Packard can come down harshly on those who use good terms in the wrong way, or for syllabic reasons—that's you, Frank Loesser, you who wanted *The Most Happy Fella* to resound with Italian good cheer and pathos in the Napa wine country, but apparently ignored the facts that mozzarella is not a very smelly cheese at all (or if it was, it means that it went bad) and that "Malaga, malaga red" is not the right kind of wine to mention in the situation in which it finds its foul self. Everywhere Packard provides recipes, too. Discussing an early Irving Berlin-Moss Hart collaboration "Face the Music," Packard goes all social history on us to explain what the Horn & Hardart automat was and how it thrived in the era of mechanical reproduction but closed when I was a teenager, but from somewhere she unveils the formerly secret recipe for the Automat's wonderful pumpkin pie.

It gets tiring after a while, but she always has some amusing things to say about how often women are compared to “tomatoes” et cetera, how all the characters in “Fiddler on the Roof” are in one food industry or the other, how both mother and daughter in Hairspray use food as solace for problems of low self-esteem, how “Waitress” makes you hungry for the heroine to find happiness through food allusions, how people the world round love vanilla ice cream, how “Hello Dolly” finds its climax in the expensive Harmonia Gardens with its cadre of dancing and singing waiters. (Dolly is on the cover, Carol Channing spearing her lower lip with a fork, Hiram giving her that glare.) It made me long for a Broadway musical without food in it.

1 person found this helpful

Rin Tin Tin: The Life and the Legend (*paperback*)

by Susan Orlean

★★★★☆

Almost Excellent

July 7, 2013

I came to Rin Tin Tin through my study of the works of contemporary poet John Ashbery, who early in his career wrote a trio of poets theater plays, and one of them was said to have been lifted from the intertitles of “Where the North Begins,” a very early Rin Tin Tin silent. Watching the movie over seventy times to transcribe all the intertitles (and indeed pinning down quite a few Ashbery borrowings), I began to feel first admiration, then respect, then downright awe for the star dog’s acting range. One of the suggestive parts in Susan Orlean’s massive biography of Rin Tin Tin is her continual assertion that possibly more than one dog was used in any one film, and that Lee Duncan’s own German shepherd, discovered as if in a miracle in wartorn France and just about smuggled back to the States against all military regulations, got the credit that might have been shared by dozens of look-alikes. Indeed can one call Orlean’s book as “biography” since its hero dies pretty early on in the book and we hear about this and that of his inferior sons and grandsons, etc. I suppose she would say that she is writing instead about the “idea” of Rin Tin Tin and so anything goes.

Anything certainly gets into this giant book. As many reviewers have noted, Orlean could have used an editor or two, or is she too powerful to have to submit to one, like Stephen King must be? There are so many extraneous bits of material here; you follow a tangent expecting it will amount to something, or have at least a tiny connection to Rinty, and it just doesn’t. What was the point, Susan Orlean, of that long chapter about the cryptolesbian poodle trainers who put poodles on the map in America in the 1930s and 1940s? It was fun to read that a half-time show of trained poodles at Yankee Stadium got more cheers than Joe DiMaggio, but then the story just peters out and it’s back to more glum moments with Lee Duncan’s charmless daughter. BTW the daughter seems like a reasonable woman somewhat beat down by life, but one comes away feeling that Orlean had something of a grudge against her for some reason, because she’s painted as though her whole life were a disappointment orchestrated by Theodore Dreiser or Michael Haneke or some other miserymeister.

Nevertheless I forgive all the flaws of the book for the power of the scenes in which Orlean discovers Rin Tin Tin’s grave in a Parisian animal cemetery...and for the ending of the book, actually about ten endings, a multitude of riches, for it seems

she wasn't sure which poignant moment to end on so she puts all of them in over the last forty pages of the book, finally the kitchen sink strategy pays off big time!

3 people found this helpful

Thomas Evans: Furniture without Rest: Introduction to a
Pedestrian Thought Theatre (*hardcover*)
by Thomas Evans

★★★★★

Gone to Earth

December 28, 2013

Elizabeth James' review of the Evans book says it all, practically, and so well! She outlines simply and savvily what seems to be going on in the book, and what on earth a pedestrian thought theatre might turn out to mean. It looks like a fun book from outside, one longhaired blonde girl in stockinged feet sets off for a walk across a room of eleven stages. Might well be Alice on a chess board! In her right hand a couple of the omnipresent Pura Vida-style bracelets made of beads or crochet or string.

As James reminds us, Evans is working out medieval ways of association and image-making that we have lost the precise words for, but perhaps part of us still feels their value deep in some kind of ancestral memory. "Pedestrian" threw me at first, for the word has degraded over time so that today to call a thing "pedestrian" is like saying it was directed by Michael Bay. But we must reconnect with the word and in doing so remind ourselves how once people walked all the way from birth to death.

I'm glad this girl is in the photos, otherwise I would not believe that these are real items of furniture. What does it mean, "furniture without rest"? We have come a long way since Willa Cather described the modernist novel as "le roman demeuble," but perhaps Evans is warning us not to throw the baby out with the bathwater, for furniture has a certain place in life, and in here, his stages, elevated on painted box frames, may be "arranged in a sequence." I suppose with eleven there are infinite sequences that can be made for them, and when you combine them with mutable emblems, you have X's or squares—why not just one long line, like a tightrope? that spell out different patterns of thinking? Besides the emblems, Evans constructs mottoes, definitions, ladders and traps. (Of these, the "transcendental ladder" most resembles the geometric line I was searching for, and takes us from low to high in three or four steps, but even reckless Alice wouldn't dare those steps, there's not an ounce of real support under them. They're utopian, "Transcendental" indeed, and this is the one about which the author gravely remarks "Transcendental Ladders are impractical for actual ascent.")

If you have ever been to Little Sparta, the gardens of Ian Hamilton Finlay in the Pentland Hills of Scotland, you will bring back bits and pieces of the faraway land with you to New York, like they did in Brigadoon, every time you open this magical book of instruction. With my own collection of tongue depressors and ice cream bar sticks, I have begun to create my own allegorical furniture and have gone so far as to push a cat up one contraption, to mixed results. She thought there was food at the end; there wasn't.

2 people found this helpful

Payard Desserts (*hardcover*)
by Frances Payard

★★★★★

My mother's pudding, my children's braised rhubarb napoleon

February 2, 2014

Our kids were always sort of pudgy, and for years we wondered if it was because we did not know how to fit them proper desserts.

My father was an absent-minded scientist and would eat iron filings if you put them on his plate. My mom was a busy professional, and her idea of dessert was making chocolate or tapioca pudding, from the same mix Bill Cosby advertised on TV. She also liked to bake molasses cookies, and sometimes she walked to the corner store and bought the old fashioned boxes of ice-cream, in which chocolate, vanilla and strawberry ice cream was molded together in stripes. As kids we could never figure out how they did that, or why, for you had to cut away every molecule of strawberry before the chocolate ice cream wasn't gonna taste all "stawbewwy," we complained in that annoying Long Island lisps we sported as kids. Influenced by the late Pee Wee Herman Playhouse show I'm sure, and Johnny Depp in Beetjuice.

Naturally as the years passed we took cues from the way our parents cooked, and also by the food revolution that has taken over here in San Francisco, but when I took up "Payard Desserts" on publication day—Halloween 2013—I felt like a lucky son of a gun. The message is largely about, don't even try to make a dish in the wrong season, instead go for the ingredients not only if they happen to be available, but do like Payard and buy them only at their peak, and base your dishes on that one factor. Well, what's at its peak on Halloween? Candy corn, of course, and Vines, Reese's peanut butter cups, and other trick or treat nonsense, but also pumpkin, squash, apples, beets, kale, broccoli, scallions, lemons and oranges, passion fruit, persimmon, cranberries, so I decided to concentrate on Payard's November recipes, starting with Citrus Terrine, in gelatin, with its secret surprise of a whole white peppercorn crushed with the bottom of a pan. My wife suggested, to save the pan use instead a small metallic kettledrum that my grandfather Doyle left me and which I use as a paperwright in the study. The sugar and the star anise build up an intoxicating aroma somewhat tempered by the jolt of the single white peppercorn, now in pieces due to the brass kettledrum's dense, explosive shrapnel action effect.

In San Francisco there aren't many trees whose leaves fall, red and brown, onto the ground, and the other traditional signs of November are likewise AWOL, but we make do just fine at the Ferry Building Farmer's Market where we asked what leaves were edible and extant—at their peak, “At their peak,” I asserted, speaking in firm tones to the Romanian poultry farmer from Gilroy, whose simple stall was festooned with peak strands of garlic cloves, gray doves lustrous as coral, deciduous branches of young white pine, and baby pumpkins tied together in a net of crisp Romanian sugar. The orange tuiles, one of Payard's singular attractions, ruled at the PTA potluck we attended with our teens. This forms part of a complex Feta Cheesecake which Payard pairs with wine-soaked dates and white pepper ice cream. He has a sort of thing about white pepper, white peppercorns, the way Julia Child had a thing for butter, and some of the younger children in the PTA potluck made ghastly faces when they got to the ice cream portion of the dessert.

I look forward to February when chocolate is said to be at its peak, so I can make some of Fayard's chocolate-based desserts, such as his cubes not of Kobe beef but of chocolate mousse, painted with chocolate down the sides into which the first entry of a fork tine will pierce to release a gushing blaze of salted caramel. Has Fayard realized how hard it is to escape in today's market from sea-salted caramel? I think I will try the *fleur de sel* right now, without waiting for the other elements to kick in. My mother, who loved to make chocolate pudding the Bill Cosby way, is possibly rolling in her grave, and I'm not sure how much my own kids are going to enjoy working their way with me through Fayard Desserts, but I plan to roll with it all year round. Plus, you can freeze the four-hour baked apple napoleon (what Payard calls his version of American “comfort food”) and it will stay fresh and lively for as many as ten weeks, we discovered, during the recent drought here in California that slightly cut down on apple production. And each of the kids has lost on the average of two pounds per foot.

12 people found this helpful

British Pottery and Porcelain

by Stanley W. Fisher

★★★★★

Superb underglaze

February 18, 2014

I hate making these kind of comparisons, where your mind is torn between two different ancestors, and you wind up saying, “So and so is the spiritual love child of Dostoevsky and James Baldwin,” but sometimes you just have to, so to show how much I like Stanley W. Fisher I can compare him to a cross between MFK Fisher in the category of food and the Richard Ellmann who knew so much about James Joyce, except that Fisher is the go-to guy about British pottery and porcelain and don’t you ever forget it! I have tried without success to verify that Stanley W. Fisher is indeed related to MFK Fisher of food fame, but despite a common surname, one redolent of the peculiar grace of providing food to the people, there seems to be no connection, though I am no genealogist and the people at the Mormon temple, initially so helpful, have now declared this a subject off limits to my research there.

I first became interested in Lowescroft porcelain, in salt-glazes earthenware, and the collection of British pottery when a kind friend from England sent me some shards of Staffordshire, thinking that I might embed them into the dirt as an ornamental border in my seashell garden. Seeing my shards withstand the rough San Francisco weather over four seasons I began wondering, “Who *was* Staffordshire?” and “How did he manage to make such indestructible pottery?” Poking around at the local antique store I soon bored them, I think, with my incessant questions, and even my English friend stopped returning my e-mails, so the local librarian dug out his own copy of Stanley F. Fisher’s indispensable compendium to “British Pottery and Porcelain” and proved right away that Staffordshire was not a person at all but a county! That was just the beginning of the mine of information you’ll acquire once you manage to get your own copy of his masterpiece. I have read several of his other books for collectors and this one, dedicated sweetly to his “wife, Muriel” (don’t you just love how English that name is, like Maggie Smith could have played her) is the best.

Soon I was the leading expert on lusterware and stoneware on my block, and new collectors would come to me asking me to verify whether or not their pots were real. I felt like those experts on Antiques Roadshow! Far too many people believe that lusterware is made out of metal, when it’s no secret nowadays that canny manufacturers of the late 18th century tried to imbue a china pot with a silvery

finish in order to impress visitors that one was wealthy enough to afford a silver teapot. It's amazing how much vanity of the 1780s inspired new forms of cottage art, but there it is, and Fisher explains that they used common salts to give the surface metallic-ish colors, a range of pinks, purples and silvers (and gold, like Princess Diana's hair. Because Fish published his book in 1962, his book does not contain the information that the bath salts addictions pandemic to Florida, in which the victims commonly snort bath salts and then go crazy often mistaking the faces of others for meals, derive from the same British salt mines as the beautiful lavender and silver tints that make collecting lusterware one of the joys of middle age.

3 people found this helpful

Changing (*English and Norwegian edition, hardcover*)
by Liv Ullmann

★★★★★

Can I handle the seasons of my life? One woman's poignant reflections in snow covered hills.

May 13, 2014

In Liv Ullmann's memoir *Changing*, only a few colors stain the crystal radiance of the skies above Norway, gray, pink, white, black; someone holds the great Norwegian star for a few minutes, then lets her fall back to the rocks of Faro Island, and yet even though it hurts to be so deeply in love, and you're betraying your husband, you still feel like life is worth living. All your allegiances are to the theater, and then top the cinema of Ingmar Bergman. All the phones are rotary, yet she longs to work on stage because that is one place in which you don't hear the phone, she says. How different from today, where you can stay in touch with your daughter even if you are onstage playing one of your signature parts (in Liv Ullmann's case, she became famous as she tells us at nineteen, in a Scandinavian town beginning with a "S," (I just looked it up, it was "Stavanger"), playing Anne Frank; and later there was her sensational success as Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, which she takes on a long straw hat circuit trail in the Sweden of the 1960s, and Norway in the 1970s, entertaining farmers and forest rangers in run down dinner theaters that had not seen a single play for over thirty and in some cases over one hundred years.

Everywhere the weather haunts her. The sun breaking through the snowcaps, the threat of the ground shifting beneath your feet, that moment between autumn and winter when you can see your reflection in the snow covered hills. When this book came out during America's bicentennial, it made an enormous impression on young California feminists and hedonists, who took the message of perpetual cosmic and personal shift to heart. The young Stevie Nicks took the emotional and wintry landscape of Ullmann's difficult Scandinavia and condensed this book into her signature song. Like "Landslide," Ullmann's memoir is haunted by the puckish spirits of a girl child, her own child self, orphaned by a WWII accident and a beautiful, willful mother, and by her own daughter Linn, whom she gave birth to during her five year long affair with director Bergman. One or the other of the two little girls appears on nearly every page. As Stevie sings, "I've been afraid of changing, cause I've built my life around you." Bergman was so jealous that he was the source of all of her fears and joys. He was like Lindsay Buckingham, the way Stevie writes about him in "Silver Springs." Then little Linn broke the ice and made Liv see she was living in what had turned into an emotional nightmare.

When she left, Liv fled to Southern California as Stevie did. “Time makes us bolder,” said the latter. “Even children get older.” Eternal changing, but one thing that did not change is Liv’s penchant for human depravity. She dated Henry Kissinger, and apparently thought this behavior sort of cute. She had the opportunity many times to poison the world’s most evil living man, and yet she stayed her hand. The only star who comes off looking bad in this “Landslide” of an autobiography is Vanessa Redgrave, like Liv a stranger in Hollywood, but otherwise an inhuman freak who is interested in Liv only if she will write her a huge check to support the cause of violent Trotskyite revolution. It was a strange era in Hollywood, one never to be repeated, a time in which these two weird, beautiful, Nordic powerhouses could each be asked to anchor a huge Hollywood musical: Redgrave the box office disappointment *Camelot*; Ullmann, the total disaster of the legendary *Lost Horizon* musical. I guess there was also Jean Seberg, weird like them, European sort of, sort of respected for her acting, and so perplexingly cast as the lead both men wanted in *Paint Your Wagon*. But she at any rate was from America, like our own songwriting virtuoso, the one and only Stevie Nicks. I can only say that *Camelot*, *Lost Horizon* and *Paint Your Wagon* would have all been improved with the casting of Nicks, who has never been given her due in American movies, nor those of any other country or planet!

5 people found this helpful

In the Blood (*Amazon streaming*)
ft. Gina Carano

★★★★★

Blood and White Satin

July 14, 2015

The movie begins with Ava dressing in a wedding gown and her future sister-in-law assuring her that from now on she will have a new family. Flashbacks indicate that Ava's own childhood was pretty weird, with a mercenary/gangbanger/cult leader (I never did decide what he was) father teaching her about what pain is like and how to give everything you've got. We decided that even though Ava (Gina Carano) is marrying into a rich family, she has secrets in her past that are returning for some reason, to trouble her today. Director John Stockwell is recalling visually the wedding at the beginning of *The Deer Hunter*, only a little bit more subtle. I didn't even know who Gina Carano was, but as every fan knows, she is like nobody else in the movies, and I began wondering why the movie was focusing in on this one girl and why, whenever she opened her mouth, it seemed like a different actress was speaking through her (often Sally Kellerman and some other actress much older than she must be).

Because the movie is called "In the Blood" we figured that the movie would involve Gina Carano discovering that she is carrying the DNA of her evil, violent, perverted father (Stephen Lang) in her blood, and that somehow she would wreak favor and destroy the white-bread family she was moving into. You could see Treat Williams asking his son (five minutes before the wedding) what he knew about the girl's history, her past, her criminal record. But then the film turned a dazzling crystal color and the groom stepped into the light and he was Cam Gigandet, finally landing a suitable role after his triumph playing "Jack" in *Burlesque*, the tragic musical that it now appears, in the kind light of history, was 2010's best film and possibly of the whole 21st century. Yes, Cam Gigandet, though he no longer sports Jack's signature derby or fedora or whatever that hat Joel Grey wore in *Cabaret*, the bartender in *Burlesque* who cynically welcomes Christina Aguilera to Los Angeles while Cher sings "Welcome to Burlesque" at her failing downtown nightclub. Cynical, yes, but a heart of gold and when he sees Ali Rose (Christina) stuck homeless in a rainstorm, he impulsively invites her into his apartment and they will be chaste roommates sparring over his bad habits, her ambition, and his charming trait of walking through his living room naked as the day God made him in France or wherever. But now he marries Gina Carano and a whole new epic romance awaits him. The nice sister kisses her passionately as the young couple embarks on a honeymoon to what is evidently Puerto Rico but which the script claims is an "island off Puerto Rice," I suppose because it is so poverty strick-

en and violent that the real Puerto Rico might sue. And the montage of a great honeymoon takes up the next ten minutes of the movie, I loved it.

Tragically enough, however, Gina and Cam become embroiled in some local politics, corrupt cops, and a zip-line attraction that is a one way ticket to certain death. I can't explain any further about "In the Blood" without revealing the huge twist in the plot, only to say that I was wrong, Gina Carano does not turn evil or become a vampire or any of the scenarios the opening sequences had prepared me for. I just want to add a few words about her, sometimes she resembles a smaller version of the actress who was Jayne Mansfield's daughter, but much younger and toned like gold in the Puerto Rican sun. Even sweaty and with carrying a flick knife in her teeth, her clothes torn and her hair lopsided, she is ravishing to behold and never ever makes a move unworthy of a star. You can't take your eyes off of her and lucky, talented Cam Gigandet, who together make up the best screen couple since, well, he starred in *Burlesque* with Christina Aguilera and taught her that not all jaded wannabe songwriters are bad. Let the critics and Rotten Tomatoes type of people sneer at her accent and her habit of reading from cue cards mounted slightly to the right side of the camera; we were asking ourselves, Who is this amazing vital creature and what other movies can we see her in? It has been a week of binging ever since and I am still infatuated with this magnificent, multi-careered action star. What other actresses (and actors) get from drama school and perhaps from inherent talent, she gets from kicking down doors barefoot, bleeding from the scalp, T-shirt ripped in ten places, valiant as Norma Shearer in *Romeo and Juliet*, and what she won't do for her Romeo! And somehow it works.

Frozen (DVD)
ft. Kristen Bell

★★★★★

Do You Want to Build a Lesbian Masterpiece?

September 29, 2015

Disney's "Frozen" has some magical sequences and tuneful numbers, but mostly people respond to it because of its story of sisters who can't live with each other, can't live without each other. The simple plot must hold a deeply felt Marion Woodman appeal to a variety of audiences—the largest of which, apparently, girls under ten, millions of whom have made home videos of themselves singing "Let It Go" and released them on YouTube in cute outfits and (sometimes) bewilderingly sophisticated, perhaps parent-supplied backgrounds and props.

Idina Menzel can be imperious in real life, but in "Frozen" she seems deeply sorry for having offended anyone and for having turned all of Irindell into a winter hell without a single flower. And also for hurting her sister Anna (once again!) with her magical power of coldness. The ingenious screenwriters have simplified the plot of Hans Christian Andersen's Snow Queen story of the Danish Romantic period, so that now instead of an evil snow queen menacing a brother and sister ("Kay" the brother and "Gerda" the sister), the siblings are both female—perhaps they took their cue from the way "Kay" never sounded like a boy's name anyhow...instead of three characters, they reduced them to two by making the evil queen and the devoted sister the same person!

Kristen Bell employs a beautiful strong voice as Anna, and she is so funny your sides will hurt at some of her byplay with Kristoff and Olaf, yet halfway through she becomes increasingly out of her game, for a reason I can't disclose—

[SPOILERS AHEAD]

Okay, because Elsa has shot a chip of ice into her heart, the way the Snow Queen did to Kay in the old Andersen story—

[SPOILERS CONCLUDED]

As she grows weaker and weaker, she has to undergo some dramatic suffering rather beyond Bell's own "Veronica Mars" comic charm. Well, even tragedy queens like Angelina Jolie might not have been able to handle the depths of the part, so I would give Kristen Bell a good "B" for doing her best.... If Billie Whitelaw was still alive she could have given Anna that precipitous Camille-like decline and

tragic illness inherent in the part. And having Jonathan Groff as Kristoff doesn't help the situation much. Luckily here the little Snowman and the big Reindeer come in and steal the show with their heroics. That snowman, "Olaf," is the most original cartoon character in eons, and his big oblivious number about "Summer" is more surreal than anything Man Ray ever made in or out of Hollywood. Suffice it to say, me and my wife were like two seven year old girls watching this film and for the first time in forever we burst out into applause and clapped until our palms grew raw and chapped. I wouldn't say that the cold never bothered me anyway, but I felt pretty heroic after watching "Frozen" and look forward to at least fourteen other sequels—fingers crossed!

14 people found this helpful

It Started in Naples (DVD)

by Clark Gable

★★★★★

For Better or for Worse

October 5, 2015

I walked into the living room and the TV was on but suddenly my wife, sitting near the remote, snapped it off as though it was something she didn't want me to see, her face nearly expressionless except for a gleam of worry in her eye, the sort of look one wears when one's keeping a secret. But we are both New Narrative writers and usually there are no secrets between us! When I picked up the remote and switched it to reverse, I could swear that she was watching some kind of highly colored vintage melodrama set on the Island of Capri. Eventually she broke down in giggles and admitted hysterically that she was watching Sophia Loren and Clark Gable in Melville Shavelson's *It Started In Naples* (1960).

This is really my kind of picture and not hers, so I must have infected her with rom-com fever! "Well, rewind it, I'll watch it with you," I offered, but she wouldn't hear of it, she was too caught up in the action. She said she would just recap things for me. "Previously, on *It Started in Naples*," she began, and quickly running through how this little 8 year old boy was the center of a custody war not between two divorcing people (perhaps there was no divorce in Italy in 1960, we guessed), but between Sophia Loren, whose sister had married a bohemian American ex-pat called—we never did find out what he was called, but he was the younger brother of important US corporation lawyer Clark Gable. And her sister and his brother had perished in a Fiat crash, or perhaps the car had gone off the narrow twisty mountain roads above Capri's beautiful blue waters—leaving behind a son whose aunt Sophia Loren—a second rate cabaret entertainer with little talent but a fabulous figure—was trying to bring up, when she thought of it. Eventually they were going to get together, but not before a lot of neorealismo hijinx and a lot of vino and cheese and grapes went down, and sexy dancing and captivating photography. Many on IMDB claim that this is their favorite movie of all time. Well, for one thing, it is a blistering anti American satire of imperialist business and law practices, the whole "Ugly American" thing Clark Gable embodies. This is harsh pseudo Billy Wilder stuff! It's like *A Foreign Affair* with Loren in the Dietrich role, and Gable in the Jean Arthur role. Gable is incredibly withered and shrunken, but still magnetic, and game for anything. In this role it's almost tragic that his American sophistication and wariness of being "played" almost loses him his chance to find the one boy he had never even known he wanted, his 8 year old self, half American, half pleasure-mad Italian.

The little boy is like nothing on earth I've ever seen in the movies. With long arms and legs, and tiny playsuits, his face often dirty, he gets drunk, sneaks cigarettes, just wants to have a good time in Capri. His English is rusty, and we could barely make out what he was saying half the time, but he's learning American slang ("I'm a tough guy, see?") as fast as Gable can dish it out. Often in his underwear—a weird Italian pair of Ur-Jockey shorts you'd never find on an American boy—he stays out all night, steals trinkets and things he thinks his aunt might like, knows far too much about sin and gambling, and avoids the hated school house. His mouth always running, his bare feet stirring up a continuous whirligig cloud of dust, like the old Roadrunner cartoons, or Pigpen from Peanuts. He's thoroughly criminal, like little Jackie Earle Haley from *The Bad News Bears*, or actually like a boy from an earlier Italian strain of cinema, like the boy in De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*. De Sica is in the movie too, playing Gable's lawyer, super tall and handsome and expansive and a double-crosser, like everyone else in this tourism-driven island.

Loren is gorgeous, but more slovenly than usual in her US films, often wearing one weird blue ensemble with green underpinnings that doesn't know if it's a house dress or a cocktail dress. It's like the producers forgot to buy her any more outfits. This one factor allows the movie to go into overdrive, insisting on its status as "neo-realistic," that she should keep wearing the same dress every day like an ordinary housewife of Italy. And the sunny criminality of the boy (the child actor, Marietto, who actually was about 13 when he played the role), and De Sica's practiced vamping, it's practically a potted history of postwar Italian cinema. But in bright color, brighter than anything Visconti or Bava ever achieved. It's like the cinematographers and set designers here were practicing for upcoming Jacques Demy movies, for not until *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg* would there be a movie where you really didn't care what was happening on the screen, everything was so luscious like flowers blooming before your eyes. When Gable and Loren slip out of a motorboat and into the velvety waters of Capri's Blue Grotto, part of your brain knows it's not them, but you don't care, they're svelte silhouettes at play in all the moonlit waters of the earth.

6 people found this helpful

Pretty Happy: Healthy Ways to Love Your Body (*hardcover*)
by Kate Hudson

★★★★★

Next time, a tell all memoir, please? Until then, I applaud your drive to “tell true.”

July 18, 2016

By the time the postman brought me my copy of Kate Hudson’s new self-help book I had completely forgotten I had ordered it; nor could I remember that it was about diet and exercise and how they pale next to yoga for toning your body and learning to love plain food. I thought it was a memoir, a tell-all, a book that would life a corner of the curtain, the curtain that has kept her life a complete mystery for all these years. But as the jacket copy explains, “in PRETTY HAPPY, Kate doesn’t tell all—she tells true.” Zap! A takedown of impudent curiosity.

The lookalike daughter of a beloved comedienne, Kate Hudson was resigned to follow in the footsteps of, say, Lucie Arnaz—to be half a celebrity, the watered down byproduct of a famous mother and father. But happily unlike Lucie Arnaz, Kate was blessed by having a father who, though a performer of some kind, definitely not a star. At Thanksgiving seven of her biggest fans got together to practice yoga moves recommended by Kate, and none of us could remember the actual name of Hudson Senior. One of us was pretty sure he was part of a fake rock group like the Monkees and they were called the Hudson Brothers and that, in a moment of weakness, Goldie Hawn had married one and then gave birth to her twins, Kate and Oliver, who recently starred in Nashville as a satanic talent agent to country stars, partially redeemed by a love affair with a reality TV-contestant Layla Grant. Kate herself has put aside all ugly thoughts and recommends what she calls “open monitoring.” Which is, while wide awake, attaining a peaceful stoned-like buzz of paying attention to the butterflies in the air and the fawns at your feet—“aware but nonreactive.”

In this way she flexes her acting muscles enough to convincingly played an impatient, rude, musical has-been on the cancelled series GLEE. We also remember her as the ingénue nurse or whatever she was who confronts Gena Rowlands in the spooky Bayou-set thriller SKELETON KEY, in the wake of Katrina. Cutting down on sugar, the “villain like no other,” helps to reground the aging body and allows it to find its own center, and prevents disease such as heart, and Crohn’s. Don’t do cleanses to lose weight! For that you can practice modern dance. Do them to detox! Kate and Oliver Hudson have walked through a dark, young person’s Hollywood littered like human zombies like Zayn Malik and they’re still

“pretty happy” and look fantastic. One time Kate got dumped. “Yup. Out of the blue. The guy I’d been dating told me it was over.” Heartbroken, she moped until Goldie Hawn told her to go on a cleanse, arguing that our cells hold emotions too, emotions you can’t shake with a good Eastern ayurvedic cleanse.

In another chapter, the Dalai Lama says that happiness is not a Duchampian “ready-made,” but rather, it is the product of one’s own actions. Are your needs being met? Do you know the name of your own dosha? Are you viewing too many photos of beautiful women? We should respect our shapes and sizes and embrace ourselves as we are. Eat more vegetables, protein and fat, do away with no-fat diet plans. No matter how many flops you make with Matthew McConaghey (many viewers actually believe the two are a real life item, but no), our bodies are one “large chemistry experiment.” A mother, a fitness addict, as well as one of the US’s great movie personalities, Kate Hudson has grown through spiritual growth and overcome the hardships of life without a real father and a mother who’s sexier and funnier than her, and Kurt Russell always in the house. She’s a “bit of a hybrid—and that’s fine.”

14 people found this helpful

Games (DVD)
by Gene Kearney

★★★★★

Scared of Signoret

August 24, 2016

When I was an American boy growing up in France, the actress Simone Signoret, still in her forties, popped up continually on French TV, while the feature pages of *Paris-Match* were always writing up tragedies suffered by the talented, Oscar-winning star. We children were deathly afraid of her. We would scream when we saw her visage, with a sick pleasure, for just as Catherine Deneuve was the face of “Marianne” in France, Signoret represented a scary monster type of evil. Our nanny encouraged our fear by telling us matter-of-factly that if we did not behave, Simone Signoret was going to come to our rooms at night and eat us. One look at that smeary, sad, voracious face would make a wise man believe she had teeth, and in *Games* (1967) she uses them in what is perhaps her best Hollywood part. Director Curtis Harrington had originally written the part of Lisa Schindler for Marlene Dietrich, but that producers told him Dietrich was box office poison at Universal, nix on Dietrich. What a shame, but at least now we have the spectacle of Simone Signoret giving a long, detailed, extended Marlene Dietrich impression. And much else besides! I look at the movie now, years removed from my TV terror at Signoret in *Games*, and I see how beautifully Harrington shows us a glossy, moody Upper East Side New York—constructed solely from standing sets on the Universal lot—in a time of changing morals and an exploding plastic inevitable. Partygoers snicker at the Op and Pop art glaring at them from the old brownstone interiors. “Paul picks it out,” says one dryly, “then Jenny pays for it.”

They’re bored and rich and kinky. How kinky? She peels off his fake mustache after he kisses her, and applies it herself, returning his kiss and making him feel the way a woman feels—shades of Rusty and Myra in *Myra Breckinridge*, more subdued than the rape of Rusty, true, but anticipating something of its gender-bending swagger. The interior decor makes me swoon: its hasty, but fullhearted embrace (pastiche?) of Lichtenstein, George Segal, Bridget Riley, Paul Thek, Stella and Warhol, Yves Klein, this hurriedly copied décor (almost as if they sent Elaine Sturtevant into Leo Castelli for an hour, then twitched her out and had her copy everything she saw all over the walls of a brownstone), overlaid with primitive brass masks and panniers, and vintage pinball machines à la Jack Spicer, dates this picture precisely in 1967, though period music cues are strangely absent. (Maybe Curtis Harrington didn’t care that much about music, although one knows from his later work he loved child stars tap dancing.) But in *Games* the non-rock soundtrack makes it all the easier to take in one fabulous wig after another on

Katharine Ross's lovely head and to marvel at how tiny James Caan's eyes are. How cute he is, like a small doll. Next to him the hunky grocery boy played by Don Stroud comes off as a top—looks like Fred Halsted in fact with his sulky gaze, enormous lips, big nipples like shell casings. One strange thing about *Games* is that, usually when movies are laid in Manhattan, scriptwriters take pains to avoid giving exact addresses (*Rosemary's Baby*, for example, is set at the fictional "Bramford Apartments," though it sure looks like the actual Dakota!). But Paul and Jenny Montgomery live at 11 East 64th Street, and maybe some of you do too, it's a real address right off the park, cozy between Fifth and Madison. You can look it up on Google Maps or Google Earth, and wonder! To sum it up, *Games* is like *Wait Until Dark* with Audrey Hepburn blind, except Katharine Ross isn't blind, or if *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* was played with a pair of antique dueling pistols. It's about the silly, kinky, addictive love games that Foucault told us were the first new sex act invented in over 2,500 years. With Ross, Caan and Signoret, totally disguised in wax doll masks, prepare an elaborate human sacrifice to shock the family attorney, it's like some sort of grim but chic sitcom set in Thelema Abbey.

3 people found this helpful

Over 21 (DVD)

by Irene Dunne

★★★★★

Triumph of Neo-Liberalism via Beefcake

June 18, 2013

The movie has to be seen to be believed, for any description of it would only make you think, why is he recommending this? It's hard to believe it actually got made, its premise (insofar as one can be made out) is so unlikely to entertain. It's the way the thing gets worked out that makes it amusing, even suspenseful. But, I must say, if you're not a liberal you're unlikely to enjoy the bushels of liberal propaganda that runs rampant in every scene. And I'm a liberal and it even irked me. Irene Dunne doesn't even really belong in the movie, but she is inserted into it as if to make you think that even the most normal member of society must now, at the end of the long WWII effort, be automatically a liberal and concerned about the world to come--winning the peace, you might say.

She's amazingly dressed in the ugliest costumes I've seen on a major star in many a moon. When her husband's colonel comes to call, she runs behind a door and zips herself into a glittering black rubber catsuit that might have inspired the then children Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren to open up their notorious Sex shop in London 30 years on. She's glamorous, and director Charles Vidor photographs her to stunning effect when it's just her face and head--for one amazing scene he shows her head horizontally, as though she were the sun on top of the horizon, thinking in profile, her eyes watching the ceiling above her--the top frame of the film--she is like Lee Miller in a Man Ray photo, and Dunne gives it everything she's got, which is plenty as Dunne fans know. No, she doesn't sing in this one, but she feels liberal and makes it seem as though household inconveniences must be ignored because we're going to make a better world, so a spring-bound chair is one step to victory, a kitchen sink with no water another, ration coupons a third. I began thinking, if she ran the world the world would be pretty much the same place it is today. perhaps it's because she's set like the jewel in the crown of a complicated system of military careerism in which her husband, Alexander Knox, has to pass a series of impossibly difficult exams for some reason I never understood. Alexander Knox! Movie lovers will hear this name in horror, thanks to his colorless performances in *Wilson* (1944) and in that Rossellini movie in which he and Ingrid Bergman are sophisticated socialites who lose their child and then she becomes a saint and he just looks bored. But here he actually has energy and in his trim little uniform he's rather sexy with his muscles popping out of his biceps and shoulders. But stop the presses! The real draw in *OVER 21* is Mr. Loren Tindall, the most beautiful man at Columbia Pictures in the mid 1940s.

His career was over pretty much as soon as it began, but check him out here as the officer married to young Jeff Donnell and the two of them are packing their little cottage when Irene Dunne arrives. He's tall--like a maypole--and well-built, like an ice cream cone, with delicious ice cream skin and hair hand-dipped into waves of dark vinyl. Did Vito Russo ever write about Over 21? There is so much to be said, I wish he were here to take over for me now because, frankly kids, I'm feeling a little lightheaded.

Okay, so, have you got that name memorized? "Loren Tindall." "Loren Tindall." Not much of an actor but, like Tynan said about Garbo, a complete reason for going to the movies.

What to Expect When You're Expecting (DVD)

ft. Cameron Diaz

★★★★★

Put them all together, they spell “M-O-T-H-E-R”

June 14, 2013

What to Expect when you're Expecting hits a home run from the title on. Like *Sex and the Single Girl* in the 1960s, Hollywood can't resist a self-help book of any kind--that's nearly all they read there--so they buy the rights to the title and then invent a plot or narrative to give moviegoers perhaps more of a treat. Woody Allen made *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)* into a sort of Laugh-In of brief sight gags and sketches. Even *Mean Girls* started out as a self-help book. So, it's a whole genre filled with built-in history. We speculated that the screenwriters of *Expecting* originally envisioned the whole movie initially as the full length story of Cameron Diaz and Matthew Morrison's characters, a reality TV trainer and a professional dancer, but actually as the movie wore on I got to dislike it every time they showed up with their story about whether or not their son should get circumcised. Mr. Shoe wanted it, but Cameron Diaz no way. It was a story that never made sense, well maybe it made sense but it is executed as though it were a heavy issue, like the passion of Christ in an Ingmar Bergman film. Anyhow, Mr. Shoe had enough scenes so he must have felt like he was still playing Shue in the old days when he was married to that deceptive lying wife of his on *Glee*.

We did notice a lot of gay leading men in this movie! Most of them were able to play heterosexuals more or less adequately. Maybe when the Cameron Diaz plot was getting too grim, producers thought they might as well have a second string to their bow and they asked Elizabeth Banks to come on and play a gorgeous woman with a schlubby dentist husband (Ben Falcone). She is a heavily conflicted character, just like Cameron Diaz, and maybe the only reason why her story is a little lighter than Cameron Diaz' is that it's not a debate about circumcision. She is the daughter in law of elderly Dennis Quaid, a wealthy and famous race car driver with more money than sense. Quaid himself is about to have twins with his young wife, played by model Brooklyn Decker. The joke is that Banks, carrying only one child and heavily invested in the myth that pregnancy is a sacred state of being, looks infinitely heavier and more bedraggled than the one having twins who wears six inch heels and is still horny for Dennis Quaid. Banks is an especially good actress, but I found Ben Falcone trying, like if you really wished for a new, chubby version of Hank Azaria really hard every night and made sacrifices to Pan, you might open your front door one day and there Ben Falcone would stand with a bacon wrapped hot dog in each hand.

Those who read my reviews will already know my next sentence, which would have been something to the effect of, “Despite her reputation as a bad or indifferent actress, Jennifer Lopez delivers the best performance in the movie.” I say this every time around, but it never stops offending some people who can’t see the forest (Ethel Barrymore-like greatness as an actress) for the trees (her image and her allegedly awful personality). But there you go. Paired not so much with Rodrigo Santoro as her selfish husband as with Wendi McClendon Covey as Kara, her boss at the aquarium. Do I believe Jennifer Lopez as a struggling photographer? She is one who makes tangible the drive people have to photograph others and dolphins. Very much so, and her trip to Ethiopia, while not really fitting in with the rest of the movie, should have been an IMAX travelogue all by itself. It is more stirring than, what was that movie with Klaus Kinski pulling an opera house over a mountain with vines and native labor?

Let’s see, who else—Chace Crawford and Anna Kendrick. I’m looking at that name “Chace Crawford” and wondering what part of it I got wrong because it just looks wrong. As a pair of food truck entrepreneurs who once tried dating in high school, the two try to act serious but the gravity of the situation seems beyond either of them. They have chemistry, but shopping chemistry, like they’d rather go to Uniqlo and see what’s new on the racks, than fall in love and get unexpectedly pregnant. All in all, a good movie, well directed by Kirk Jones, with plenty of appealing side characters, including the amazing Chris Rock, probably the funniest part of the movie, well, him and his little son “Jordan,” a hapless sort of cute little kid drawn from silent film, never says anything, just falls down repeatedly, and some mean little part of one’s id laughs its ass off every time.

1 person found this helpful

Paleopoetics: The Evolution of the Preliterate Imagination (*hardcover*)

by Christopher Collins

★★★★★

Back to Bedrock

May 14, 2013

A kind friend, aware of my interest in the intense research conducted by the Hanna-Barbera studio when preparing the “Bible” for their long-running early 60s hit *The Flintstones*, suggested that Christopher Collins’ new book might include some *Flintstones* tidbits. Well, not exactly, but what I uncovered opening its pages was reward enough for my curiosity. I find his imaginative and sympathetic recreation of prehistoric man and his movement from sight to thought to speech almost as convincing as the time-based, seven season run of the Hanna-Barbera classic from 1960 through 1966 (and on to present TV culture). There’s no “Ann-Margrock” in Collins’ scholarly book, but that is about the only thing he’s missing. All the other tropes are there, including a detailed account of Merlin Donald’s four stages of development.

No one would ever say the *The Flintstones* is meant to be a documentary. In fact, it is really more or less a satire of American life in the contemporary Cold War atmosphere in which it was made. Similarly, Collins’ cavemen are very much a product of today’s prisms of thought, particularly in the way that for him (he is the professor emeritus of English at NYU, not really a scientist or archaeologist *per se*) ontogeny is never better than in its stringent recapitulation of phylogeny. If I understand it, primitive man in the days before speech still possessed a sort of poetic. A man or woman in the jungle veldt might look at a tree and see it sharply and vividly, but if he or she saw that tree again a few minutes later, they had no way to realize it was the same tree as the one they had just seen. The disconnect was even sharper when the tree flowered, or became covered with snow, etc, its visual impact altered in any way. It was only when man started walking towards the tree, that he learned it was one object from moment to moment, and an element of narrative entered the paleopoetic.

Man is the only animal to be able to use speech to conjure up the absent (though Collins shows us that bees have been observed dancing around objects that used to exist in a particular location, like a mulberry bush chopped down since the bees were last there—perhaps not even those exact bees, but their ancestors!), and in *The Flintstones* bees were put to use for all sorts of anticipations of modern day projects—such as the electric razor, which Hanna-Barbera configured as a clam-shell filled with buzzing bees that would bite off parts of a man’s beard. Fred and

Barney often had what we would call five o'clock shadow since the Ur-electric bee razor had flaws. Collins asks us repeatedly to keep in mind the question Noam Chomsky asked to challenge behaviorist theories of child development that theorized language grasp as a pattern of call and response, "arguing that the amount of time used by parents to teach this behavior could not account for the complex grammatical learning that the child achieves by three years of age."

Flintstones fans will be familiar with Collins' argument through the osmosis of comparing Pebbles Flintstones' speech acceleration over seven years, with that of her counterpart/love interest Bamm-Bamm, the towheaded son of Barney and Betty Rubble. Bamm-Bamm is cute but he's sort of monosyllabic if that. (It is implied that there's an innate difference in development between the natural-born like Pebbles, and the adopted such as Bamm-Bamm.) In the adventures of the two youngsters, which gradually came to dominate the series (my colleague Derek McCormack points to the existence of a contemporary tie-in volume called *Pebbles and Bamm-Bamm Meet a Wicked Witch*, which unexpectedly parallels Collins' citation of Donald's third step of language development as the "Mythic") the glib and cute yakety yak of Pebbles is frequently contrasted to little Bamm-Bamm as the miniature "stone face" boy nothing like either of his putative parents Barney and Betty.

As Cole Porter wrote (in "Find Me a Primitive Man"), "I don't mean a kind that belongs to a club/ But the kind that has a club that belongs to him/ I could be the personal slave/ Of someone just out of a cave." Collins is a wonderful writer who keeps surprising us at every turn with the twists of language development, including changes in physiology that allowed words beyond the grunts of Bamm-Bamm. If imagination was the mammal's most effective tool, it is equally true, he argues, that instantly a social problem arose once what he calls the "mental photography" of the imagination took root. "The first scrap of object information ever communicated was likely to have been a lie." (Lies, like poetry, might have been devised to create an alternate universe than the one unfolding in front of the witness' eye.)

3 people found this helpful

Full Service: My Adventures in Hollywood and the Secret
Sex Lives of the Stars
by Scotty Bowers

★★★★☆

The Oldest Man Alive

February 12, 2012

I wouldn't give this one five stars, because it was pretty "badly written," but we live in an age of contingency and I don't really care about what's good or bad in that sense. Obviously the autobiography of Scotty Bowers, or any 88 year old, is going to be uphill sledding, but I come away from it liking the man and envying him his exciting life at the top of the heap, procuring for and tricking the stars (and not only the stars but people like J Edgar Hoover and the Windsors).

Once or twice I started to doubt the accuracy of his memories. Not the Spencer Tracy story, the one has so many of my fellow reviewers hollering, but just little things. For example, Scotty attests that he procured young girls for Katharine Hepburn, the Duchess of Windsor, and Phyllis Gates, once the wife of Rock Hudson. Is it a coincidence that, as he remembers them, all three preferred "slim, small, dark-haired trim-figured girls?" Or was it just that he couldn't remember and dragged out the same tag any time his "as told to" guy asked him for a preference. On the other hand, I was impressed that the first star we hear of him having sex with was not someone super famous or legendary like James Dean, but instead the sort of forgotten Walter Pidgeon. Come on, if you were asking the whole thing up, wouldn't you start chapter one with somebody people remember, instead of gentlemanly, intellectual-ish, "Pidge"? It had the ring of truth to me, just because Pidgeon's fame is so nondescript.

I was also impressed that unlike every other star autobiography, Scotty didn't claim to have had sex with Marilyn Monroe. I have new respect for Desi Arnaz as well, a man so generous that he gave his girls \$200 or \$300 a throw when the standard price was twenty bucks. Sad, sad, sad, was the story of Scotty and Betty's precious daughter Donna. I just didn't see it coming! I had no idea how bad Katharine Hepburn's complexion was; at any rate Bowers describes it here as a cross between old burlap and brand new steel wool. She always looks so good in the movies! Oh, and I wish I was a fly on the wall of the closet into which Scotty sneaked in order to watch Bob Hope have sex with the super glamorous starlet slash tart Barbara Payton! I never thought of Bob Hope as sexy before, but Scotty saw the man in action and it wasn't just a ski nose on Hope! I don't suppose he ever got any sleep, but Scotty Bowers remembers a lot of risqué 30s slang, some of which was totally

new to me, the acronyms “BLC” and “PTM,” and also his peculiar use of the verb “to trick.” My own sex life hasn’t been as long as Scotty’s, but I never heard of “trick” as a transitive verb, “We both tricked Spencer Tracy,” rather than as I would say, “We both tricked with” well, name your own more modernday closeted star.

56 people found this helpful

Breast Cancer Awareness Push Pins, 200 per Tub (*Pink*)
by Officemate

★★★★★

Think Pink

August 26, 2011

If you are worried that having these pink push pins on your desk at home or at the office will somehow brand you as a softie, well, worry no more, just enjoy. First off, this is a product with true quality. I have bought six packs of these pins and have never experienced so much as a jab or a defect. It is almost as good as it gets! Then, the color pink is not as feminine as you might suppose. Indeed, as you can see from the illustration, no two push pins have the same exact tint of pink. And their colors change depending on the light. At morning, spill out the jar of Office Mate Push Pins across your blotter in the morning sunlight. You'll see a soothing, almost angelic pink on their tips, as friendly as a dog's tongue licking your face. At noon, under the whitehot sun, spill them again, the pink nearly disappears, almost burnt off by the summer heat. You'll think you're looking at little white dots of looseleaf clipped from a pad of white paper, instead of the backs of sharp pins. Seeing them pushed into corkboards you wonder, how'd that pink get so pallid, like an old formal your former wife wore to her high school prom and for some unaccountable reason kept hung and wrapped on the back of her closet door for years. Miss Havisham anybody?

Then at evening, when the breezes pour in through the veranda, and it's time for a nice planters punch, knock over your container of push pins once again and see the difference! The pink has turned red, lobster red, as though engorged by blood and the pins seem sharper than ever. Take your thumbs and plunge these pin-heads through paper and cork, feel the satisfying crunch going in, the press and release. Tell me this ain't the way push pins should be—like small, personalized power tools of the mind.

24 people found this helpful

Stud Earrings Sterling Silver - Fish Bone

by Old Glory

★★★★★

Bony Memories

July 23, 2010

Not the highest-ranked jewelry on Amazon, Old Glory Sterling Silver Fish Bone Earrings are a delightful gift for a special anniversary, or to wear on your own. I first saw them at a popular seafood place nearby at the Wharf in San Francisco, but the price was artificially hiked to attract tourists, and I knew I could do better using my Amazon prime account.

My wife liked getting these earrings, as they constantly recall for her a transition from not eating fish at all, to once in a while, on the advice of her doctor, trying a salmon or trout, perhaps once a month, for protein reasons if nothing else. At first, the bones made her feel grisly but then she realized, it's all nature. And as it turns out, it is not silverplate covering actually fishbones, but each earring is 100 per cent solid sterling silver without a trace of the original bone, now lost to history and the artist's imagination. Our three cats totally ignore them, which they would not do if even one cell's worth of fish remained in their makeup. We can leave them out on the dinner table or even in the cat's dish, and they will remain untouched, still gleaming with the traditional heartiness of fine silver.

You will always be getting smiles from neighbors and strangers when you leave your apartment wearing earrings from old Glory. This is my fourth pair and it won't be the last. They are unisex, though perhaps they look better on someone with a smaller lobe than mine. I wish Old Glory would consider making a longer pair, with five or six pairs of lateral bones, instead of the present, skimpy four. But such are the dreams of an impossible princess.

4 people found this helpful

Carbon Fiber Minimalist Wallet

by FIDELO

★★★★★

State surveillance overcome—for now

April 8, 2017

When I bought this little carbon wallet I didn't realize that what I wanted was more simplicity in my life. I looked around my apartment in the South of Market section of San Francisco—on a spring morning with a hint of freesia in the air, — and what I saw was mess—the mess of lived struggle against the capitalist machine choking our lives. I have barricaded myself in, I realized, keeping my head close to the ground. Well, close to the ground as you can get in a third floor walk-up.

When we moved in, it was after the big earthquake of 1989, and tenants left this building in droves because of the rocking and rolling the building underwent during the revenge of Loma Prieta—and if you weren't on the somewhat more stable ground floor, you moved your kit and kaboodle back to Kansas or wherever you had come from. But rents were cheap then. Now we pile up our books and pictures as though they could keep us alive, though it's fairly obvious they can't.

That's why the minimalist slim front Carbon Fiber Wallet is the one for me now. You can't put a roll of bills in it, but I don't have much of a roll anyhow. This is the sort of wallet that I have considered tucking underneath my skin like a Scarlett Johansson sci-fi thriller. It's not all fantasy! After the earthquake when our cat Stanley ran away, we were urged to embed a chip under his skin so we could always keep track of him. He did come back, but we never did that implant and maybe if we had he would not have died the crummy death he did.

But the best part is that since acquiring this wallet I have not been troubled by any state agency or criminal organization (and they are basically two ways of saying the same thing) employing drone technology to read my credit card numbers through the skin of previous wallet and gaining access to all of my capital and to my info as a person, which is more valuable today, apparently, than my own body. Something about the carbon fibers is preventing surveillance cameras from gaining access to my digits. We live in a comic book world now and I live a little easier knowing that one bit of it has been deferred at least for a few weeks, until THEY come up with a way to see through carbon!

33 people found this helpful

Guide of the Thyssen Bornemisza Museum

by Fundacion Coleccion Thyssen-Bornemisza

★★★★★

Farewell to the “Misza”

August 4, 2016

The last time I was in Madrid I stopped in, as so often before, into the privately held Thyssen Bornemisza Museum, but for the first time, foreseeing my retirement and how soon I would no longer be able to afford an annual jaunt to Iberia, I did something I never thought I would do, I accepted the Museum’s proffered gift of a hard copy of their guide.

Actually, had I known I could get it off Amazon for one cent, I wouldn’t have made such an impulsive buy on such a sad occasion. But now I’m glad I own this handsome book, for it reminds me of many long Madrid afternoons spent wandering from the first floor to the second floor, and back again, and dipping down into the basement cafeteria for a quick fixed meal, and looking at the North American pop art which is so well represented here, Aficionados of “el pop” know that the collection of “Tita” ranks high among all collections of pop art in the world, makes the collection of New York’s Museum of Modern Art look puny in comparison, or the Whitney.

In fact, I’m old enough to remember the days before there was a Warhol Museum in Pittsburgh so if you wanted to see a slew of Warhols, best thing to do was to get a good seat on the Concorde (the legendary transatlantic “bird of choice,” on which there were literally no bad seats) and hie thee to The Thyssen Bornemisza—what the poets called “El Misza,” or simply, to “Tita’s Place”—and see the Warhols larger than life there. It was Tita’s famous definition of “El Pop” that gave us its shape, its contour. There were three key elements: it must quote from existing cultural tropes, like a can of soup; it works on free association, like the great Rauschenberg combine “Express,” seen here since the 60s and the model for David Fincher’s video for Madonna’s later international hit “Express Yourself”; and finally, it is extrovert. (See page 162 of the English translation of this guide.)

Tita’s cocktails were a bit like that too. She had the pop on the ground floor, and the Renaissance on the floor above, so she would pour into a few dashes of Coca-Cola then top it off with guapa or grenadine. Refreshing, like Schwitters with a twist of merz.

Alas, those days are no more and I am glad now, that I accepted guide Pablo's kind gift is this shiny, gaudy catalogue. In my dotage now, I can open it at every page and remember my annual jaunts Madrid and how hard people worked for their money, but I could relax, peel some olives, and sip me a Tita.

30-Inch Teardrop Christmas Swag with Apples, Holly, and German Ivy

by Good Tidings



When in Doubt, Go with the Swag

December 31, 2009

I wanted to get the kids some swag for the holidays and thank goodness didn't look for the reviews that accompany Good Tidings! I might have gotten so discouraged it would have been a terrible Christmas for all of us in our group, kids and adults alike. Goodness knows 2009 has been a terrible year what with economic foreclosure, broken promises, worry about jobs and careers: I feel sorry for the children is what. My kids have a thing for swag, always have, maybe comes from a special place in their hearts and a time when, as itinerant festive merrymakers, we would take them from town to town at Christmastime to sing carols in front of happy and well-off family townhouses in the nicer parts of town. Sometimes the snow would be falling and the kids, who had seen snow only on TV, would watch like angels in wonderment as the white cold flakes covered the holly and the ivy.

Now here it comes back again in swag form. For those of you who have missed out on the joy of swag, it is an agricultural product made from living firs and other decorations. I have seen them threaded with miniature gold horns and harps, but here, it is just mother nature speaking, holly, ivy, and a few apples for good measure.

The kids have always enjoyed a nice apple. Many a Christmas morning they would rub the sleep from their eyes and then plunge a greedy little hand into the very bottom of the Christmas stocking hung from the dinette with care, to find the prettiest apple available in stores. Now all this goodness available in season no matter what part of the country you're from (we're in San Francisco). It's shaped like a teardrop and may indeed bring a tear to your eye if you have any heart at all, and remember, Christmas is for the children. When in doubt, go with the swag.

10 Questions for the Dalai Lama

by The Dalai Lama

★★★★☆

Always the same

January 8, 2010

The Dalai Lama seems like a great guy, but if you didn't know his ways you might find him a little disconcerting. Rick Ray, the filmmaker, yearned to get some footage of the man, but the production company that sent him to India had neglected to tell Dharamsala that he was coming, so he found himself in utter despair, thousands of miles from home in a caste-ridden land where he didn't know a soul, with no date with his target. The resulting film is the result of his coming up with Plan B (the whole movie might be called, "Plan B") which was to contact the press office and ask for a brief interview. I don't know why. It seems like Dalai is very familiar with being interviewed, and has felt the ambiguous kiss of the camera's gaze upon his handsome face since a very young age. Why, he has been famous since 1938 or so and really knows how to play to the camera.

Ray doesn't seem to be able to penetrate much beyond the public face of the Dalai Lama. Is there a private face? Maybe he's one of those celebrities who are always on, like William Burroughs used to be and like John Waters is always John Waters. Footage of Dalai twenty years ago is exactly the same as footage of today--the illusion is aided considerably by clever use of his standard red and saffron colored robes and the same style glasses. And always that unearthly laugh, promoted by his fans as his "sense of humor," but in Rick Ray's well-researched documentary that laugh keeps coming out at unexpected, not to say unwarranted places, like the Joker locked up in Arkham Asylum. Rick gets high marks from me for not betraying even by the blink of an eyelash, any surprise or alarm when that infernal laugh floats up into the high corners of the palace. He just sits there, like a man, knees apart, elbows on Indian exile chair, and a sort of smile plays over his lips, he breathes stertorously like a man thinking thoughts so ecstatic they seem almost visible. Oh s--t, I'm sitting right here and the f&x&ing Dalai Lama is answering my 10 questions! Play it cool, buddy, play it cool.

It seems so sad that, when Dalai finally leaves us, the Chinese have kidnapped the child lama who was supposed to help locate the next him. Worse, they have brought onto the stage their own impostor child lama, whom Rick Ray regards with utmost suspicion. He doesn't seem to have much good to say about anything Chinese.

1 person found this helpful

Walking Humbly: Scripture Meditations in Verse (*paperback*)
by Thomas Flowers

★★★★★

Walking on Sunshine

November 9, 2009

This is the most religious book I have ever read! I ordered it some time ago for two reasons, one is that the author is a close relation with a woman who I know from an internet listserv devoted to the works of our favorite YA author, Lenora Mattingly Weber. As it happens, many of us in the group are writers too, and when this member wrote in bragging about her son or brother or whatever he was, many of us ran to Amazon to pick up on this book. I think it must have been her son. I don't think it was her husband or father, because apparently as I read closer on the back cover, the author is a Jesuit!

I hadn't expected that, I just thought it was a book about walking humbly. See, here at my office, the management has instituted a program where, instead of going on a break, they have contests to motivate all of us workers into getting out into the sunshine and walking for fifteen minutes in the morning, 15 minutes each afternoon. This book was going to be my ace in the hole, but as I read it more closely, it is not really about walking at all, despite that lovely color photo of someone walking away from the camera in a putty-colored parka. The weather is a lot like the weather here in San Francisco but as I say, it didn't take me long to open the book and look through it and it was all about first there is a brief Bible passage, then a poem written by Thomas Flowers, then some questions—questions which you could walk a ways to, trying to think of the answers. He isn't a bad poet, and his verse seems equally inflected by the short American breath of Emily Dickinson and Robinson Jeffers, and the jam-packed assonance and verbal fireworks of Manley Hopkins, the priest whom Flowers is said to be studying. Sometimes the sheer exhilaration of the poem makes the questions that follow it seem more stern than they have to be, as though the young man were having too much fun and his superego is chastising him to be more serious. But that gives the book an entertaining tension. And his questions are super good, not at all the sort of thing I would ever ask myself if not for a helpful guide like this one. Vamos Paulist Press!

2 people found this helpful

Two Hot Dogs with Everything (*hardcover*)

by Paul Haven

★★★★☆

Sixteen Games Out

May 4, 2009

Though this book is for kids they were giving it away at our local hot dog place on the corner of 12th and Howard on condition that you buy—you guessed it—two hot dogs with everything. I asked if I could still get the book if I left out the sauerkraut and at first they didn't want to, but after consultation with the manager the barista agreed. I sat down with a new book and two hot dogs, with slightly everything, and began to read. To my surprise this baseball legend was well worth reading, though it seems awfully long for kids. It is like the Lord of the Rings of ballpark sagas, but I'm sure that if I were 9 or 10 this book would be like manna from heaven.

It's a little silly but basically a real page turner concerning young Danny Gutkin, who like every other kid in town believes that the Sluggers' one hundred year slump can be cured if only they believe! It's not just about keeping the same pair of underwear on day after day, it's about eating two hot dogs with everything. Author Paul Haven remembers exactly what it's like to be a fan rooting for a losing organization, and he loads his story with layer upon layer of delicious, sometimes mordant whimsy. Danny's two friends (one boy, one "honorary boy" called Molly) are well drawn and their escapades seem real, even when the plot goes over the top.

Which it does right away, since Danny gets the mystical power to help the Sluggers win games when he starts chewing 100 year old bubble gum (don't even ask, there's a big story behind this development) and when word of his accomplishment leaks, he becomes a hero to every fan and every player.

It's almost as if Paul Haven has spies among children, or else he has a photographic memory. He writes like James Thurber--and that's a plus, just listen: "Any kid facing the Grand Canyon of punishments will tell you that you should never sneak up on a potentially dangerous parent without first getting a good read on his or her mood. Parents can be unpredictable, and caution is key."

To sum it up, if you like baseball, hot dogs or bubble gum, or winning, this book is for you—or more properly speaking your kids!

German Potato Salad Can, 15-Ounce

by Read

★★★★☆

Holiday Seasonal Salad

November 29, 2012

Now that the holidays are here my wife and I attend many parties at church functions and social media events in San Francisco. Oddly enough the one food you see at both types of affairs is the so-called German potato salad. Recently we were at a party celebrating the arrival of young Twitter folks to our block. It's nice to see young people digging in to the foods we had long ago as children in another time pre-digital culture, when basically you went to the deli and asked for one of two different kinds of potato salad, or some wise old neighbors made it themselves, adding crumbling bacon and diced pickle chips to their golden hoard of spuds.

I asked the corporate hostess who had made the delicious potato salad we were wolfing down and she replied, "Alice Waters of Chez Panisse." It was worthy of Chef Waters, but as it turned out, later that evening the hostess sought me out and said she had been misinformed, and the Chez Panisse potato salad had been reserved for the Twitter VIPS, while we late comers made do with fancy Read German Potato Salad. Nice of her to let us know, she was all apologetic and so forth, but Twitter had nothing to be ashamed of. In the backroom of the kitchen, we found empty cans of Read stacked high in the dumpster, easily seen even by fading eyes due to the distinctive red, yellow and black packaging, like the flag of Germany, so simple it is like the red, white and blue of the USA. The caterers had spiked up the Read canned salad with some extra potatoes, bacon, parsley and some sagacious slices of fresh strawberry as a splash of garni.

I compliment the Read people for making a product that not only baby boomers, and the foreign-born, can enjoy, but something that new grads and new Twitter hires take to with the reckless abandon and elan of their generation. My wife who knows about such things whispered that, in addition, it is probably cheaper than ordering from Berkeley's Chez Panisse where California cuisine was born, so if you had to pay off a student loan, it was probably going to be Read for you, at least till your startup took off in a big way and all of a sudden the Rolling Stones were playing your company's Christmas party.

28 people found this helpful

Hi-Tec-C Maica 0.4mm Extra Fine Point Ballpoint Pen, 12-Color Set (LHM180C4-12C)

by Pilot

★★★★☆

A breath of 60s air

June 8, 2015

As an American boy growing up in France, I got used to the French way of doing things very quickly—so quickly that my Dad worried that French ways were taking away some essential kernel of “American-ness” from me. It wasn’t overnight, of course, for French ways are so different than those my parents had taught us on Long Island—but after a while I began to think of every French product as better than the ones I had left behind in Smithtown. The game of Risk, for example, I preferred infinitely to the bourgeois American Monopoly with its sordid focus on Capital. The Risk we played at home, of course, was itself a bastardized version of Albert Lamorisse’s French original. Luckily we could play both versions often on one bureau, sweeping our pieces madly in the French style and being more sedate and mannered when we went back to the American board. Anyhow Dad was glad that there was at least one American staple I found superior to its French avatar, and that was the simple ballpoint pen. Though many of my classmates at l’école had, of course, beautiful pens that were almost family heirlooms, and many carried the Montblanc pen like it was a badge of cultural superiority, I was always so glad when cousins and merchants back home airtailed me et ma soeur the latest round of Pilot pens—the beautiful Pilot with their jaunty caps and their slim, yet strong, plastic encasements. “Encasements”—is that how you would say it in the US?

They had to be strong, for I was a rough and tumble athletic teen, always ready for a gang fight or a rigorous round of pétanque, and the pens in my back pocket sometimes broke—if they were Montblanc pens—and a sharp collision with turf, or another garçon’s foot, might leave mon cul a hideous mess of blue or black ink. I ordered the 12 pack of Pilot Hu-Tec-C Maica pens recently through Amazon Prime, and as soon as I unwrapped the brown paper of the box, my years in De Gaulle’s France came back to me like the madeline that made Marcel swoon back to an earlier, simpler time, in Proust’s 7 volume novel Remembrance of Things Past. Of course with today’s sleek Japanese influence the pens themselves are rather different, and kind of clunky, wouldn’t you say, their encasements encumbered with useless protrusions—though the glittering jewel cameo laid into each pen top is charming, like a diamond almost in its brightness. Like other owners, I too

am perplexed about the color range Pilot is giving us in the Hi-Tec-C 12 pack. There are something like three or four oranges—from gold to apricot to a pale root beer—why so many I wonder? It's not like many people of any age or gender do much writing in orange shades do they? Oh, maybe they do in Japan. I bought out some old French stationery that I kept, a stone blue, and when I tried writing a note to ma soeur with the "Apricot Orange" pen I couldn't even see any marks on it! Looked like invisible ink. Similarly there is a scarlet and two pinks, and I can't tell them apart.

The caps are constantly being mixed up, but maybe that's just me. Each 12 pack should be issued with a separate, extra assortment of tops, just in case they slip onto the carpet while writing. My wife said, why not use the orange and black pens you complain about every day and every nuit, and make a pen and ink drawing of the San Francisco Giants stadium—our uniforms, you see, are orange and black. I think I will. She is toujours the one with the best ideas and knows her colors well, having had them "done" herself by a certified New Age color consultant. Boasting all those orange shades—the Pilot 12 pack is what we in the New Age would call an "Autumn" set. "They write beautifully," my wife says, "and I love them." She keeps stealing them to grade student papers with. We are bringing this pen set to our four-year annual color palette review, and seeing if it makes the grade with our Franco American style. However I will never lose my memories, not so long as these pens stay on my desk like beautiful reminders of the land of my birth.

14 people found this helpful

TRIPWIRE PAMPHLET SERIES

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2. nibia pastrana santiago, *objetos indispuestos, inauguraciones suspendidas, o nales inevitables para un casi-balle (indisposed objects, suspended inaugurations, or inevitable endings for an almost dance)*, 2019.
3. The Feminist Economics Department, *Desperate Holdings (un) Real Estate: Dis-Investment Strategy*, 2019.
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9. Sara Uribe, *todas las cajas están vacías / all the boxes are empty*, translated by JD Pluecker, 2020.
10. Lotte L.S., *A town, three cities, a fig, a riot, two blue hyacinths, three beginnings, five letters, a “death”, two solitudes, façades, four loose dogs, a doppelgänger, a likeness, three airport floors, thirty-six weeks—*, 2021.
11. Peter Weiss, *Rimbaud: a fragment*, translated by Hunter Bolin, 2021.
12. Kevin Killian, *Selected Amazon Reviews*, Vol. 4, eds. David Buuck & Ted Rees, with an introduction by Matias Viegner, 2022.

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