

BRIEFLY NOTED

Kevin McGowin

The Pursuit of Oblivion: A Global History of Narcotics.
Richard Davenport-Hines.
Norton, 2002.
576 pages. \$29.95 (hardcover).

This book covers issues that have been written about often, but rarely as well and with as much insight, or in a single, concise and readable volume. He gives a thorough overview of the history with plenty of examples, and the research is deep and solid without being academically pedantic. The man somehow manages to cover just about everything related to anything about his subject, with a strong emphasis on the last two centuries and their societal aspects, in a lucid, tight prose style that'll have you reading for hours, learning a kilo, and enjoying every minute of it. I'm giving it to people for Christmas this year. And drugs? People that write books like this usually tip their hand pretty quick as to their own personal views on the controversies surrounding the stuff, but Davenport-Hines is pretty balanced without being detached so he can score tenure or something while not pissing off his dope-smoking buddies, either. All this combined makes for a book I'll take any day over two good hits of Fiorinol.

Shoppers: Two Plays.
Denis Johnson.
Perennial, 2002.
211 pages. \$12.95 (paperback).

Noted fiction writer and essayist Denis Johnson's first volume of plays, released in paperback, is solid and the plays stage worthy, a bit in the Sam Shepard American tradition, though nothing here's gonna knock you on your ass with your mouth open like the best of his prose, either. But his characterizations ring true and the plays are darkly comic. Johnson is playwright in residence for the Campo Santo theatre company in San Francisco, he's still young, and if he

wants to be a playwright, this is a good start, though he's already a hell of a lot better at it than most (and it seems like all novelists or poets try playwriting eventually, with usually disastrous results). Writing plays is very different from writing novels and stories, no matter how good you are at dialogue, and it's every bit as hard, in general—and Johnson's technique is pretty solid. In fact, he could use that technique along with the wild imagination he shows in novels like his masterpiece, *Jesus' Son*, to create exciting and unique plays that avoid all that pretentious and tired Tom Stoppard shit, and which go beyond Shepard's often tedious thematic symbolism, while being funny, terrifying, clear, direct and profound all at once. He's not quite there yet, but he's got it in him and he's more than well on his way.

Roscoe.
William Kennedy.
Viking, 2002.
291 pages. \$24.95 (hardcover).

Roscoe is the seventh novel in Kennedy's "Albany" cycle, the most notable other book of which is the excellent *Ironweed*, for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. It's the only other book by Kennedy I've read, but I liked it well enough to want to pick up the new one, and for the most part am glad I did.

Ironweed is one of those rare novels that translated well to the Big Screen—I thought the adaptation, with Jack Nicholson, Meryl Streep, and Tom Waits was terrific. Much of the reason why is perhaps that Kennedy is among the most "cinematic" of "literary" novelists, a quality in evidence with the present book, too—in a way that somehow reminds me of D.H. Lawrence, Kennedy is capable of vivid lyrical flights which never detract from an otherwise conventional narrative, and which evoke an overtly visual panoramic landscape. As in *Ironweed*, Kennedy weaves the surreal in with the realism of the prose, creating a convincing

and often brilliant effect where the reader is able to step into the actual consciousness of a character—"hearing" dead people "speak," for example—without missing a beat of the forward motion of the plot.

But that is where the novel becomes a little weighty. Much of the motion of the book is slow and cumbersome, and at times a bit predictable, as we enter the lives of a post-W.W.II Albany small-time politician and his world of other politicians, complete with the lack of character one might expect from such characters.

Not that we're supposed to especially like Roscoe, the man, but one never really gets a very clear sense of him or of any of the many other characters in this novel. It's easy to say that this is because Kennedy is suggesting that there's not much to them, but I don't buy the imitative fallacy. We're introduced, mid-stream, to such a plethora of people and their lineages in a mere 291 pages that all the characters, even the principals, are drawn far too thinly to sustain a narrative about events that are less disagreeable than rather tedious and boring. Perhaps I'm missing something because I haven't read all seven books of the cycle, but a novel should stand on its own.

Vivid, lyrical writers like Kennedy, and at times Lawrence, seem to often fall into this predicament. Kennedy is often wryly funny in a way Lawrence never was, but he seems to want to create a microcosm of America a bit . . . obviously, a bit too much.

But the actual writing, save for some episodes of forgettable dialogue, soars. At his best, Kennedy is spectacular, a surreal prose-poem stylist who's worth reading simply for the tightness of the imagery and the energy that bursts out of his sentences like atoms splitting in the middle of a consonant. There is no American fiction writer alive who can come close to William Kennedy in this aspect of his prose.

Which is why *Roscoe* is finally a success. The prose itself creates a narrative of its own, and makes me wonder if conventional standards of character and narrative should even be held to apply to such a vigorous, fresh way of telling a story.

Old Gods Almost Dead:
The 40-Year Odyssey of the Rolling Stones.
Stephen Davis.
Broadway Books, 2001.
576 pages. \$27.50 (hardcover).

For pretty much as long as I can remember, I've liked the Rolling Stones pretty much as well as the next person. I think they were a kick-ass rock band in their prime, and to some degree still are, though I'm not one of those people who sees them in the way some opera fans see Wagner, which is either total adoration or utter enmity; I like a great many of their songs and,

as such, have followed the much-publicized debacles of their individual personal lives since about 1970.

With this book, Davis breaks no more new ground than he has with his previous books on Led Zeppelin and on Aerosmith, both of which I also read—in fact, he breaks *less*. If you even know who the Rolling Stones *are*, and I'll bet you do, you have at least *suspected* that women, drugs, and booze may have played major roles in their 40-Year-Odyssey. As for being "Gods" or "Almost Dead," one hopes Davis is writing ironically: these dudes are none of the above any more than anybody, including Stephen Davis. "Gods," perhaps, in the sense that they have obviously tapped into some Dionysian archetype made more poignant by their much-ballyhooed longevity as a band, but if Davis taps into this, I must have nodded out.

So let me just break down for you the information contained in this book, which incidentally displays a rather unfortunate degree of familiarity with or appreciation of either the Stones' *music* or their overall cultural importance:

They liked to party, and one of their guitarists died from either heroin or murder in 1969, so they got a new one, and then Ron Wood, who's a heroin addict, too. Keith was also a heroin addict but now he's just on coke, as are Mick and Charlie, but only while they're touring. Mick hates to wear condoms, and Keith drinks Stoli mixed with Sunkist. That's his poison. And while Mick quit cigarettes years ago, Keith chain-smokes Marlboro Reds, and is a total ass to his fans.

How was that? Good, was it?

You're a fool if you thought so, but that's the Book, and I just saved you \$27.50.

No, really, the Pleasure was Mine.

From a Buick 8.
Stephen King.
Scribner, 2002.
356 pages. \$28.00 (hardcover).

I'm glad King and Scribner chose to bring out this book this fall instead of the 1,000-plus page fifth installment of the tiresome *Dark Tower* pseudo-Tolkein fantasy series, which has been going downhill since at least its second volume and will not be reviewed in these pages next year, because I'm not gonna read it. But I say "I'm glad" because the present book is a damn good read, a psychological thriller instead of a silly horror novel like *Christine*, which people who are into King will immediately expect because this one too is concerned with an evil automobile. But this time, it's not one that's chasing people around and killing them—the book is about the strange and often disconcerting aspects of memory and the way a story changes the facts of reality with its re-telling,

and about the synchronicities that relocate real human lives. The characterizations are perhaps slightly inconsistent unless one suspends disbelief, which you may as well, since after all, you're not in it to write a dissertation on Thomas Hardy; but King's fame has allowed him the luxury to mature as a writer and extend his range. He's a "horror" writer no more, at least not in the genre sense. True, I don't think much of his efforts to re-write the *Ring* cycle or whatever, but so long as he's not trying too hard for profundity, I think his work since *Bag of Bones*, in addition to the best of the work before it (see my other King review for details) qualifies him as both a Major American Writer in a Literary sense as well as one who can still keep you turning pages. Hey—this book, while not a masterpiece, gets the job done and it's fun. It's all in what you bring to it.

The Noontday Demon: An Atlas of Depression.

Andrew Solomon.

Scribner, 2001.

571 pages. \$28.00 (hardcover).

There have been many books published about depression of late, and I've read a good many of them. Some of them are quite informative and sane, such as *The Depression Sourcebook* by Brian Quinn (McGraw-Hill, 2000), which I read because, guess what? I was fucking depressed! Like Goya, whose work appears on the cover of Andrew Solomon's award-winning tome, championed on its back cover by Styron and pretty much every other living best-selling writer who has also admitted to being depressed. Hell, I'm surprised Scribner didn't include retroactive praise from such depression-ridden luminaries as Michaelangelo, Beethoven, William Blake, Churchill, and Kurt Cobain.

I've heard Solomon's pieces in magazines like *The New Yorker* as well as his works of fiction are pretty good. I wouldn't know—haven't read them. Ain't going to. Because the book that did the job for this reviewer is the present volume, which is truly a comic masterpiece, all the way down to Solomon's distorted visage on the back cover leaflet.

I bought it because I was experiencing seasonal depression in December, and because it has a yellow cover, and I rather tend to like the color yellow. Actually, I shoplifted it, but that's a different story. Anyway, while this book is not about depression, but rather about Andrew Solomon, the fellow has constructed a character, also named Andrew Solomon, who had me turning pages like a madman long into the night, roaring with laughter, and pissing myself in my girlfriend's bed. Shit, now I'm happy and upbeat and I'm running track! If you're depressed, or if anyone close to you is depressed, you will not be once

you read this first-person account of a man who is way, way more fucked up than you, me, Robert Downey Jr., or the narrator of *The Benny Poda Years*.

Solomon goes on at length about all the psychosomatic drugs he's addicted to. How he loves benzos, and also E, coke, and he's a heavy drinker. He tells the reader that he wants to find a powder that makes him feel like Wayne Gretzky, even though he has to snort it five times a day.

He rambles, disjointedly, for 571 pages, one contradictory belly-laugh after another, until you finally GET IT . . . he's joking! He's a goddamn genius! Shit, in the very first section he talks about how his very own Daddy is the U.S. distributor of the antidepressant Celexa, and as such he won't talk about that particular drug theoretically . . . and then he up and does it, on page 192! He denies it has certain side effects, which in fucking fact it DOES, as I can tell you since I weaned myself off that evil shit with massive side effects this past month for the first time since I was married to the Jewish Ballerina in the Book. I was roaring. My chest was tight and I couldn't breathe.

Solomon gets all manic on drugs and starts quoting verse in places, from people like Keats and Edna St. Vincent Millay, who was also depressed (Nancy Milford's new bio. on her is terrific), and then he tells you he wrote what he just wrote or quoted because he was amped up on psychomeds! Jesus! He's on Zyprexa, he says. Don't take it. Don't take it, Dear reader.

But for the sake of God, you've gotta read this book to believe it. It'll send pleasure signals up and out the ass of your brain, and you won't need a whore, you won't need no booze! Won't need a virgin priest! Or even someone you can cry to! I was Waiting on a Friend, and Andy Solomon's character's done more for me than any character since fucking Holden Caulfield.

Two thumbs and a dick, way, way up. Andrew Solomon is the finest comic Master writing in English since they translated Revelations from the Hebrew. Get it. The world will no longer be on your Shoulders.
