

REVIEWS

Common Ectoids of Arizona.
 Stepan Chapman.
 Lockout Press, 2001.
 44 pages. \$5.00 (chapbook).

Reviewed by Laurel Savino

The introduction to Stepan Chapman's chapbook *Common Ectoids of Arizona* begins by comparing his enthusiasm for "the Unseen" with bird watching. I think he's referring to how hard it is to see birds in the wild, how quickly they move and how they take off, frustrating attempts to get a good look.

It doesn't seem quite fair, because anyone can go bird watching, but only Chapman, and his "enthusiasts of the Unseen" can catch a glimpse of ectoplasmic entities. But, he insists, they deserve the same attention.

Which he pays them. His book is a field guide for spiritualist tourists in Arizona, a sketchbook of field observations of "complex liminal creatures, neither flesh nor concept," noting both phenotypes and behaviors.

The line drawings are deft and sketchy. Deep perspective offers a little drama and he includes an impressive variety of cacti in his ectoblast ecology. The ectoids' faces, when they have them, are expressive, whether beatific or startled or sexually knowing. His creatures sometimes sport familiar human body parts—there are a lot of naked breasts on the females of the species—and most have at least one human facial feature like eyes, though they may take up most of the face or sit perched on eye-stalks. When they don't feature human sex organs or giant gnashing teeth, there's sometimes a charming Dr. Seuss quality, especially among creatures that are fleet in movement with a kind of head-held-high spring to their step. There's also a bit of Sussy parading on a variety of vehicles and steeds.

Ectoid behaviors include mating dances and glowing in the dark and flashing like lightning when startled. Some impersonate humans until they give

themselves away by doing things that aren't possible for us, like walking up walls. Others are observed going about their particular business. They don't look like us, but often our concerns are the same.

Teenage Ocatilloids watch a movie at the drive-in. Mexican Glyphoids "seeking a better life for their children" hitchhike into Arizona from Nogales. A couple of Ectobugs catch an after hours strip show performed by a glow-in-the-dark girl. Her sex organs are right where they would be were she human, but her limbs wind around into long tentacles.

Chapman's observations take special note of ectoids in polluted environments. While some display mutations caused by pollution, many thrive on toxins and seek out situations where they are likely to encounter them in gas stations, airport runways, and copper mines. Like us, Chapman wants us to know, some ectoids benefit from the production of toxic pollution while others pay a high price for it.

This selfish tendency may be a thread in Chapman's fiction. Winner of the science fiction Philip K. Dick Memorial Award for his novel *The Troika*, he is also the author of a story called "The One-Armed Elek," in which a shaman from an Inuit-like culture confronts his village with the blame of a crushing famine. Arrogance and violence among villagers, it seems, have angered their goddess, who punishes them with hunger. The elek's message enrages the village leader, who rips off his arm. Later, the severed hand strangles the elek in his sleep.

This parallel of his characters' shortsighted behavior with ours runs throughout *Common Ectoids of Arizona* and there is a whiff of self-defensiveness from the messenger. Beneath the groovy 1960s-style cartoons there is both a relentless hippie whimsy and an insistence on the possibility of an unseen fauna. He ends his introduction with a challenge to the reader, defying "uninformed persons of a skeptical bent [who] sometimes accuse me of inventing these strange creatures." This seems a bit cranky for such a slender fancy. It's a little passive-aggressive to criticize those who can't see invisible beings for not

believing, like the former lord of Riverdance who insisted that anyone saying they didn't like his brand of neotraditional Irish dance had to be lying.

But some of *Common Ectoids* is touching, like the invisible (even to Chapman) ectoid of the "elderly widower phenotype," apparent only from his hat, suit, shoes and cane, who haunts a cemetery. Like Dick's androids (also inorganic but rich in concept), Chapman's ectoids can't help but remember.

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The Secret Life of Bees.

Sue Monk Kidd.

Viking, 2002.

301 pages. \$24.95 (hardcover).

Castling.

Rand Clifford.

Starchief Press, 1995.

543 pages. \$20.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Lucy Harrison

These two books have almost nothing in common, but I'm going to compare them anyway. Ms. Kidd's novel (or "The Bee Book," as I like to call it) tells the story of a young white girl's escape from an abusive father into the arms of a group of friendly black beekeeping sisters. The other novel, Mr. Clifford's *Castling* (or "The Pot Book") tells of a youngish married guy escaping from his job and his wife and his button-down life into the arms of a group of friendly marijuana-growing radicals. One of the books—the Bee Book—entertained me while I was reading it, but slipped from my consciousness rather rapidly after that. The Pot Book, on the other hand, pissed me off royally while I was reading it, but keeps sticking with me for some damn reason. Below, I will attempt to explain further.

Sue Monk Kidd's novel *The Secret Life of Bees* has some gorgeous descriptions in it. There's a scene early on, when the narrator Lily, and her black housekeeper, Rosaleen, sit naked in a river and let the water rush over them, washing them clean for their rebirth into a new life. The writing in that scene is as pure and refreshing as the river water, and it was a pleasure to read it. There are many other moments like that throughout the book, where the prose is so polished that it shines. Lily is a likeable enough girl, the Boatwright sisters who adopt her are interesting and well-drawn, and the story moves forward at a good pace. I do have a couple of serious problems with the motivation of certain characters, however.

The catalyst for Lily and Rosaleen running away is that Rosaleen gets into trouble with some white men in town. Civil Rights legislation has just passed, and Rosaleen wants to get her voter registration card. She takes Lily into town with her, and on the way to

the office they pass a group of white men who make some derogatory comments about Rosaleen, her skin color, and her fan. Now, I agree that these remarks are hateful and cruel and despicable. But I don't think, in the south of Jim Crow, that it would be particularly unusual for a person of color to hear such remarks from a group of ignorant white men who were probably half-drunk and restless with boredom. I believe that most black people in that situation would have just let the comments roll off them and gone on their way. Instead, Rosaleen decides to dump out her snuff can on their feet. I just don't buy it. I might believe it if her character showed any other signs of impulsiveness, or rebelliousness, or even just plain temper, but she doesn't. Ever. There's another, similar encounter closer to the end of the book, when another black character throws a bottle at a group of white men. Again, I don't buy it. It doesn't make any sense within the culture of the times, and it comes out of nowhere, and it isn't earned by the rest of the story.

Having said that, those were the only real problems I had with the book. There were a couple of other plot points that didn't quite ring true (like Lily's accidentally shooting her mother when she was four) and some turns of phrase that jarred me, but for the most part I really enjoyed this book. Ms. Kidd drew me into the world of the Boatwright sisters, and if that world was maybe a little too honey-sweet and melodramatic at times, Ms. Kidd's clean-as-water writing more than made up for it.

Rand Clifford's *Castling*, on the other hand, is not particularly well written, and I did not enjoy reading it. Sometimes I hated reading it. Seriously, there were times when I put the book down and said to myself, 'I hate this book.' Mr. Clifford's love affair with the ellipsis quickly becomes rather tiresome . . . on some pages I counted over thirty times . . . that the ellipsis was used . . . apparently in favor of rather more conventional punctuation . . . such as commas . . . or even periods . . . or just when the author felt like sticking one in for no apparent reason . . .

Mr. Clifford also has an annoying habit of lecturing. All his characters share the same mindset about marijuana, recreational vehicles, logging, mining, organic food, beer, wine, sex, white trash neighbors, and the likelihood that the earth has been contacted by a superior race of aliens. The narrator goes on and on at great length on these topics. Even though I might agree with most of his philosophy—except the part about the aliens—I was bored reading it. When I was in Harry Crews' creative writing class years ago, he said that *Moby Dick* would be a much better book if Melville had left out all the instructional chapters on whaling and other topics and just stuck to the story. Mr. Clifford could certainly have benefited from hearing that advice, although I'm still not convinced that there's a particularly compelling story beneath his editorializing.

Plus the writing is pretty wooden. There are certainly some lovingly detailed descriptions of marijuana, beer, and women's sexual proclivities, but for me that didn't add up to a story. If I wanted to learn how to grow marijuana, I wouldn't go looking in the fiction aisle. The only three-dimensional character in this story was the narrator. That wouldn't necessarily bother me too much, except that ALL of the women characters are either sex kittens, earth mothers, or come from another planet. Okay, so perhaps Mr. Clifford is trying to make a point, and perhaps it's the narrator that sees the women as this one-dimensional. But they don't ever slip up from that role, even in a lighthearted moment, so it's difficult to believe that they're supposed to be anything other than the way they are written.

There wasn't much of a story here, once you take out diatribes and instructional sections, but what there was of it I didn't find particularly believable. I thought the narrator acted like a whiny, voyeuristic frat boy, and if I were his wife I would have left him years ago. I would never have run an ad in the personals to try and get him back—unless it was to serve him with divorce papers, perhaps. I also don't believe that a big castle filled with marijuana plants and fenced with wire and taking up several city blocks wouldn't get some kind of negative attention from the police.

Having said that, I can't get the damn Pot Book out of my head. I've told all my friends about it. Mostly about how much I didn't like it, but still. It's not every day a book sticks with me this way. Years from now I bet I'll remember this book—the camera in the moose's head, and the RV sniper, and the neighbor marking his territory with the rubber from his peeling-out car tires. I already can't remember nearly as much about the Bee Book, although I liked it more. Perhaps that says something about Mr. Clifford's imagination, or perhaps about his social commentary. In any case, I think I might give his next book a try. As long as he leaves out the ellipses . . .

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The Hell Screens.

Alvin Lu.

Four Walls, Eight Windows, 2000.

195 pages. \$22.00 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Karen Trimboth

"Art borrows the form of warfare," says Cheng-Ming, the Chinese American who narrates much of *The Hell Screens* by Alvin Lu. Fair enough—conflict drives all successful stories—but it's an implication that proves unsettling. The conflict in this intricate first novel unfolds in ghostly territory, where one Westerner struggles to understand the enigma of Asian culture.

At first, the story appears to belong to the suspense

or detective genres, but eventually this guise is discarded. The hero, Cheng-Ming, is an expatriate American living in Taipei, Taiwan, a bustling city knotted with ancient temples and reminders of its colonial past. He collects tales of the supernatural, an effortless search, for despite their modern sensibilities, most of the residents he encounters reveal a sometimes reluctant affinity for avenging spirits and omens, if only for the otherworldly knowledge that will fatten their stock portfolios.

Meanwhile, a serial murderer-rapist known only as K is on the loose. He's an Asian Jack-the-Ripper who fascinates the public because of his elusiveness and daring exploits. So widespread is K's fame that all murders are starting to be attributed to him, as in the case of an elderly man poisoned to death in a hospital. Despite the questioning of more likely suspects, K is blamed for the crime. "The whole thing didn't seem at all K's signature. Yet K has made his mark, probably without being involved."

Cheng-Ming meets a young student, Sylvia, who claims to have once been K's lover, but he's sure she's mistaken. He returns to his apartment, located in a haunted building, only to dream that K has invaded his room.

Later, his room is invaded in waking life by an exorcist and Fatty, the Buddha-like neighbor who roams the hallways with a camcorder, hoping to record proof of the afterlife. An exorcism is performed—before the lens—to appease the recent suicide of another neighbor. The exorcist and Fatty prickle Cheng-Ming with their assertion that he's too Western to understand their beliefs.

As suggested by the camcorder's presence, direct experience matters. The rest of the story documents the breakdown of Cheng-Ming's Western psyche through a series of notebook entries recorded during the seventh lunar month, traditionally the time when spirits walk the earth. His continual difficulty with his contact lens is transmuted into a compelling metaphor for the dissolution of his observer status.

In an odd moment, Sylvia washes his lens with her saliva and tea. Afterward, Cheng-Ming perceives the world anew—not only does he penetrate K's aura but, in several exquisitely surreal scenes, he encounters spirits. This openness to the hidden side of Asian culture also leaves Cheng-Ming vulnerable to ghostly possession, although it's unclear by whom.

Here's where the story begins to falter. It should have more sharply rendered, awakening us to the possibility of a new world order after this cross-cultural immersion. Instead, the implications of Cheng-Ming's experience—and K's pervasive influence—remain ambiguous.

Just as maps play an integral part in warfare, so does the role of place in storytelling, if we are to fully understand the characters. Here Lu brings his descriptive powers to bear, succinctly creating an island me-

tropolis caught between old and new, as seen through Cheng-Ming's camcorder-like gaze: "Below, the city spun, black waters still flowing through intersections, blocked by floating detritus, bicycles, laundry, lumber, plants, telephone wires. Side streets, full of wandering spirits set free by the wind, became death traps for drivers and passengers caught unawares in slow traffic."

Ultimately, the novel's suspense lies in the shift of narrative voice to a completely Asian one. A subtle change in key, perhaps, but those who seek a finely rendered experiment should read *The Hell Screens*. Others who prefer a linear tale will probably feel disappointed with the book's obliqueness.

Glenway Wescott Personally: A Biography.

Jerry Rosco.

University of Wisconsin Press, 2002.

306 pages. \$29.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Ted Wojtasik

In 1925 Glenway Wescott sailed for France to write his second novel, to join the other American expatriates living in Paris, and to become a literary figure within the modernist movement that Ernest Hemingway and Gertrude Stein termed the Lost Generation. His second novel, *The Grandmothers* (1927), went through twenty-six printings within six months and won the Harper Prize Novel Award—its publication had been likened to the appearance of *Winesburg, Ohio* and *Spoon River Anthology*. Wescott met Hemingway, Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ford Madox Ford, Djuna Barnes, Jean Cocteau, Robert McAlmon, and other luminaries of that period. In fact, Hemingway parodies Wescott, who had been an openly gay man and a literary rival, as Robert Prentiss in *The Sun Also Rises*. For all intents and purposes, Hemingway first introduces Brett Ashley, in today's terminology, as a "fag hag" along with Prentiss/Wescott and other gay men.

Glenway Wescott (1901-1987), however, has been marginalized in American literary history. Fortunately, with Jerry Rosco's engrossing and well-written biography, a rediscovery of this important and long-neglected American writer is underway. Wescott wrote the novella *The Pilgrim Hawk* (1940), which is about two American expatriates in France and their encounter with an Irish couple and their pet pilgrim hawk. Many critics consider this work to be one of the most distinguished novellas of twentieth-century American literature—this important book, long out of print, has been recently republished with an introduction by Michael Cunningham. Wescott also wrote a best-selling novel called *Apartment in Athens* (1945), the story of a Nazi officer's occupation of a Greek family's home during W.W.II—this novel, too, has been

long out of print but will soon be republished. He was elected to and served as president of the National Institute of Arts and Letters in the late 1950s and early 1960s. As the self-proclaimed Dean of Homosexuals, he did extensive work for Dr. Alfred C. Kinsey and the Institute of Sex Research. He published an exquisite collection of critical essays and reminiscences called *Images of Truth* (1962) about his friendship and admiration for six important writers: Katherine Anne Porter, Somerset Maugham, Colette, Isak Dinesen, Thomas Mann, and Thornton Wilder.

Rosco, however, did not write a literary biography in that analysis and explication of his novels, short stories, and essays are kept to a minimum. His strategy was to concentrate on the life, the historical times, the friendships, and the lovers of this writer, especially his lifelong partnership with museum administrator Monroe Wheeler. Wescott met, knew, or formed intimate friendships with most of the literary and artistic figures of the twentieth century—Rosco's index is a virtual Who's Who of literature and art. Rosco has done extensive and meticulous research to illuminate not only the life of this extraordinary man of letters but also the gay subculture of Paris and New York City. To read through this biography is to read through the making of American literary history.

Collected Poems.

Ed Cox.

Paycock Press, 2001.

152 pages. \$13.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Reginald Shepherd

I first encountered Ed Cox's poems in the early 1980s, when I read his book *Waking*, which Gay Sunshine Press published in 1977. His spare, wistful evocations of adolescent gay longing and anticipation, and of the desire for touch and connection that drives men to cruise streets and bars looking, waiting, hoping for the one who will "hear the words we find in our hands," are still as powerful as ever. Some of the earlier poems in this collection are almost haiku, stripped to their most essential elements, elemental words: "this wind these windows." The delicate, precise poems retain their poise even when addressing homelessness, mental illness, Hiroshima, and Vietnam; and his homage to Hart Crane manages both grandeur and intimacy. The long poem "Ezra and Agnes," about his parents, vividly conjures up their world, their history, and their voices: "You can go, go / like a match on a cold night." The fragility of many of the poems underscores the fragility of the moments they memorialize.

Unfortunately, the linguistic energy and surprise, the sense of hearing and seeing each word for the first

time, flag a bit in the last, previous unpublished section, "Part Of," though there are still amazing phrases like "this is the fossil of thirst" or "and our memories complete the shore." The revisions of earlier poems, in normalizing and smoothing out the syntax and diction, sometimes lose the charge of the originals. But the attention to and love for the things and people of the quotidian world, the overlooked and forgotten out of which the real is made, is always strong and compelling: "Immediacy [is] our primary objective." The poems never lose their conviction of "how things have names, a meaning of their own." Ed Cox may be dead, but his poems still help us in "drawing from the dark one more day."

Loteria Cards and Fortune Poems: A Book of Lives.

Juan Felipe Herrera.

Artemio Rodriguez, illustrator.

City Lights Books, 1999.

213 pages. \$15.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Reginald Harris

This elegant book of 104 poems and linocuts reimagines an ancient tradition. *Loteria* is a popular traditional Mexican game, with roots going back to the Aztecs. As in bingo, players attempt to match their game cards to the *loteria* announcer's picks, but using a deck of cards illustrated with traditional characters (The Sun, a Flag, a Heart, the Devil and so on) instead of letters and numbers. The announcer often accompanies his calling with a line of traditional or extemporaneous verse.

Together, Mexican artist Rodriguez and Chicano poet Herrera explore and explode this tradition. As opposed to the flat images of the cards still being used in contemporary Mexico and the United States, Rodriguez's images are detailed, surreal, often pointedly political. They comment on Mexican history and culture as well as the history of art. He also adds to the cannon of cards with such new images as "The Zapitista," or a gaunt "Mojado" (wetback) on one card being chased by a gruesome man/machine/spider combination of "La Migra" on the card immediately following it.

Herrera's poems replace the brief couplets or sayings associated with the traditional *loteria* images. Usually limiting himself to twelve to fifteen lines, the poems are beautiful vignettes, either addressed to the image on the card or inhabiting its thoughts. Herrera's Snake claims "no ones' got me right," His Star's "five pointed heart / rotates out of late-night miseries." And he sings to The Mermaid "I stalked her for centuries. / My apologies."

At times Herrera seems overwhelmed by Rodriguez' images, and he feels compelled to mention of every

detail of Rodriguez's linocut in his poem, turning some into little more than an image list. These occasional lapses, however, do not diminish the beauty of this elegant volume. This is a book to savor and luxuriate in.

Boulevard: A Novel of New Orleans.

Jim Grimsley.

Algonquin Books, 2002.

292 pages. \$23.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Kevin McGowin

Jim Grimsley's fifth novel, set in New Orleans in 1976, seemed an obvious choice for me to subject to review: I've long admired his work, and gave a favorable review to his collection, *Mr. Universe and Other Plays* in these pages several years ago. Moreover, I live in New Orleans, and have written both a novel (*Town Full of Hours*, online) and numerous columns about the city and its culture; and while not gay myself, I am familiar with Nola's homosexual community, close-knit as it is with the rest of the town's society as a whole, and while I treat this aspect satirically in my novel (along with everything else about the place), my many gay friends and acquaintances in New Orleans, like many of their counterparts in San Francisco and New York and elsewhere, are not "marginalized" as perhaps they once were or seen as a "subculture" (as I'm told was the case for many of them in the South twenty-five or so years ago), but in many ways are the pulse of the city's artistic community, and its other communities, as well. And, like Grimsley's protagonist, Newell, I'm originally from Alabama, where these things are still very much "underground," and most certainly were in the 1970s.

But a writer of the caliber of Jim Grimsley is no more a "gay" writer than Truman Capote or Tennessee Williams, regardless of what his subject matter may be, and were anyone to suggest otherwise, I would take umbrage on his behalf, as his work here as elsewhere transcends its ostensible themes, like that of the other aforementioned writers, both of whom are also associated with New Orleans—and the list could and does go on. I say this in anticipation of narrow and spurious "arguments" by those who haven't (and probably don't intend to) read what may be Grimsley's finest and certainly most ambitious novel to date, while acknowledging that the subject matter is both a valid and realistic depiction of an aspect of human experience, appreciable by most literate and intelligent readers for any number of their own subjective reasons, a fact that speaks highly of Mr. Grimsley's facility as an artist.

That facility is evident to the reader from the opening paragraph, and from the very first pages of the

book—lyrical and atmospheric, like most of Grimsley's prose, yet solid, specific, and never overblown, which is a trap many writers of the small "genre" of "New Orleans Novels" seems to instantly fall prey to, especially if they live there, which Grimsley does not. But he sure knows the city, complete with its peculiarities, eccentricities and crannies and nooks of sordidness and of beauty, all of which he describes with a smooth and seemingly effortless, undistracting dexterity which reveals him at once as a master of his craft and a genius at evoking a "local color" of characterizations previously reduced to a certain shallow parody of the real by other Nola Novelist Notables—Percy (awkward and anal), Toole (who stereotyped the place so well he couldn't ever write of it again, or anything else), Williams (lots of disjointed boozy ramblings, save for his brilliant and underrated play "Vieux Carre"), Anne Rice (fantasy of a place Nola never was), Codrescu (who thinks he is New Orleans, and there's a word for that in Greek Tragedy), and the countless other hacks and Competent Hacks who trade on the idea that the city is a breathing paradox, which, though they never put it very well, is not a new idea. Jim Grimsley is the best writer of all of these, surpassing even the hyperbolic realism of Nelson Algren's *Walk on the Wild Side*: perhaps the wildest thing about New Orleans is, in a sense, that it's just as mundane or more so than Tulsa, which Grimsley understands, and that, you see, is what drives you headlong into the swamp.

Yet such masterful writing as this is a pacing set-up for an entertaining, disquieting and quite engaging story, which is also quite often hilarious. My personal knowledge of the porn shop and S&M and dope scenes that flourish in Nola's (then as now) Lower French Quarter and Fauborg Marigny and those involved in such activities is none of your business, save to say that Grimsley has got it down, without losing control of situation of character one iota. And as Newell makes his tentative and naive way into it, so does the reader. The writing is seductive and tantalizing, like the acts of an expert Dom—sensitive, perceptive, stinging, and thrilling in the process. I hope the author recognizes the high degree to which this is a compliment when he reads this. I rather expect that he will.

Grimsley is equally as capable of evoking sadness, which is never bathos but realistic in a way that renders the implied isolations of other characters in the work of the authors mentioned above to the forced and seam-evident constructs they ultimately are. And in this book there's plenty of it, but its descriptions are executed so tastefully and even subtly as to seem all the more . . . realistic. As for what happens in the book, and its closure, it is not suspenseful nor is it meant to be; neither is it simple existential capitulation, either. It just works. The novel stands, and it stands tall, complete with a truthful landscape occupied by very real and believable characters who we all feel that we know, because we do.

So to close what, for me, is a rather lengthy review, and without doing what I dislike most in reviews (obtrusive delving into the specifics of the story), I, as a New Orleanian, published novelist and a man who has, above all, seen, proclaim this novel a real winner, no matter if you live in New Orleans or visit there or if you're a day-trader in Fairbanks, Alaska. But if you were planning a "New Orleans Novel," or even something remotely like it, and have read up on the literature such a scene has inspired and weighed it and found it somehow wanting in the balance, now, before you presume to try, you had better read *Boulevard*. And you also might want to think twice about hopping the next bus from your town to go get a room on Barracks Street. Or maybe you won't.

Because that's how good Jim Grimsley is.

Desert Walking.

Kenny Fries.

The Advocado Press, 2000.

82 pages. \$15.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Reginald Shepherd

Kenny Fries is a poet of the luminous moment and the luminous landscape. His poems, even when melancholy or wistful, celebrate the world illuminated by love: the love of two men for each other, the love of a man for the natural world (especially the stark beauty of the deserts of the American West), and the love of the artist for color, shape, and form, for drawing order out of matter. The pure lyricism of these poems is piercing, the intensity of focus is unwavering. *Desert Walking* could as aptly have been entitled *Art and Love*, for it's largely devoted to (and an example of) these two modes of attention, these two ways of seeing the world anew. Many of the poems are about painters and paintings, celebrating and exploring the artist's construction of the world. One of its centerpieces is about and incorporates the work and voice of Georgia O'Keeffe, for example, and there is also an extended homage to Hart Crane that is both lament and celebration. As Fries writes in "Toward an Abstract Art," a poem which explores a verbal analogue to Ellsworth Kelly's painterly process, "it matters / what we make / from what we find." In the same poem, Fries urges us to "Open your work to the shapes of the world. / But take only what is necessary." Fries sees the traces of the past in the landscapes he moves through; he sees the presence of the past in the current moment: "the earth's history / is displayed in shape and color." The poems bring together the shapes the observing eye draws out of the natural world and the shapes the artist's eye produces, just as they link words, the poet's raw material, with colors and shapes, the painter's raw material: "colors / become the words

of a language // without syntax, and finally / . . . the form becomes the word." Such an incarnation of form in language is one of this book's most compelling accomplishments.

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Pagan Days.

Michael Rumaker.

Circumstantial Productions Publishing, 1999.

621 pages. \$20.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Jeffery Beam

In his "Afterword" to the North Carolina Wesleyan College Press 1991 new expanded edition of Michael Rumaker's classic work *Gringos and Other Stories*, Robert Creeley remarks on the author's talents: "His writing has always a manner of exceptional caring for the general world despite the inexorable despair that confronts its persons." Earlier in the essay, Creeley reflects on Rumaker's perennial themes, "a common, terrifying recital of human dysfunction and want, placed in such a familiar circumstance." Creeley is well suited to the task of speaking about Rumaker's talents. The two men have known each other since Rumaker attended Black Mountain College during its literary heyday. Rumaker was a writing pupil of Charles Olson and a fellow student of North Carolina-native and poet-publisher Jonathan Williams. *Pagan Days*, Rumaker's long-awaited novel, confirms the authoritative simplicities in which Rumaker roots human stories.

Unlike the usual adult rebels in most of the *Gringos* stories and in Rumaker's classic gay works—the poem "The Fairies are Dancing All Over the World" and the novels and memoirs *My First Satyrnalia*, *To Kill A Cardinal*, *A Day and a Night at the Baths*, and *Robert Duncan in San Francisco*—in *Pagan Days* the protagonist is a young boy. First in South Philly and then along the Delaware River in Lenape, New Jersey, Mickey Lithwack, relates, through an innate capacity for curiosity and celebration, the nobility of his circumstances, the value of suffering, the gift of his own and others' marginality, and the insistent beauty of the world around him. His rite of passage simply, provocatively, and seamlessly told, traces the naturalness of Mickey's developing gay and artistic sensibility.

It's important to realize that the book only follows Mickey from birth to about nine years old. Critic Leverett T. Smith, Jr. adroitly observes in a letter to Rumaker (June 2001),

Coming of age? We'd need to redefine the phrase to fit *Pagan Days*. That it's a crucial period in Mickey's development is certainly so, but in many ways he's far from self-knowledge. This seems to be the substance of the book, that what Mickey learns about loving his family, what he responds to

positively in the church, are important among those things which will eventually liberate him.

Like David Copperfield, Mickey narrates his life in an eternal present—aware of what's happening to him, even somehow aware that he is unfolding and becoming, but without any deep knowledge of where it will take him. But Mickey has the soul of an artist, and thus embraces what happens to him with unthinking astonishment, even pleasure, and a sense of naive self-discovery.

The time is the Depression. Mickey's father, "Stosh," loses his job and thus their home in Philly. The family of one girl, four boys, and their shy, loving, buck-toothed mother Nora, move to the country where things are cheaper, in hopes that Stosh's old friend Sam Beezley can get him a job at the nearby shipyard. Here begins Mickey's "living in the sticks," or "pagan days," as one of Mickey's teachers defines it: "Miss Prouty says pagans is them that lives in the sticks." Mickey narrates the story beginning with his birth. As the Depression intensifies, Mickey's father sinks deeper and deeper into drink and eventually into wife and child abuse, finding work only on the WPA road crews and the county relief dump truck. Mickey's mother, "Nor," worries constantly—about putting food on the table, about clothing the children, about losing family connections with her sisters in Philly and her recently deceased mother, and about Stosh's drinking. The local priest will not allow her to make confession since she admits to using condoms and resisting her husband's sex drive and violence.

Mickey's mother resonates as an influential force in Mickey's life. The first words of the novel are about her: "In the beginning she was a drum in me ears and then it got all quiet and I dint hear nothing excepting the drum of me own heart." At one particularly dark time, Mickey takes armfuls of roses and makes an altar around the image of Mary in his mother's bedroom:

It was the time of the wild roses and they was the first roses I ever saw, growing everywhere you looked in our front yard and in all the fields around, even back near the swamp . . . I couldn't get enough of sniffing them roses. Thinking that if she didn't have a penny for a candle then all the flowers I was picking . . . each and every one of them could be a candle on her bureau.

Always he seeks to preserve and protect his mother, to honor her as he has learned to honor the Virgin Mary. Nora's moral force is a protected, unsullied presence that Mickey constantly refers to as an example of how to live. She becomes intertwined with the heady mysticism of the church, the purity of Mary and the saints, occupying the center position in the Lithwack family, particularly for Mickey and his father, throughout its difficulties.

Mickey's siblings Frank, Buster, deaf "Slap," and the younger Kate and Danny, though secondary characters, are fully drawn. As are the other minor characters—Nor's sisters; Sam's wife Babes; the poor neighbors the Snarps; the ostentatious neighbors the Mahoneys whose house burns to the ground; the teachers—Mrs. Feek, Miss Riggs, and Miss Prouty; and Father Mack and Sister Joseph Mary. Each is as lovingly portrayed as another. Not one is stock cast or un-sympathetic. Each demonstrates to Mickey some aspect of what it is to be human. For example, rumors of the local society columnist Charley's clandestine desires (conveyed to Nora by Mrs. Beezley as "Ya know, he likes to . . . *kiss their peepes*") both intrigue and repel the young Mickey. Mickey observes the townspeople making fun of Charley behind his back, while obsequiously courting him in hopes of seeing their names in the social column. Through observing the "town queer," Mickey learns to hide his own desires, but later, because of Charley's presence, confronts them, recognizing how self-servingly hypocritical people can be.

Mickey is befriended by Earl Snarp Jr., the poorest, most rebellious, most sexually canny boy in the neighborhood, as well as Ronnie Mahoney, the richest, and with his Shirley Temple curls, the most sissy one. When he becomes an altar boy, his affections redirect to his mentor, Timothy Burnside, whose worldly handsome but saintly masculinity he hopes to learn: "He had what my mother called 'clean-cut looks' beneath eyebrows that were like dark wings joined together and eyelashes that were just as dark and thick, like Tyrone Power's eyes . . . his chest . . . strong like Boy's was in the Tarzan movies." Such movie star grandeur contrasts sharply with Earl Jr.'s dirty hygiene and Ronnie's exaggerated primness.

Mickey's highly sensitive response to his world intensifies his experiences through the lens of the erotic and the sensual. His pagan dances in the forest with Earl Jr., his dressing up in Ronnie's mother's clothes, the smells of the swamp and forest, the tender infatuation he has for Timothy, the attraction and repulsion to Charley, the queasiness he feels at Father Mack's advances, the charged romanticism of Sister Joseph Mary's and Miss Prouty's stories of saints and natural disasters, the complicated dance of love and terror between his parents, and his own budding sexuality all create in Mickey a vertiginous feeling—what is truth, what is wrong or right?

Mickey views the contradictions within the Catholic Church, first, through the gold communion platen worth enough to feed him and his family for a year, and then through the duplicitous overweight priest who presses against him in the sacristy "smiling, 'What lovely eyes you have,' . . . his voice as soft as the watered silk of the vestment he'd just slipped out of." Mickey struggles to reconcile the inconsistencies within Catholicism, which repel him, with its

erotic mesmerizing beauty, such as that of St. Theresa (whom Mickey studies in first communion class).

Mickey struggles to understand the weight of each in his relationships and experiences. Rumaker's locale is always the right here, right now, and through Mickey's poetic eyes, and his childlike yet prodigiously intuitive voice, Rumaker's delicate approach is not without melody, surprise and layers of meaning as in this passage where Mickey receives a surprise beating:

I danced around him while he held me by the throat, holding back crying as long as I could, out of pride, but looking back wild at my mother, pleading with my eyes for her to stop him. But she'd already lowered her head again, bent over her crocheting like she didn't want to see . . .

But the more I tried to get out of his way, the more furious he got, so that he walloped me all the harder, his face as red as Miss Prouty's fires, as red as the fires of Father Mack's hell, his hair all hanging in his face when he bent to me, then sticking up like a rooster's comb when he reared back and raised his arm up again, his breath coming fast the way I sometimes heard it in the night in the dark of their bedroom, the way mine did and the way Earl Jr.'s did, playing Slaves and Masters in the wood.

"You gonna do as I say? You gonna be good?" he shouted, and me yelling back, "Yes! Yes! I'll be good! I'll do anything you want!" promising him anything, not knowing what I was promising, not knowing why he'd come after me, or what I hadn't done that he wanted me to do.

Finally, my mother, low at first, then raising her voice so he would hear her, murmured, "Awright, that's enough now, he's learnt his lesson whatever he done." But it seemed like the very sound of her voice only infuriated him all the more even though her complaining grew fainter and fainter til she fell into a silence like she did when he walloped Slap, as if she knew, like my brothers seemed to know, if he was beating me or any one of us, he wouldn't bother her.

Such deftness propels the novel into generous delights reminiscent of Joyce's *Dubliners*, Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*, Dickens' novels, and Capote's Thanksgiving and Christmas memories.

Suddenly, the attack on Pearl Harbor brings war and war brings jobs. Work brings wholesome food, electricity, and the radio's music, ease, and laughter. The novel ironically ends with peace in the family and community as war breaks out.

Circumstances in Rumaker's work are oftentimes volatile and potentially shattering, yet Mickey's light heart and the enduring love of family preserve and enlarge him. Rumaker's characters breathe like Rodin's figures—they are alive, real, sinewy, torn, ecstatic, and transformative. Rumaker has never received the attention he deserves—his simplicity of expression can be misunderstood as lack of tension, and his celebration of homosexuality is often considered too delicate and Edenically innocent. This partly

explains Rumaker's difficulty in finding a big-name publisher for this book. Establishment publishers must think him too quietly old-fashioned; publishers of "traditional" fiction too bold, in creating a precocious rural gay character no more than nine years old.

Rumaker's work has always been about those who struggle against social, economic, and moral odds. Mickey Lithwack is one of his most powerful characters in such a struggle, the novel combining autobiographical truth with solidly American narrative force. In *Eroticizing the Nation: Michael Rumaker's Fiction*, Leverett T. Smith reminds us that *Pagan Days* protests against general stereotypical notions of maleness and nineteenth-century notions of womanhood. Along with its focus on Catholicism in the working class, Rumaker creates a vital and important piece of social criticism, as well as an engaging "read."

Once, as Mickey dances naked for Earl Jr. in a clearing, he sings to Earl Jr. "as much as [to] myself, singing like I used to sing to my mother, I imagined the grass was hair I was dancing in, like I was dancing in long green hair, like the Indian grass was the green hair not only in the clearing but over all the ground everywhere all over the world."

Mickey's days as a "pagan" open his eyes to an almost mystical, but certainly aesthetic, view of the world where each experience, no matter how difficult or painful, offers him a vision that will carry him through life. *Pagan Days* enriches our literature, and reinforces that the avant-garde need not be unintelligible to communicate the complexity of being human.

* * *

Lullaby.

Chuck Palahniuk.

Doubleday, 2002.

260 pages. \$24.95 (hardcover).

Reviewed by Kevin McGowin

Chuck Palahniuk is an authentic American genius, and his book is a masterpiece. The book, it's called *Survivor*, and also goes by the titles *Fight Club*, *Choke*, and now *Lullaby*—but it's a really great book, and if you haven't read it before, you should go pick it up the first chance you get. Which *title* it happens to appear under is not really important, though you'd do well to start with the other ones, the ones that have the other titles.

This is a review about the book by Chuck Palahniuk. By the time you have read it, 235,982 people worldwide will be dead. They will not get to read the book by Chuck Palahniuk. Unless they already read one of the copies that has one of the different titles.

Go figure.

The book by Chuck Palahniuk, this is what it reads like.

It's a brilliant American social satire, one that rings true—it begins with a clever premise, hilarious even, and proceeds to interweave the most improbable associations into a cutting acerbic acuity, a cohesive narrative whose bass line, the one that finally at the end comes forward to drown out all the other voices in the book, sounds a bit like . . . this.

Like you. Like you the way you wished you had the courage to be.

But we all run out of societal platitudes to rag on, especially those that, like most platitudes, contain an eerie grain of truth. Absurd American preoccupations.

Even Chuck Palahniuk.

I'll admit it—*Lullaby* almost lulled me to sleep (haha). And irked me with its trendy pretentiousness. His tropes are tired here, the seams in the writing too obvious, the syntax too forward, and the key "ideas" rehash—for example, Carlin came up with a variation on the "most of the people you hear on laugh tracks are now dead" idea about 30 years ago. Yes, it has some good lines, some quality passages—but I've come to hold Palahniuk to a much higher standard. After all, this is the man I've considered (and stated in print) to be "the most vital literary voice of his generation." This is why I'm disappointed in a book that reads like the self-parody of a man parodying DeLillo's *American* or *White Noise* (the latter title a phrase he mentions in the book, and in part the purpose of all the tirelessly-researched details about colors and furniture and foliage) and what with all the repeated lines ("The more people die, the more things stay the same," "Constructive destruction," and the idea that Maybe it's not what we Did that Counts, but what we Didn't Do).

Krishnamurti for Generation X. Visa, MasterCard, American Express. *Who will die first?*

—Y'know, I'll bet that Chuck, pissed at me though he and his fans may be as they read this, that Chuck knows goddamn well that *Lullaby* is not by a long shot the best installment of the Palahniuk Book. Which began with *Invisible Monsters*, introducing the themes of vanity and hypocrisy that permeate the others: *Fight Club*, the excellent film of which made its author a Star, and *Choke*, which hit the bestseller lists (as I suspect *Lullaby* will too, for two or three weeks) and established Palahniuk for real in the world of literary fiction, and which I championed for the National Book Award (it deserved it). I wish I'd published my review of *that* one in these pages, but the timing was off. Email my publisher. Ask him to send it to you.

And then there was his *real* masterpiece, *Survivor*, especially poignant after 9/11, which *hammers* the reader with profundity after profundity. You could highlight the whole thing and put it in *Bartlett's*.

And now, *this*. To say it's writing for a public with a

short attention span, *mimicking* the culture, well, they call this the “pathetic fallacy.”

The man’s unofficial Web site (chuckpalahniuk.net) had announced that this was to be a “horror” novel, suggesting that C. P. was up to taking risks, branching out, extending his range. But *Lullaby* is not a horror novel. The others, *they* are horror novels, and they contain what is sorely lacking in this slight, short volume—real character development and a real story. Now that DeLillo seems to have passed the torch as Apocalyptic Postmodern American Novelist, hey! He was always fresh. And it seems that Palahniuk is in danger of not just turning into the next Tom Robbins or Quentin Tarantino, but worse—he’s running the risk of turning into everything he affects to despise.

On his website, a raffle is underway—buy a Chuck Palahniuk T-shirt (you can do so multiple times) and, if you win, he’ll use your real name in an upcoming book. And he’s written a blurb explaining why this action is tenable from a literary perspective. Well, it’s already been done—but when I did it, I did it for free, though. And he’s more than welcome to name his next Bad Guy Kevin McGowin. Knock yourself out.

You’re not your fucking khakis.

—I’m both a novelist myself and a critic, but as a critic, it’s my job to be honest. You read the book and loved it? Swell! But the seams are so loose they’re unraveled—characters’ actions are unexplained, and the rest reads like outtakes from his *Survivor* notebooks, *counting 1 . . . counting 2 . . . counting . . .*

Or maybe you *are* Chuck Palahniuk. Hey, pal, I respect you, I really do, and you know it. But take some time off. Read some Thomas Hardy or some James Purdy, Jung or something. Try a stage play. Write in 3rd person. And next time, surprise me.

And *Lullaby*? Well, maybe it’s not what you did that matters, it’s what you *didn’t* do.

But it’ll make a great film.

At the Sky’s Edge: Poems 1991-1996.

Bei Dao.

David Hinton, translator.

New Directions, 2001.

196 pages. \$15.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Cy Dillon

If you value the poetry of the past quarter-century, and you do not already own *Forms of Distance* (1994) and *Landscape Over Zero* (1996) by Bei Dao (pseudonym of Zhao Zhenkai), then *At the Sky’s Edge* belongs in your collection.

Bei Dao, known for his role as the poetic voice of the Democracy Movement in China and as the leader of the “misty” school of Chinese poets, combines surreal images with a simplicity of diction that echoes the

classic Chinese lyricists. David Hinton’s translation is economical in the spirit of Rexroth’s translations of Li Po and Tu Fu without giving up the outrageous in Bei Dao’s vision or the dark sense of humor. The graceful calligraphy of this bilingual edition is a welcome addition, clarifying Hinton’s role as a translator rather than one writer imitating another’s poems in a different language.

The exile that dominates Bei Dao’s life since 1989 is always present in these lyrics. Witness lines from “Midnight Singer”:

a song
is an ever hostile tree
beyond the border
it unleashes its promise
that wolf-pack feeding on tomorrow.

Constant, also, is his sense of driving metaphor as far as it will go, only to tie it firmly to the actual:

a song
is the death of a singer
his death-night
pressed into black records
singing over and over and over.

At the Sky’s Edge allows us to hear directly from a certified hero about the cost of asserting individuality in a society that renounces the individual. It is also heroic, as I see it, to turn bitterness into beauty without betraying it into sentimentality.

4.

Noelle Kocot.

Four Way Books, 2001.

70 pages. \$13.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Zoë Francesca

The poems in 4, recipient of the 1999 Four Way Books Levis Poetry Prize, are remarkable in their ability to hide all and reveal all in one fell swoop. The book’s title is one of the mysteries given the reader to solve—the poems like clues to a murder. Not only are most of the poems written in four-line stanzas in multiples of four, the number four has a mystical symbolism related to the Holy Trinity, the colors blue and green, and the narrator’s childhood.

A majority of the poems in 4 are abstract with a coded language that lends the poems an eerie gravity and tension reminiscent of surrealism and Salvador Dali. As in a Dali painting, nothing in 4 is off the cuff. Each image, each word feels carefully selected to stand for something that can’t be said directly, as in the poem “What I Want to Tell You But Can’t”: “A creature sealed

in deepest amber, / I have grown immune to horizons / Dragging their bars like leaden sunlight / Against a destiny wrapped / Around me like a fence / That I will never climb."

Kocot's formalism, reflected not only in her measured stanzas but also in glorious rhyme schemes and sestinas, pay tribute to Elizabeth Bishop. This is especially evident in the book's first poem, "Good Things Come To Those Who Wait," which takes its rhyme scheme from Bishop's "Arrival at Santos" and even one of its characters, the retired police lieutenant Miss Breen. The poem "Nostalgia" is a good example of Kocot's technique of building metaphors and similes on top of each other until the words form a new story of their own. The effect is breathtaking, like a cinematographic tracking shot: "While you continue to hide yourself away / In some hotel, this season spreads a tablecloth / Of newly-fallen snow covered / By an immemorial, telluric dust / Illuminated by the artificial rust / Of streetlamps that shepherd / Him or her to their respective subways / As you sanctify your place among the lost."

Drunk on the Wine of the Beloved: 100 Poems of Hafiz.

Thomas Rain Crowe, translator.
Shambhala Publications, 2001.
106 pages. \$12.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by Cy Dillon

Thomas Rain Crowe has a knack for timing, and this affordable translation of one of the Islamic world's most important poets comes at a time when it will draw attention it might not have gotten last year. City Lights Bookstore chose it as one of its books of the month recently, saying "During a time of international political and religious chaos and violence, perhaps no other work is more essential to our survival and recovery."

Crowe has a passion for Hafiz, and does justice to the tradition of the *ghazal* form as well as to the role of Sufism in Hafiz's writing in the readable introduction. Crowe's explanation of his role as "impersonator" is remarkably clear, as is his reason for emphasizing the sound of the poems. The selection of one hundred *ghazals* allows us to gauge Hafiz's range in this form without creating a massive tome, and Crowe also chooses wisely in avoiding a scholarly translation with reams of notes and textual tables.

In fact, only one minor flaw prevents the book from conveying something close to the experience of Hafiz's Islamic readers, and Crowe alludes to it in his introduction: "we must be careful not to read too much literalness into these scenes" [of drinking in a tavern]. I submit that it is the sensual appeal of wine, dirt, sex, and sentiment that helps Hafiz maintain his

hold on the imagination of the Middle East after all these centuries. The wine of this communion is rendered impotent as Welch's if it is not real wine before it is intoxication for the spirit. Let's hope this is not the last we hear from Crowe on Hafiz, and I hope in the future he will allow the lips of the Beloved to be lips of flesh.

Dementia Pugilistica.

David Lawrence.
Box Turtle Press, 1999.
96 pages. \$10.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by Reginald Harris

David Lawrence wants us to believe he's a tough guy. This book of short, stripped down poems and prose-like dreams are filled with pain and blood and blunt language. Women dump him. He cheats on his wife. The IRS comes after him and he gets tossed in jail. Lawrence dreams of being a boxer, fighting champions like Hector Camacho, or a rapper "The Renegade Jew," battling sucker MCs on the mike. He doesn't so much hold back his tears as curse at them, daring them to fall. "I like to get punched / the way I used to like to snort cocaine" he writes in the collection's title poem, and he wants us to believe him.

Sometimes this stance works, and Lawrence's pith and grit combine to create pithy, often funny, vulgarly honest poems, that pack a surprisingly strong punch, like a swift jab right on the button.

At other times, the performance wears thin. The pain is here, and some of the beauty, but there's little that truly connects the reader with the persona in these poems. One wants more from Lawrence, wants him to stretch, reach, dig deeper, and be more honest with us and himself concerning the emotions he's experiencing. Many of the poems are little more than anecdotes, short jokes, or bitter punch lines one might hear a bruised former lover spit out late one night in a bar, searching for someone to commiserate with him. But just when you get pulled in, intrigued by the story, the teller clams up, orders another drink, and moves on to another tall tale. Eventually, the bartender sings out last call, and you leave, feeling as though you have seen something, been exposed to something, someone giving you a brief glimpse of their heart, but dissatisfied, hungry, yearning for more.
