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The Tech Threat: Literary Journalism in the Age of Interruption

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Works Discussed:

Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technology and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked by Adam Alter. New York: Penguin Press, 2017. Illustrations. Notes. Hardcover, 354 pp., USD\$27.

The World beyond Your Head: On Becoming an Individual in an Age of Distraction by Matthew B. Crawford. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015. Notes. Index. Hardcover available. Paperback, 305 pp. USD\$15.

Disrupted: My Misadventure in the Start-up Bubble by Dan Lyons. New York: Hachette, 2017. Hardcover available. Paperback, 258 pp., USD\$16.

Chaos Monkeys: Obscene Fortune and Random Failure in Silicon Valley by Antonio García Martínez. New York: Harper, 2016. Index. Hardcover, 515 pp., USD\$29.99.

Smarter Than You Think: How Technology Is Changing Our Minds for the Better by Clive Thompson. New York: Penguin Press, 2014. Notes. Index. Hardcover available. Paperback, 352 pp., USD\$17.

You could be doing so many other things besides reading this essay: You could be shopping online, updating social media, or responding to text messages. You could be playing *Words with Friends* or asking your electronic assistant to add milk to your grocery list. You could be watching the next episode of your favorite television series through a streaming service on your tablet or giving in to the urge to check your email.

If you really do feel like reading, you could be Googling any work of literary journalism and likely finding it—or some part of it—at Longreads.com, some other publisher's website, or even on Google itself.

It has never been easier to read anything you want to read—and it's never been harder to actually find the time.

While choosing to spend time in a more instantly gratifying way online is not an acceptable excuse for putting off doing the *Hiroshima* assignment, it is a believable one. Many people are sacrificing things they need to do in order to shop online or scroll through Facebook.

In *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technologies and the Business of Keeping Us Hooked*, Adam Alter outlines the biological, cultural, and behavioral reasons so many of us find it difficult to distance ourselves from our devices. Yet, technological advances also allow access to more knowledge than ever before, freeing us from having to rely on memory, personal experience, and in-person networks. In *Smarter Than You Think*, Clive Thompson argues that technological changes are more positive than negative, and that by learning to use technology we can learn more and do better. None of the five books discussed here is examined as literary journalism. Rather, this essay explores the effects of technology on literary journalism. These books will be of interest because of the authors' takes on the cultural shifts technology has set in motion, and how those shifts may impact literary journalism in an era of unprecedented access, communication, and distraction.

Literary journalism requires a commitment from both writer and reader. The reporting and writing demands exceed those of most other kinds of journalism. The reader must summon the attention span needed to engage with written works that are both long and meaningful. The fictional equivalent is not the airport novel but the work of literature. An investment in literary journalism presents its own rewards for readers. In his 2016 IALJS keynote address, William Dow explained this succinctly and well: "Literary journalism is foremost a pairing of literature and journalism—a combination perhaps more intimately related than any other two narrative genres because it is a way of posing problems and pursuing solutions in ways that no other paired or interfused genres can."¹ Literary journalists have always taken on the social, cultural, and political problems of their times, captivating their readers with exhaustive reporting and innovative approaches to writing. They take us into the experiences of people living through difficult things, such as war (cue Hemingway, Gellhorn, Hersey, and Herr), poverty (so many from which to choose, from Jack London to Barbara Ehrenreich), even guarding prisoners (enter Ted Conover and Shane Bauer). Through these true tales comes an understanding of pressing issues as well as of the human condition, one that can't be achieved through poems or novels, inverted pyramids or data visualization.

Among the positive developments of technology, Longreads.com and startups, such as Latterly and Catapult, deliver excellent works of long form and literary journalism to your inbox. Facebook makes these works easy to share. When stumbling across an intriguing article while browsing social media or clicking a link on another web page, free tools, such as Pocket, allow you to save the story, as does Facebook, to read later. In this fast-moving, technologically enhanced world, however, "later" may never come.

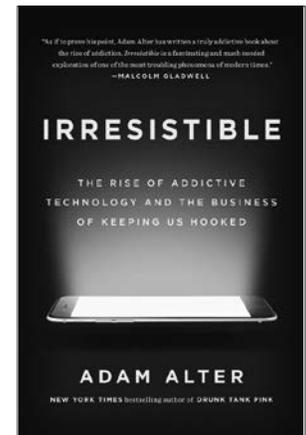
This essay pulls from Nicolas Carr's landmark work, *The Shallows*,² in which he examines research into neuroplasticity, the ability of the brain to change in response to one's environment and experiences. Carr explains that the brain continually

changes in response to environments. Early humans adapted to the use of tools. In the current age, our brains are becoming adept at dealing with environments developed by technology, becoming better at skills such as multitasking and worse at focusing attention. As a result, our brains might be changing so it is becoming harder to read longer texts. The average person's attention span was twelve seconds in 2000; it was only eight seconds in 2013.³

"Dozens of studies by psychologists, neurobiologists, and educators point to the same conclusion: When we go online, we enter an environment that promotes cursory reading, hurried and distracted thinking, and superficial learning," Carr wrote. "Even as the Internet grants us easy access to vast amounts of information, it is turning us into shallower thinkers, literally changing the structure of our brain."⁴

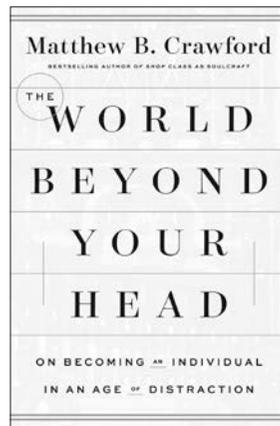
In *Irresistible*, Alter writes an even darker conclusion. Not only is technology making us shallow, it is making us addicted. In our tech-immersive culture, the signs of addiction creep up slowly and are easy to miss. According to Alter, the six ingredients of behavioral addiction are "compelling goals that are just beyond reach; irresistible and unpredictable positive feedback; a sense of incremental progress and improvement; tasks that become slowly more difficult over time; unresolved tensions that demand resolution; and strong social connections."⁵ Behavioral addictions have increased rapidly over recent decades, thanks to entrepreneurs' electronic engineering for increasingly addictive behaviors propagated by the psychological and social rewards that come with the swiping, feedback, and fun experiences provided by an ever-evolving galaxy of affordable gadgets. While companies that make these devices continually promote the impression that the consumer is in control and that life is better because of the ability to look up anything, watch anything, and communicate with anyone, the personal and social costs of the near-constant interaction with screens are irrefutable. Alter is sure the technology entrepreneurs who have engineered truly addictive digital devices and activities knew what they were doing. Some of their greatest innovators, he notes, including Steve Jobs and Evan Williams, kept their creations out of the hands of their own children.⁶

Alter draws a parallel between behavioral addiction and chemical addiction. How easy it is to look back at the early proponents of cocaine, including Sigmund Freud, with superiority. Today we know of the drug's dangers. "But perhaps our sense of superiority is misplaced," Alter writes. Just as cocaine charmed early adopters a century ago, "today we are enamored of technology. We're willing to overlook its costs for its many gleaming benefits: for on-demand entertainment portals, car services, and cleaning companies; Facebook and Twitter; Instagram and Snapchat . . . and the rise of a new breed of obsessions, compulsions, and addictions that barely existed during the twentieth century."⁷



Proponents of literary journalism should also be concerned about findings Alter relays about the decline in empathy among college students. Instances of online bullying and harassment are well documented, with teenage girls being especially cruel to one another on social networks.⁸ Literary journalism requires an interest in other people's lives. Whereas the New Journalists of the 1960s "called attention to their own voices"⁹ in pushing the boundaries of journalistic writing, as Robert Boynton has noted, the "new, new journalists" distinguished themselves from the literary journalists of Tom Wolfe's heyday through their reportorial feats, some of which included spending months or even years with their subjects.¹⁰ Conover spent nearly a year as a prison guard for *New Jack*, and Adrian LeBlanc spent almost a decade reporting *Random Family*.¹¹ With online communication and texting overtaking face-to-face interaction, it is unclear how the changes in communication patterns will affect empathy: that is, can it develop adequately in the digital world? How will the next generation of literary journalists work in a culture that places little value on trying to understand other people's experiences? Will the next generation of literary journalists have the conviction to pursue such deeply reported work?

As did Alter, Crawford in his book, *The World beyond Your Head*, characterizes technology, especially the creators and marketers of technology, as a threat, but not because of technology's addictive nature. Crawford believes technology is making the world too easy for us. In *The World beyond Your Head*, he describes the disturbing forms many technological advances are taking, separating who we are from what we do in the world. Autonomous automobiles, near-constant electronic stimulation, and on-demand entertainment distract us from the difficult work of becoming individuals who make things and make mistakes. "Silence is now offered as a luxury good," Crawford writes.¹²



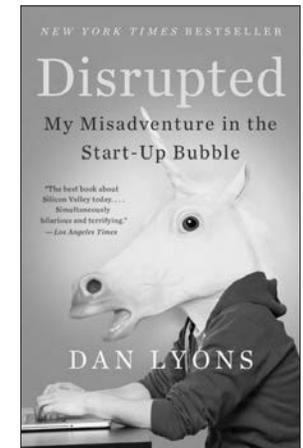
To realize one's potential as an individual, each person must engage with the world. Crawford gives examples of individuals who mastered their environment, reaching their potential: The motorcycle driver who develops connections to both the motorcycle and the road, the short-order cook who achieves a well-orchestrated arrangement of ingredients and implements, and the hockey player who wields the stick as if it's another body part. As engineers and other technologists develop more ways for people not to engage with the real world, however, easiness, not excellence in our individual areas of aptitude and interest, becomes the goal.

In *The World beyond Your Head*, Crawford cites his own inability to focus on Aristotle when he knows he could just watch *Sons of Anarchy*, a television series he could talk about the next day with friends. "There is, then, a large cultural consequence to our ability to concentrate on things that aren't immediately engaging, or our lack of such ability: the persistence of intellectual diversity, or not. To insist on the importance of trained powers of concentration is to recognize that independence

of thought and feeling is a fragile thing, and requires certain conditions."¹³

Dan Lyons and Antonio García Martínez, in their respective memoirs, further the argument for not surrendering our culture to the whims and whiz-bang products of technology companies. Despite the appearances and hype, they learned that the technology startup world does not champion independent thought as much as it rewards moxie and marketing. Their accounts characterize the leaders of technological innovation, not as people with altruistic intentions nor, for the most part, remotely deserving of the hero status contemporary culture bestows on them. Instead of being evangelists for social and intellectual progress, the people at the helm are, in Lyons and Martínez's experience, opportunists seeking personal wealth and status.

In *Disrupted: My Misadventure in the Start-up Bubble*, former *Newsweek* writer Lyons chronicles his experiences while aspiring to become a "marketing wizard"¹⁴ at a Boston-area software startup. Lyons's hopes crest and fall in this classic fish-out-of-water story as he realizes the hip, venture capital-infused company with candy dispensers in the walls was more cult than business. "HubSpot is like a corporate version of Up with People, the inspirational singing group from the 1970s, but with a touch of Scientology. It's a cult based around marketing. The Happy!! Awesome!! Start-up Cult, I began to call it."¹⁵



Lyons came to HubSpot after being laid off at *Newsweek*. "I think they just want to hire younger people," his boss had told him. "They can take your salary and hire five kids right out of college."¹⁶ He finds a job at HubSpot after a stint at a technology news website. He makes it through several rounds of interviews, including with the company's cofounders, who seem excited by his ideas and hire him to help improve the company's place in the marketing world. Or so he thinks. "The work I'm doing will exist in a gray area—a mix of journalism, marketing, and propaganda. Halligan and Shah don't know what this will look like, and neither do I. But it could be an interesting experiment."¹⁷ Along with the work, he anticipates his stock options will turn into lots of cash once HubSpot goes public at some point in the future. What he finds is a company built on smoke and mirrors—and run by "bozos" who now "hire bozos."¹⁸ Its product is sold to businesses the owners have decided need marketing software. Lyons finds that HubSpot's sales and marketing workforce outnumbers that of its software development staff. He becomes a recorder of the hype—from the trainer who tells him and the other new hires, "HubSpot is *changing the world*,"¹⁹ to Fearless Fridays doing arts and crafts or anything, as long as it's not their actual job.

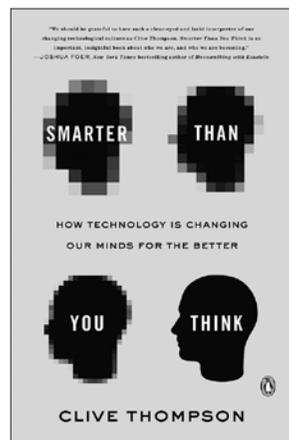
This is the kind of company Lyons and Martínez see attracting venture capital in the United States today.

Other kinds are chronicled in Martínez's memoir, *Chaos Monkeys: Obscene Fortune and Random Failure in Silicon Valley*. While Lyons gives an outsider's look at start-up culture, Martínez immerses us in the sausage making at the factory floor

level. But Martínez makes sure the readers know he's not the typical technology entrepreneur: Lacking fortuitous "happenstance" or "membership in a privileged cohort"—paths others have taken to success in Silicon Valley—he succeeded through pure "skullduggery."²⁰ His views on just about everyone in that space, from venture capitalists to his old boss, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, are cultural-myth shattering. His is a tell-all, no-holds-barred, in-your-face memoir with lots of explanation breaks. (This is how Google makes money selling ads. This is the definition of a derivative.) Martínez's Silicon Valley is a haven for sociopaths with work addictions, a mostly male bastion of ego-infused tech culture where women are either hot receptionists and/or sexual conquests.

Chaos Monkeys is part ego trip, part how-to book. Although Martínez doesn't seem to be a trustworthy sort of person who has the reader's best interest at heart, his approach to his subject matter is lively, authoritative, and unconventional. His book is definitely a worthwhile read.

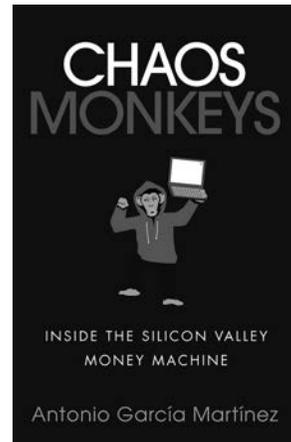
Both memoirs make clear that tech culture doesn't reward introspection, empathy, or other attributes required for literary journalism to be written and read. Of the five books reviewed here, only Clive Thompson's *Smarter Than You Think* is hopeful, making the argument that technology may be changing us for the better. Humans can use—and are using—technology to enhance their thinking, communicating, and



problem-solving skills. He rightly points out that new technological shifts in media have always caused anxiety. Scholars worried the printing press would result in huge quantities of books without any way for the truly great ones to stand out.²¹ Instead of imperiling writing, however, the Internet has led to more people doing it. "They were all writers who were reading each other's stuff, and then writing about that, too."²²

Thompson qualifies this rosy picture with an acknowledgment that he is choosing to focus on the positives technology offers. He agrees with Carr that new digital tools are making it more difficult to concentrate, that it's up to individuals and institutions to know when and how it's most beneficial—and least destructive—to use them. "At their best, today's digital tools help us see more, retain more, communicate more. At their worst, they leave us prey to the manipulation of the toolmakers. But on balance, I'd argue, what is happening is deeply positive."²³

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Among the positive developments for literary journalism has been the explosion of multimedia-infused, long-form journalism sparked by the *New York Times*'s "Snow Fall: The Avalanche at Tunnel Creek," which won the Pulitzer Prize in Feature Writing in 2013. Over the years, developers have streamlined these presentations for easy viewing on mobile devices,²⁴ where news consumers, especially millennials, are spending much of their media time.²⁵ But the phone is a distracting technology, especially when used in public spaces filled with other electronic stimuli, such as television. Crawford says we need an "*attentional commons*," urging us to fight for distraction-free zones with the same urgency with which we preserve public spaces like libraries and parks.²⁶

To "reclaim the real" in a more general sense, however, Crawford recommends shifting focus from technology to "the intention that guides its design and its dissemination into every area of life."²⁷ As we learn more about the siren song of addictive technology, we are becoming more suspicious of it. For literary journalism, the warnings sounded by authors such as Alter bode well. He believes the answer to behavioral addiction lies with consumers reining in their own use and that of their children. Digital tools can still benefit their users as long as they do not overpower personal relationships and social bonds.²⁸ Corraling technology's reach is also important on a personal level. While we often watch, swipe, and interact with social media to amuse ourselves, we read literary journalism and other thoughtful, well-crafted texts to achieve greater things. "It matters," writes literary critic Harold Bloom, "if individuals are to retain any capacity to form their own judgments and opinions, that they continue to read for themselves."²⁹

It's not more time we need to get to that great read, or even fewer devices. It's a different outlook.

Notes

- 1 Dow, "Reading Otherwise," 119.
- 2 Carr, *The Shallows*.
- 3 Microsoft Canada, *Attention Spans*, quoted in Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technologies*, 28, 325n28.
- 4 Carr, "The Web Shatters Focus," graph 5.
- 5 Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technologies*, 9.
- 6 Alter, 1–2.
- 7 Alter, 38–39.
- 8 Alter, 40–41.
- 9 Sims, "The Literary Journalists," 3.
- 10 Boynton, *The New New Journalism*, xiii.
- 11 Boynton, 6, xiii.
- 12 Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 12.
- 13 Crawford, 17.
- 14 Lyons, *Disrupted: My Misadventure*, 56.
- 15 Lyons, 48.

- 16 Lyons, 13.
 17 Lyons, 35.
 18 Lyons, 77.
 19 Lyons, 41 (emphasis in original).
 20 Martínez, *Chaos Monkeys*, 229.
 21 Thompson, *Smarter Than You Think*, 12.
 22 Thompson, 51.
 23 Thompson, 6.
 24 Dowling, "Toward a New Aesthetic of Digital Literary Journalism," 100–116.
 25 The Media Insight Project, "How Millennials Get News," 2.
 26 Crawford, *The World beyond Your Head*, 11 (emphasis in original).
 27 Crawford, 247.
 28 Alter, *Irresistible: The Rise of Addictive Technologies*, 319–20.
 29 Bloom, *How to Read and Why*, 21.

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An Anthology of One's Own

The Stories We Tell: Classic True Tales by America's Greatest Women Journalists edited by Patsy Sims. La Jolla, California: Sager Group, 2017. Paperback, 390 pp., USD\$25.90.

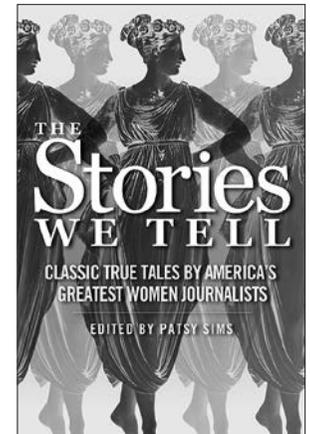
Reviewed by Sheila Webb, Western Washington University, United States

The Stories We Tell showcases twenty-three long-form nonfiction stories by authors ranging from Lillian Ross to Gerri Hirshey to Janet Malcolm to Joyce Wadler to Isabel Wilkerson. In stories dating from 1964 to 2016, the collection features first-person health narratives, historical and cultural analyses, and interviews with iconic artistic figures. The collection illustrates the critical role that magazines play in nourishing long form: nine appeared in the *New Yorker*, two in *Esquire*, and four in the *New York Times Magazine*.

Editor Patsy Sims has done an exemplary job in selecting renowned authors. She took the interesting approach of asking each author to choose which article to publish. This has obvious benefits, the primary one being that we can depend on the author to showcase her best work. This does, however, create a volume without a clear theme or stance, which is a drawback in an anthology that might be used as a textbook. Further, this approach means that some stories suffer. For example, "Holy Days: The World of a Hasidic Family" by Lis Harris originally appeared in three *New Yorker* installments. No doubt because of space constraints, only an excerpt from the second part of the series is published here, which creates a loss of context.

Although each of the stories deserves mention, a few offer special insights into the writing process. "The Last Day" is a master class, on paper, of how to write a feature story. Robin Marantz Henig's poignant portrait of Sandy Bem charts Bem's decline due to Alzheimer's and how Bem took control of her end of life. Henig movingly portrays Bem, her life and academic career, all related to her ex-husband and academic partner, and their two children. The article reads like a scientific and political treatise as well. Henig describes research on Alzheimer's and outlines state laws that determined the course Bem took. A judicious use of quotes lets each character be heard.

Joan Didion evokes her striving California, a state where people go to start over but drag their problems with them instead, in her gem "Some Dreamers of the Golden Dream." In "My Breast," Joyce Wadler offers a humorous blow-by-blow of her diagnosis and subsequent treatment for breast cancer, all told with her acerbic self-aware wit, as she negotiates medical information; muses over decisions she has to



make; navigates an on-again, off-again relationship; and describes her confusion and panic, all while continuing to work for *People* magazine. Finally, although published in 1964, Gloria Steinem's "Mrs. Kennedy at the Moment" stays fresh. Along with other pieces in this collection, the article still resonates as Steinem describes the cultural role politicians and their families fulfill; shows the intense pressure from publicity at the time, and how Mrs. Kennedy both was affected by it and also manipulated it; and describes the press's and public's laser focus on Mrs. Kennedy's appearance, fashion, and domiciles, in much the same way that current stories focus, for example, on the British royals and their soon-to-be newest member. Steinem's story thus illustrates the complex way in which political figures interact, exploit, and are interpreted by and through cultural myths, expectations, and the publicity machine—in this case, a highly gendered one.

The stories are arranged alphabetically by author and include notes on each author's career history. The anthology would benefit from additional author grounding in several ways: by informing the reader why the author chose the story she did, how the story fits into the time and place of its publication, and how the story exemplifies the style or concerns of both the author and the era. Publishing credits appear at the end of the volume, but the reader would also be served by including publication date and magazine title with the article to help situate the story in its historical context.

An anthology of women journalists inevitably raises the question: If and when will such anthologies no longer be necessary? As Adrian Nicole LeBlanc, one of the authors in the collection, notes: ". . . won't it be a fine day when [an] anthology specifically focused on women journalists won't make any sense?" (Sims, "Notes from Our Contributors," i). Such anthologies aim to provide equity and to address the implicit bias in publishing, a charge taken on by the VIDA Count, which since 2010 has done a yearly tally of gender ratio in magazines and now is looking at ethnicity, LGBT, disability, and age. VIDA data show that in 2016, women wrote thirty-nine percent of *New Yorker* pieces (VIDA 2017, para. 6), while men wrote sixty-one percent.

But counting only gets us so far. In their 2016 study of book reviews in the *New York Times*, Andrew Piper and Richard Jean So found that a higher ratio does not guarantee that women writers are being reviewed equitably. They note that women continue to be stereotyped in reviews: "Women writers are still being defined by their 'sentimental' traits and a love of writing about 'maternal' issues, while men are most often being defined by their attention to matters of science and the state" (Piper and So, "Women Write about Family, Men Write about War," *New Republic*, April 8, 2016, para. 8).

Cynthia Ozick viewed the phrase "woman writer" as political because it was not used descriptively (Walden, 2–3 ["The World of Cynthia Ozick: An Introduction." *Studies in American Jewish Literature* (1981–), no. 6 (Fall 1987): 1–4]). Further, even if "total equality" (pay parity, equal numbers in editorial positions, etc.) could be achieved, women will still have a different *social* history and, therefore, a particular interpretive lens, so this kind of anthology might always be relevant. Yet, the idea of

the essentialism of women's writing has been debated for centuries. So, a second question the reader might ask is: Can we identify a woman's voice or a woman's perspective? To answer this, we might look at the ways in which women bring both a political and cultural perspective to content. This is particularly evident in Joyce Wadler's "My Breast." Thus, given that this anthology includes a range of story genres, it would benefit from being grounded in theoretical issues of gender representation for use in academic settings.

This anthology would be suited to classes in literary journalism, feature writing, or even advanced reporting, for, among other virtues, its authors' adept use of descriptive language, deft handling of quotes, and application of personal narrative. It will also be of interest to those interested in the role women have taken in magazine writing.

Hemingway through the Trauma Lens

Hemingway's Wars: Public and Private Battles

by Linda Wagner-Martin. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2017. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Hardcover, 250 pp., USD\$38.

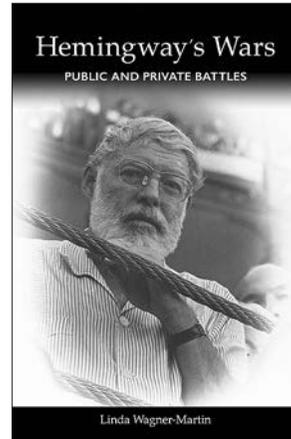
Reviewed by Doug Underwood, University of Washington, United States

Sometimes the best way to learn more about a famous writer is to focus on a framework—an angle—and explore it so deeply that it yields new insights. Sometimes this happens when an old and well-examined framework—such as Ernest Hemingway's war experiences and how his wounding contributed to his life story and his writings—is explored anew, and a fresh portrait emerges. Such is the case with Linda Wagner-Martin's *Hemingway's Wars: Public and Private Battles*, in which the impact of Hemingway's war injury and rehabilitation—once called by Hemingway scholars the “wound theory”—is reexamined within the context of contemporary trauma studies and what is now known about the way trauma's symptoms can seep into every aspect of a writer's life.

The book is a biography of sorts, but it is mostly an exploration of Hemingway's writing philosophy in the context of his many traumas—within his family upbringing and his marriages, in his response to his father's suicide, but mostly in his history of war reporting and his suffering of a terrible mortar shell wounding during his work as an ambulance driver on the Italian front during World War I. The book also draws upon—and then attempts to move beyond—the many scholarly writings and studies that have examined the impact of war and its consequences for Hemingway's troubled psyche, including his alcoholism, his books obsessed with war as a theme, his own eventual suicide, as well as his fame for both denying the deeper emotional impact upon him of his war experiences and trading upon them in his posturing as one of American literature's greatest “man's man.”

Trauma leaks out of Hemingway's novels and stories in many places, and Wagner-Martin chronicles this thoroughly by closely examining some of his most celebrated writings with war as a theme or sub-theme and exploring the many scholarly analyses of these works: the novels *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, *Across the River and into the Trees*, and short stories such as “Soldier's Home,” “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” and “Hills Like White Elephants.” Hemingway has long invited psychological examinations of his writings and even more so, his celebrity profile with its grandiose self-mythologizing and its tragic undercurrents.

Wagner-Martin's approach is to lay out her study within a biographical time-



line of Hemingway's life and then dip regularly into the places where trauma and emotional suffering can best be seen as manifested in his life and art. In this sense, the book seems to zigzag through chronology, textual evidence in Hemingway's own works or his quotations, and what scholars have made of his trauma chronicles. When there are differences of opinions (and there are), Wagner-Martin tends to quote people on both sides of the issue, but frequently adds her own viewpoint. As the former president of the Ernest Hemingway Foundation and Society, she has a tendency to present Hemingway in as worshipful a manner as he often presented himself, but she moderates this with clear-eyed insights and critical analysis of the ways Hemingway was unable to acknowledge how deeply he was wounded as a person (and thus less forthcoming as a writer). She includes with this the comments of scholars who do not accept Hemingway's way of interpreting his own life, his suffering, and his skills as a novelist.

For example, her critique of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is highly admiring and generally accepting of Hemingway's heroically self-sacrificial and spiritual approach to fictionalizing the combat he witnessed as an observer of the Spanish Civil War. But this chapter is followed by a discussion of his role in World War II, where he underwent harrowing and life-threatening experiences during his frontline reporting in Europe (as well as sometimes moving into a combat role himself). Drawing on the work of scholar James Meredith, Wagner-Martin notes that Hemingway had never “been trained” for combat, he “knew nothing about military discipline, or about surviving, or about injuring or killing other people” (Wagner-Martin, 151). She quoted Meredith, who had written, “Hemingway was traumatized not just by all the death and destruction he witnessed, but also by the fact that he became directly involved in the killing . . . Hemingway, the forty-six-year-old world-famous novelist, who had no business being there, *was* there,” and this haunted him “throughout the rest of his life” (Wagner-Martin, 151, quoting Meredith, 408 [“War: World War II,” in *Ernest Hemingway in Context*, edited by Debra A. Modellmog and Suzanne del Gizzo, 402–8. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013]).

Wagner-Martin's takeaway from this is that in the larger sense, Hemingway never really tried to write his great novel about World War II—it was too complex and difficult for him. The postures he had taken in his earlier writing about war felt false to him, his understanding of self-sacrifice too limited. “He was not the ‘scholar of war’ that he pretended to be,” she writes. Hemingway could not write—in his term—“truly” about war in his fiction or in his *Collier's* essays about World War II, she said, where he “dodged the facts of conflict, and he wrote about situations oblique to the real” (Wagner-Martin, 158). Published in 1950, *Across the River and into the Trees*—although its lack of critical success frustrated Hemingway—was effective, Wagner-Martin concludes, in its recounting of World War I brutalities through the memories of an old colonel, Richard Cantwell. But she seems less confident that in writing about these “combat dreams,” Hemingway resolved his post-World War II ambivalence about warfare or his loss of faith that he knew how to directly approach the subject anymore. This was what led some scholars to conclude that he turned for the rest of his writing career to stories about “the majesty of the sea, the marlin and

sharks, the non-manmade skirmishes that could be read metaphorically as well as literarily" (157).

In referring to Hemingway's new approach to writing, Wagner-Martin is largely talking about *The Old Man and the Sea*, which won the Nobel Prize. Hemingway was often at his best when he immersed himself in other cultures. There he could tap into the dignity and spiritual depths of foreign peoples, whether it was the fictional Spanish bullfighter, Pedro Romero, in *The Sun Also Rises*; or the communist soldier, Anselmo, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; or Santiago, the old Cuban fisherman, in his iconic contest with his mythical marlin. However, Hemingway's presentation of death and trauma can take on such elevated meaning in his fictional portrayals of non-Anglo cultures that he has been accused of fetishizing trauma as part of his romanticizing of people he believes live more authentically than U.S. Americans and Brits. This becomes clear in one of his best-known pieces of literary journalism, *Green Hills of Africa*, where, in his real-life chronicle, he comes across as treating the locals like a white bwana and where his only interest in the animals is in shooting them. After the writing of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway became mostly a broken man, suffering from alcoholic psychosis, displaying celebrity hauteur in his feuds with and comments about other writers, and "slops" over into posturing and sentimentalism when he abandoned the hard, objective style of his youthful works (Wilson, 404 ["Hemingway: Gauge of Morale," in *The Portable Edmund Wilson*, 403–7, New York: Viking, 1983]).

Psychoanalyzing Hemingway and his writings has long been a favorite pastime of critics, and refining this to the study of trauma in his art and life seems a natural extension of this endeavor. In a writer who mixed emotional denial with grandiose posing, self-mythologizing with delicate subtextual references to his suffering, and macho and sharp-edged objective journalistic style with allusions to the pain and weakness that he signaled could be found by reading between the lines, Hemingway prodded his fellow ex-patriot writer and erstwhile friend, Gertrude Stein, to say that she wished he "would give up [the] show-off soldiering" and the "phoney [*sic*] grace under pressure" (Wagner-Martin, 44, quoting Alix Du Poy Daniel, 17 ["The Stimulating Life with Gertrude & Co.," *Lost Generation Journal* 6, no. 1 (Summer 1979): 16–18]) if he wanted to fully realize his talents. In this, it is tempting to conclude that at least some of Hemingway's appeal is the satisfaction gained in allowing ourselves to act as if we know so much more about Hemingway than he acknowledged about himself—and to discount the real pain that trauma inflicted in his life. At the same time, his denial and lack of insight into his own life—combined with his substitution of confident external narrative for deep introspection into his anguish and insecurities—have left him a persistent mystery for the many readers who have found wisdom within his obviously fragile nature and strength in the hurt that he could only faintly acknowledge.

Wagner-Martin's effort to turn these insights into a direct and comprehensive examination of trauma, with all the clinical and diagnostic elements that now go with it, might have seemed too blunt a force for Hemingway himself, but it is effective in an age where we are now encouraged to confess to our emotional weaknesses

and find the signs of psychological crisis in our efforts to hide them. Sometimes Wagner-Martin's oscillating route—in some pages quoting people as if Hemingway were a battlefield genius, in other places talking about how little he really knew about war—suggests a synthesis of these contradictions that is not always in her analysis. The biographical sections and connecting material can sometimes be less than satisfying for those interested in a writer who has had so many biographies written about him. But the continued weaving of this biographical and textual material into what we now know about how trauma can work within a great writer holds the book together and effectively so. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway deals with trauma only obliquely; in *A Farewell to Arms*, sentimentally; in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, mystically and heroically. But throughout Wagner-Martin's work, the symptoms of war trauma in his protagonists, Jake Barnes, Frederic Henry, and Robert Jordan, are manifested in ways that convincingly expand our understanding of the connection between trauma and literature.

In my view, Hemingway does denial the best—both in his evading of the full impact of trauma in his life and in the way he imports the technique into his literary characters. His direct observations of and philosophizing about war, and the noble pain and courageous stoicism that he finds in it (particularly in his later writings), often do not feel persuasive or true to real human experience. As he aged, Hemingway became obsessed that he had lost the genuine touch of his youthful writing. It is an irony that as he accumulated more battlefield experience—particularly in World War II—he lost the ability to convey the effects of war in as artful or resonant a fashion as he had once done. In his early reading, Hemingway was greatly influenced by Stephen Crane and Rudyard Kipling—two writers who made their youthful reputations, in part, by writing about war without having seen much of it. Hemingway got much literary mileage in his early career from his mortar shell wound while delivering candy to the frontline troops. But like Crane, whose literary prowess declined as he sought more opportunities to see warfare up close, Hemingway lost much of his writing edge when he grew determined to immerse himself in the consequences of combat. And yet, clearly it was the long-term effects that commonly plague those struggling with traumatic memory—drinking to excess, night sweats and troubled sleep, anxiety, depression, and restlessness, and suicidal thoughts and psychological instability—that contributed to Hemingway's demise.

Perhaps it is hard to write an integrated book about trauma's effects in an author who never fully integrated the impact of his own trauma on his own life. But in this thoughtful and well-researched book, Wagner-Martin succeeds, despite the sometimes scattershot combination of general biography with research into Hemingway's traumatized psyche, in producing a portrait of a life that was intertwined with trauma throughout and in filling in our understanding of its role in the career of one of our culture's most celebrated, so-called suffering artists.

Short, Sharp Canadian Literary Journalism

The Shoe Boy: A Trapline Memoir

by Duncan McCue. Vancouver: Nonvella Publishing, 2016. Paperback, 86 pp., CAD\$16.95.

Darwin's Moving

by Taylor Lambert. Edmonton: NeWest Press, 2017. Paperback, 145 pp., CAD\$19.95.

Reviewed by Brian Gabriel, Concordia University, Canada

Looking for some Canadian literary journalism (eh)? Duncan McCue's *The Shoe Boy: A Trapline Memoir* and Taylor Lambert's *Darwin's Moving* might be worth a read. While *The Shoe Boy* captures an adolescent's disconnect from his surroundings and from himself, *Darwin's Moving* is about adults disconnected for whatever reasons (and there are many) from social norms and behaviors that most people understand. Lambert looks outward for his story, whereas McCue looks inward.

At seventeen, McCue, now a CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) reporter and anchor, spent five months working a trapline in East James Bay, Québec, learning from a Cree elder named Robbie Matthew Sr. about what it means to be an Indian. The experience—really a gift from his father—“promised deliverance from the self-doubts that nagged me, even if I did worry about not having a clue what I was going to be doing out there” (McCue, 19). The teenager quickly experiences greater self-doubt, realizing that only three things matter in the wild: “food, shelter, and fire” (29). He is a terrible hunter, living among people who put “good hunters” on the top. “No question: I am on the bottom” (50), McCue writes. In all, he feels like a “pretty lousy Indian” (64), who tires “of daily reminders of my inadequacies” (61). At one point, the young man contemplates suicide before being saved by a little gray bird landing in a nearby tree. The rustling noise breaks McCue's sad reverie.

Adding to his alienation is his lineage: “I was an Ojibwe kid who went from being the only Indian in my elementary school to a high school where the kids called me *waamishtikushiu* (“white man”) because I didn't speak Cree” (11). He is an outsider. Even Matthew calls the boy “Mis-ah Duncan” and refers to him



as “Shoe Boy,” a somewhat derogatory term for Indian children ripped from their families and forced to attend residential schools run by white people (50).

Still, Matthew's teaching—“He rarely instructs me, or even corrects me” (67)—pays off because the boy transforms into an adult under Matthew's patient, subtle guidance. McCue eventually leaves the trapline and his Cree family. “You should have been a Cree” (78), they finally tell him. But McCue knows better: “I was never going to become a wise and successful hunter of bears and geese, caribou and beaver . . . I would always be the shoe boy” (83). McCue loses contact with them until one day a Facebook friend request from Bruce Matthew, Robbie's son, appears. That his ties to the Matthew family transcended time is mirrored in McCue's dedicating this memoir to his biological mother *and* his Cree mother, Sally.

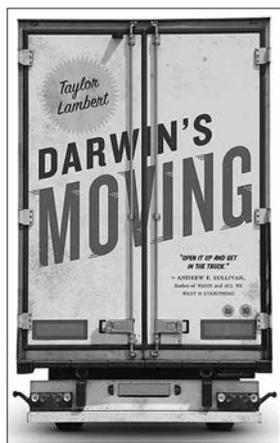
At the outset of *Darwin's Moving*, former *Calgary Herald* reporter Taylor Lambert tells the reader, “Journalists are generally advised that writing about close acquaintances is full of pitfalls” (Lambert, x). Lambert ignores that advice by presenting a study of class, of haves and have-nots, and of savory and not-so-savory characters, who enter strangers' homes and move them from one place to another.

Lambert met Darwin, of *Darwin's Moving*, when Lambert, then a university student, needed a summer job. He stuck around the job to support his later freelance journalism career. Lambert comes to this ten-year-long immersive journalistic project organically. His intent is not to expose wrongdoing but to tell readers about the flawed souls hired to care, if briefly, for a family's most precious possessions. Thus, *Darwin's Moving*, Lambert's fourth book of nonfiction, is populated with characters who have few emotional tools to succeed in a complicated world. As Lambert earns their trust, they willingly share the “emotional, difficult, shadowed parts of their lives” (x) with him. In kind, Lambert reveals their professionalism and humanity.

Taylor, like McCue, shares an initial sense of alienation with coworkers he calls “the flip side of the boom coin” (32). He states, “I did not come from this class [of people] . . . we came from different *places*. . . they grew up poor and I did not.” Lambert, like McCue, learns about himself as watches these men. “Moving furniture taught me more about humanity and about my own shortcomings,” he observes, “than I could have ever imagined” (31–32).

Except for Darwin, a “giant of a man” (28) with “high standards he holds his workers to” (ix), the movers Lambert describes are not nice people, but they like him. “I can't imagine what I would have to do for them to want to harm me as they have harmed others,” he writes (103). Jesse, for example, can keep his “drinking and drug habits . . . under a self-imposed check” until he can't (90). Keith, horribly abused as a child, “looks like he'd rob you, then cut you anyway, just for fun” (104). Lambert once asked Keith what he would be had his life been different: A cop, he answers, “Because I could have helped people” (145). Yet, these near sociopaths fool most customers with their charming glibness as they tote housefuls of belongings from one expensive home to another. Darwin, their boss, understands them because, if not for a few lucky breaks, he could be them.

Both Lambert and McCue are journalists, and their prose shows that training. McCue's *The Shoe Boy* is written with a television reporter's acuity with short, sharp,



clear sentences. Lambert devotes more space to each of his descriptions. Both men do their reporting, too, with each book containing rich veins of information. While Lambert's journalistic focus is Calgary and its sprawling housing developments, McCue targets hydroelectric projects that destroyed traditional Indigenous hunting lands, suicide among aboriginal youth, and even roads that opened the Canadian north to tourism.

At the end of *The Shoe Boy*, when McCue reconnects with his Cree family, he remembers the lessons of living along the trapline and realizes he did, in fact, become a hunter, "a hunter of stories" (McCue, 84). It is a vocation that he and Lambert share. In a lovely coda, McCue writes, "I sing to the stories, asking them to come to me, to feed me, to nourish my family and my people" (84). *The Shoe Boy* and *Darwin's Moving* offer good fare for anyone wanting to taste some Canadian literary journalism.

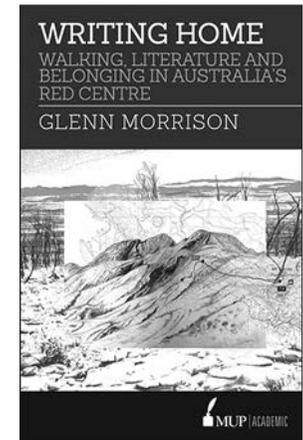
Literary Journalism's Walkabout

Writing Home: Walking, Literature and Belonging in Australia's Red Centre
by Glenn Morrison. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2017. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Paperback, 326 pp., AUD\$49.99.

Reviewed by Fiona Giles, University of Sydney, Australia

Glenn Morrison's ambitious analysis of the ways in which Australian writers have constructed the central region of the world's largest island and smallest continent—their country—is a welcome addition to a much neglected area of Australian studies, as well as literary journalism scholarship. In addition to filling a gap in the research, the work balances an exploration of the role of walking in narrative, together with a sense of home, nation, and the relationship of settler to Indigenous culture. The discussion of these elements is conducted through the lenses of six narrative nonfiction works or bodies of literature: "A Man from the Dreamtime" (Thompson 2003, 20–37), as told to anthropologist Myfany Turpin by Keytetye elder Tommy Kngwarraye Thompson (In *Growing Up Kaytetye: Stories by Tommye Kngwarraye Thompson*, edited by Myfany Turpin, Alice Springs: Jukurrpa Books); the explorer John McDouall Stuart's account of his journey from the south to the north of the continent in 1860 (Stuart 1860/1983 [*Fourth Expedition Journal, March to September 1860*. Adelaide: Sullivan's Cove]); the memoir *Journey to Horseshoe Bend* by anthropologist T. G. H. Strehlow about his childhood journey down the Finke River in 1922 (Strehlow 1969 [Adelaide: Rigby]; *I Saw a Strange Land* by conservationist Arthur Groom, which constructs the Red Centre as what can be called a "tourist playground" (Morrison 1950, xix [Groom, New York: Viking]) in an untainted wilderness Bruce Chatwin's best-selling travel narrative *The Songlines* (Chatwin 1987 [New York: Viking]), which represents the first serious attempt to explain the complex and spiritually significant tracings of Indigenous journeys across the continent; and Eleanor Hogan's memoir-based *Alice Springs* (Hogan 2012 [Sydney: UNSW Press]), which reasserts the town as an "Aboriginal problem" in more reductive socioeconomic terms. These are not all, strictly speaking, literary journalism, encompassing sometimes more expositional forms as well as narrative accounts, and including the semi-fictionalized work of Chatwin.

Nevertheless, a close reading of the selected texts provides key insights into the way Central Australia has been constructed by an Australian population that lives primarily on the coastal fringes, paradoxically both revering and disparaging its complex and, to many, elusive meanings. That is, while considered by many to provide a



more “authentic” Australia than the cities and urban sprawl, those who live there are considered “outsiders” (Morrison, 31). As Morrison writes, “This regional struggle for cultural equilibrium echoes a broader settler Australian struggle to belong, which since the 1990s has emerged as a matter of deepest concern to some Australians” (31). The texts also have in common their attention to the journey, primarily through walking, which Morrison captures in a quote from Robert Spencer’s literary textual analysis of Palestinian writer Raja Shehadeh’s *Palestinian Walks: Forays into a Vanishing Landscape*—“each meandering walk [enabled him] to amble no less circuitously around received ideas about the region in order to peruse them from an alternative point of view” (Morrison, 43, from Spencer 2010, 40 [“Ecocriticism in the Colonial Present: The Politics of Dwelling in Raja Shehadeh’s *Palestinian Walks: Notes on a Vanishing Landscape*.” *Postcolonial Studies* 13, no. 1 (March 2010): 33–54]; Shehadeh 2008 [New York: Scribner]). Or, more pithily, in referring to the Romantic poets as well as Thoreau and Baudelaire (among others), Morrison writes, “It is important to remember that ideas of home, nation and, consequently, belonging or frontier, can all be explored on a walk” (Morrison, 43).

The crux of Morrison’s thesis is to provide a critique of the way in which many dominant Australian historical and geopolitical texts have constructed the Red Centre as a frontier, with all that implies regarding lawlessness, and the impermeable borderlines between civilized and uncivilized, law-abiding and lawless, culture and nature, among other hierarchical binaries. The close readings show how the different works echo, trouble, or deconstruct this frontier imaginary, providing varied understandings of the place, and more or less sympathetic representations of its Indigenous cultures. Morrison sees the persistence of the frontier mentality as “a failure of the Australian imagination” that divides ideas of belonging from a frontier perspective, “one that hampers the capacity of non-Indigenous Australians to reimagine the Centre as home” (32). His book provides a more nuanced, accurate and intriguing alternative based on the works of those who report from the stance of an intimate and embodied engagement with the land.

The chapters focusing on the texts are preceded by theoretical accounts of the meaning of frontier, of home, of nation and belonging, together with a useful history of philosophy concerning space and place. Incorporating the ideas of Relph and Marx, Morrison distinguishes between a humanist lineage concerned with a sense of place and the spaces of production, in turn corresponding to the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger’s concept of dwelling through “being-in-the-world” and “a Marxist apprehension of space [in which] both space and place are socially produced and consumed” (16) work provides a lucid and illuminating guide to a maze of difficult theory, providing a useful grounding for the textual analyses to follow.

Morrison’s suggested re-imagining of the frontier as home is based on the idea of a palimpsest, rather than a single or unitary concept, so that the “links to nation that emerge among and between the texts . . . [the palimpsest] speaks to an Australian ecopoetics” (258) that remains open and shifting. Detouring between both phenomenological and Marxist understandings of the land encountered via the journey

enables him to build what he calls an “epistemological bridge” and “negotiate historically competing understandings” (259). He cautions, though, that walking through a landscape of itself (and writing of that walk) does not guarantee “an inclusive or even moral narrative” (259). This is important in avoiding an essentializing or idealization of walking practice, yet the implication is that walking is a necessary, if not always sufficient, part of the process.

Without making grand claims to any (or even all) texts replacing the idea of frontier with that of home, Morrison’s work makes an impressive contribution to a more measured understanding of their relationship, and possibilities for a constructive mutuality emerging from that entanglement; or as he prefers to write, its “layering” (260). Hybridity is also a metaphor that Morrison adopts, allowing that this, together with ambiguity, forms a useful and truer basis for an Australian sense of self.

Spirit, Land, and Contemplation

Native Echoes: Listening to the Spirit of the Land

by Kent Nerburn. St. Louis Park, MN: Wolf nor Dog Books, 2017. Paperback, 142 pp., USD\$18.95.

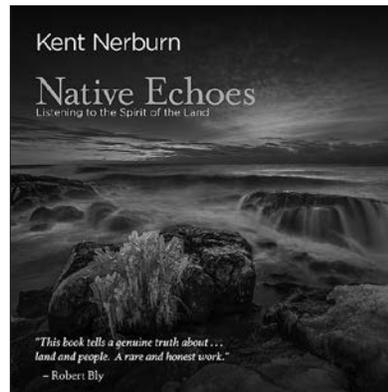
Reviewed by Nancy L. Roberts, State University of New York at Albany, United States

This quiet, contemplative work offers profound insights about “the power of the great natural forces that surround us and shape our hearts and spirits” (Nerburn, Author’s Preface). Kent Nerburn, who has lived and worked among Native American peoples in his northern Minnesota home, bridges Native and non-Native (Judeo-Christian) cultures in eloquent prose that invites comparison to Anne Lamott and Annie Dillard.

In a new preface to this edition (earlier published in large part as *A Haunting Reverence* by New World Library, 1996, and University of Minnesota Press, 1999), Nerburn explains that he sought “to meld the richness and insight of our western spiritual tradition with the Native heartbeat of our American land—a search, if you will, for an authentic American spirituality” (Author’s Preface). His literary journey takes him across a varied terrain, from a young Indian boy’s funeral by “a northern lake on a windswept point of land” (7), to a buffalo ranch where he encounters a mysterious bull that trails him, staring with “dark, flat eyes” (75), to a farmhouse, “abandoned, swaybacked, empty,” where the wind “is filled with banshee howls, screams, and distant laughter” (93).

The book is divided into twenty-five short chapters, organized into six groupings: Whisperings, Wanderings, Solitudes, Darkenings, Awakenings, and Solaces. Nerburn explains that he wrote the book “during the coldest winter in recent memory” (Author’s Preface), and he fully evokes that season in a piece entitled “Winterwatch” (57–59), in the Solitudes section: “We know it is coming. We can see it in the animals’ eyes. The sky is too cold; the wind, too raw. Leaden clouds loom heavy on the horizon. Darkness grows stronger than light.” From the northwest, he perceives “a sound there, beneath hearing, like the distant rhythm of an approaching army. In its cadence is the heavy breath of winter” (57). In another piece he describes freshly fallen snow as “a prayer shawl donned upon the land” (61).

And, elsewhere, “If you would live in winter, you must give yourself to blue” (65). Because, he explains:



The blue-hued snow betrays its water source within. . . . Even the wind blows blue—cool, edgy, soothing and serene. And above it all a cobalt sky vaults insurmountable in cloudless brilliance, casting shadows long and lavender across the land. It is the palette of a genius painter, this winter day; a Chinese watercolor, but with edges sharp and cutting as a knife. (65)

In the “Legacy” chapter (part of Solaces), Nerburn characterizes an old pine tree as “virtuous, unwavering, singular in his devotion to the sky,” with “a growing weariness within him” (133). No longer do children “play beneath his branches. He is too dark; his needles are too sharp. . . . They run to him only when sticks are needed for a fire. His dead limbs snap like fingers, burst quickly into flame” (133–34). But Nerburn refuses to cut down the “old brittle” tree that, a neighbor warns, could fall on his house. The tree brings to mind the spirit of his father, who in old age once sat underneath this very tree.

Nerburn is a keen observer of these powerful natural forces all around us. One night in a blinding snowstorm on a remote road, he picks up an old man who needs a ride to the Indian reservation some twenty miles further. Yet he finds he is more alone than ever because of the man’s unnerving silence: “His eyes are avian, seeing far and minute, looking for a single movement or a hint of meaning in the violent storm that rages around us” (86).

Born and raised near Minneapolis, Nerburn earned a bachelor’s degree (summa cum laude) in American studies from the University of Minnesota and Ph.D. in religious studies and art at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley in conjunction with the University of California, Berkeley.

His website explains that for many years he created over-life-sized sculptures from tree trunks and lived in Europe where he could study the works of his “heroes, Michelangelo, Donatello, and Rodin” (Nerburn, kentnerburn.com/kent-nerburn/about/). When he returned to Minnesota, he lived in the pine and lake country near the Canadian border and worked for several years on the Red Lake Ojibwe reservation. His job “helping students collect the memories of the tribal elders” (Nerburn, “About”) was transforming, as it introduced him to Native American spiritual traditions that he has long found compelling. He writes:

My work has been a constant search, from various perspectives, for an authentic American spirituality, integrating our western Judeo-Christian tradition with the other traditions of the world, and especially the indigenous spirituality of the people who first inhabited this continent. Someone once called me a “guerilla theologian,” and I think that is fairly accurate. I am deeply concerned with the human condition and our responsibility to the earth, the people on it, and the generations to come. I believe that we are, at heart, spiritual beings seeking spiritual meaning, and I try to honor this search wherever I discover it in the course of my daily life. (Nerburn, “About”)

Nerburn turned from sculpting to writing about twenty years ago because he felt it would let him reach more people. Since then he has written seventeen books on spiritual values and Native American subjects. They include a trilogy of spiritual essays: *Simple Truths*; *Small Graces*; and *The Hidden Beauty of Everyday Life* (recently

reissued as *Ordinary Sacred*); and *Make Me an Instrument of Your Peace*; and *Road Angels: Searching for Home on America's Coast of Dreams*. He has also written *Letters to My Son* (essays); *Neither Wolf nor Dog: On Forgotten Roads with an Indian Elder*, which won the Minnesota Book award for creative nonfiction in 1995; and *The Wolf at Twilight: An Indian Elder's Journey through a Land of Ghosts and Shadows*, which won the same award in 2009.

Native Echoes is an excellent introduction to the work of this gifted writer. Nerburn's prose offers masterful sensory description and metaphor that, with his thoughtful reflections on the natural forces that shape us, make his work a compelling addition to the canon of literary nonfiction.

Full Immersion in Syria's Little Baghdad

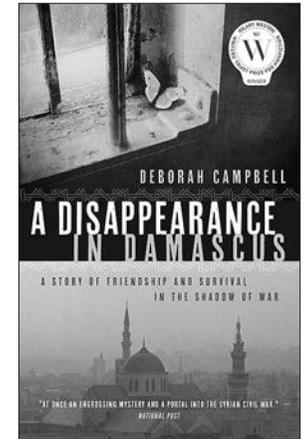
A Disappearance in Damascus: Friendship and Survival in the Shadow of War by Deborah Campbell. New York: Picador, 2016. Notes. Bibliography. Paperback, 2018. Hardcover, 342 pp., USD\$27.

Reviewed by Bill Reynolds, Ryerson University, Canada

Deborah Campbell's latest book, *A Disappearance in Damascus*, focuses on the urgent domino story of our time, the second Iraq invasion and its concatenation: the inevitable Iraqi refugee crisis, the spawning of ISIS, the Syrian civil war, and the ensuing Syrian refugee calamity. In her career as a literary journalist, the Vancouver-based Campbell has among other endeavors spent months on the ground to find out for herself what was going on among regular Israeli, and written a book about it, *This Heated Place* (2002); in Iran, stretched her stay as a freelancer to six months to get past the usual caricatures to understand how real people live their lives in- and outside of Tehran, and filed her story, "Iran's Quiet Revolution," to *The Walrus* magazine in Canada (2006); and followed that magazine feature with an extended stay in Damascus to find out how ordinary Iraqis were coping with being forced out of their homeland, and filing "Exodus" to *Harper's* magazine (2008). That latter story has been expanded here to book length because she had an additional, personal story to tell. Ahlam, the woman who became her fixer and eventually her confidante and friend, disappeared. After coming home to Canada following her first extended stay, Campbell returned to Damascus to try to find Ahlam. This second sojourn especially tested her assumptions about the city, the surveillance state, and, indeed, the nature of immersion methodology.

Campbell tells her story with a sharp journalistic eye, but also, because of the flourishing bond between the journalist writing about the Iraqi diaspora in Syria and the fixer based in Damascus, an emotional edge. Perhaps the most pertinent aspects of the story, from the literary journalism point of view, are the recurring ruminations on immersion methodology.

About fifty pages into the book, Campbell provides a summary. She says the Syrian civil war was not sectarian but rather a class war between relatively prosperous city people and the farming families fleeing drought-stricken lands and flocking to the city in search of work. When the Arab Spring erupted, in spring 2011, and the government fired on protestors, Saudi Arabia capitalized on the chaos by attacking Syria, the ally of its enemy, Iran. Only then did the uprising become sectarian, as proxy war jihadists—caring nothing for Syria itself or any struggle for democracy—piled into



Syria from Turkey to rain grief on the people (48–49).

Campbell is able to conjure images quickly through description. On the departing Iraqi professional class, she writes: “Some looked dressed for the office, women in high heels and oversized sunglasses, men in pleated dress pants and button-down shirts, as if they’d walked out of work, grabbed the kids and the cash, and just left” (6). When she visits the family of a former Iraqi intelligence officer, whose farmhouse was shelled by RPGs (rocket-propelled grenades), she finds anguish and horror. The officer’s wife was paralyzed, his youngest daughter was burned, his oldest daughter was killed, his eldest son was tortured afterward, and now they are stuck in Syria. When Campbell suggests to her fixer that the facially disfigured nine-year-old daughter, despite being tormented by classmates, should be in school, learning, the reply is chilling: “‘She will marry a man who beats her and have children who can’t read.’” (58). This level of fatalism is also on display in Campbell’s description of Little Baghdad, the somewhat medieval looking suburb a of low-rise tenements in Damascus: “Farther along were the gold shops where Iraqi widows performed alchemy, turning their jewellery into bread; some did the same with their bodies once the gold was gone” (30).

On post-invasion Baghdad, Campbell supplies this indelible image:

One day, on a street corner, they came across a magnificent white stallion. The stables of Uday Hussein had been looted, and this stunning creature had been hitched to an impoverished street vendor’s rickety cart. Spooked by gunfire, the horse bolted, launching itself into a barrier of razor wire the Americans had set up. The soldiers scrambled for a forklift while a crowd of Iraqis watched the horse bleed to death on the sidewalk. (114–15)

On the impending destruction of Damascus, she writes of Souk al-Hamidiyeh, the bazaar in the Old City:

. . . I needed the souk: a dim and cavernous tunnel where I could dissolve into the cosmopolitan stew of nationalities and religions. Greek Orthodox priests in flowing robes striding past women in jeans and men in business suits; white headscarves, no headscarves, nuns in habits, kids in school uniforms, tourists in shorts . . . this age-old tradition of pluralism would shortly disappear, adding millions of Syrians to the millions of Iraqis seeking refuge in the outside world.” (189–90)

Back in Iraq, she pinpoints the imbecility of al-Qaeda aggression against farmers: “‘They’ve started hanging cloth over the animals’ backsides. Cows, donkeys, sheep. Only the chickens are exempt because they can’t tell male from female.’” If that is a new first in egregious illogic, it is bested by the correct way to sell tomatoes (female) and cucumbers (male), which is to say, not side by side in the marketplace, and not served together in salads. Tomatoes mingling with cucumbers—things might get hot (52).

As for the U.S. presence, Campbell’s summation of Paul Bremer’s Coalition Provisional Authority’s Order Number One, de-Baathification, which banned Sadaam Hussein’s party members from working in the post-invasion society, is succinct: It “effectively lobotomized the country” (54).

And, finally, among the many pithy observations, is her assessment of the U.S.’s

culpability in creating the incubator for Daesh: “Indeed, without the American prisons in Iraq, Islamic State would not exist” (122). In other words, the Camp Bucca detention facility in Um Qasr, about an hour’s drive south of Basrah, brought jihadists together and supplied them with impressionable recruits.

Campbell readily admits she “hate[s] reporting in packs” (7). She has always been a freelancer and, after a couple of decades in the business, has become crusty and protective of her independence. She identifies with her fixer because “neither of us liked being told what to do . . . , a mentality that is characteristic of freelancers who prefer to go their own way, follow their own stories, which is to say their own minds” (82).

Just her luck, at the border post she inadvertently lands in just this pack situation. She arrives at the same time as “the cavalry,” a U.S. TV news team (6). Based in Jerusalem, which the cameraman calls “Dixie” (his crew’s code word for the “Zionist entity”), he has two admissions (7). One, they are not interested in the refugees and the crisis; they want dirt on the Iraqi terrorists that might be hidden among the refugees and staging their activities from Syria (10). That is the story that will play back home. And two, he goes back into Iraq to report only to justify his paycheck. The network ensures its reporting teams are heavily guarded—rightly so, since so many journalists have been killed. Campbell cannot help but point out: “This was good for the staff but bad for journalism” (7).

At the border Campbell explains that she is working on a story for *Harper’s* about Iraqi refugees fleeing their disaster of a country—a story about civilians, not military personnel or government officials. In so doing she tells us a little bit about her method: “While most reporting focuses on those who ‘make history,’ what interests me more are the ordinary people who have to live it” (9). What was it that Norman Sims said in his introduction to *True Stories* (2007)? “Among the shared characteristics of literary journalism [is] . . . a focus on ordinary people . . .” (6). In so doing Campbell points out that she has come to Syria on a typical tourist visa, not a working journalist visa. There is a good reason for that: “To request an official journalist’s visa is to advertise your intentions to those whose job it is to get in your way” (13). Of course, this style of reporting can make a mockery of Gay Talese’s famous “hanging out” method. Sometimes, she says, hanging out feels more like “drowning journalism” or “thrashing around journalism” (20). Not that this ironic feeling of futility stops her. She believes, perhaps fearlessly, perhaps foolishly, it is her right to ask questions and follow the trail she sets out for herself. She says, “I have found this in journalism too: that if you believe you have the right to be somewhere, or talk to anyone no matter how powerful or barricaded, nobody blinks” (132).

As she settles in Little Baghdad, Damascus, and the immersion process naturally takes over, Campbell becomes somewhat less worried about her alien appearance (white, blonde, six feet tall) and being observed. She even flirts with the idea that she is fading to fly-on-the-wall status: “I felt myself, slowly, become part of the background. Part of the scene, where I like to be. Not that I completely disappeared—that wasn’t possible” (147). While everyday people in Little Baghdad no longer shoot questioning glances her way, the fact of her comradeship with her fixer foils any truly objective fly-on-the-wall status.

Which is to say, the complexity of the journalist-source relation laid bare in the text is good for the sake of literary journalism. Yet doubt about her noble immersion project lingers. She believes she can and will write a more nuanced piece than the work of “parachute” journalists who drop from the sky and form near-instant opinions for the audience back home, and then bail. And it is true Campbell does spend an excruciating amount of time trying to understand what is happening around her, especially when Ahlam (which means “dreams”) is threatened by authorities and, ultimately, disappears. Despite the usual wariness when a journalist begins working with a recommended fixer—who could be a double agent, working for the government; and most of whom would need the money, so it would not come as a surprise—Campbell, with her goal of explaining the ordinary experience of displaced Iraqis, struggles with motivation. At one point, when questioned by a comrade about the effectiveness of her writing, she asks herself, “One article, a thousand articles, however in-depth and penetrating, what could they actually do beyond letting me say I had tried?” (25).

More than tried. If one of the time-tested devices of successful narrative is to find a lead character through which to tell the story, Campbell could not have done much better than her energetic, optimistic, indefatigable fixer. Ahlam’s father, Ahmed, was unusual, raising his daughter like a boy. That is to say, he taught her to depend on herself. He drilled into her precepts for living such as: begin and the rest will follow; if you are afraid do not speak, and if you speak do not be afraid; there is no difference between rich and poor; and there is no difference between Sunni and Shia. He orders Ahlam’s brothers to teach her how to swim (something girls did not do). He also looked the other way when she rebelled against traditional female housework, instead indulging her hunger for books and knowledge of other worlds beyond her own. “I’m a bad housewife,” she said in her apartment to Campbell, who noted the messy interior. “She sounded unapologetic. She sounded amused” (41).

Campbell then reveals a bit more about her method. Books are an important indicator of personality, she believes. She says:

Whenever I go to someone’s home and see books, I automatically start to flip through them, ignoring everything else, ignoring even the propriety of looking through someone’s belongings, the inner workings of their mind perhaps, their ideals or passions or pretensions. The books they read or wish you to think they read can tell you as much or more than can be gleaned in conversation. (41)

But her comfort zone for immersion reporting is often tested. For instance, in Damascus, a standard cultural practice turns a journalist’s ethical principle on its head. When a woman, who cannot afford to give personal objects away, offers her a bottle of perfume, Campbell feels she must accept the gift for the sake of not offending her. “I felt the awkwardness of taking their gifts, and then taking more: their stories, the accounting of what had been lost” (60). Campbell, perhaps inadvertently, raises the sketchy and ethically worrisome issue of immersion journalists getting something (the story) for nothing. In this case, the source not only receives nothing, but she also gives away her few possessions.

Campbell dwells on the cost of doing this kind of immersion work as empathy

for her fixer grows over time. There is a thematic layer in the book that twins Ahlam’s personal crises—breaking up with her husband and keeping track of her children—and the author’s deteriorating relationship with her longtime live-in boyfriend, who remains in Vancouver and suffers alone or through Skype conversations during her many trips abroad to immerse herself in long-form international political stories. When she returns to Damascus, not only the relationship but also her ruminations on method reach their nadir: “Tracking down people for information I needed was my profession, yet this time I had no idea where to start” (204). Ahlam’s disappearance occurs just over halfway through the book, and Campbell is implicated. At one point a journalist tells her “they” think she is a Mossad or CIA agent, and that is why Ahlam was taken away. Campbell wonders who “they” are (187).

There are a few quibbles with the “whodunit” structure. There is a section in the middle of the book that dwells on the author’s psychological state too much. The reader starts to wonder: *Is this book about the fixer or the author?* Well, it is about both, but in this section the writer’s anxieties are a bit too glaring. Another issue is that the rat in the story, that is, the identity of person who tells lies about Ahlam to the Syrian authorities, feels a little telegraphed, at least to this reviewer. And from some of the key phrases in the story—such as Ahlam’s father’s advice (and warning) to her daughter that while learning to swim in water is easy, learning to swim in life is difficult—the reader gets the feeling that he has not heard the last of this morsel. And, finally, a few scenes are static. When the most compelling action is the pouring of wine, it recalls the literary journalist’s nightmare scene location to meet a source—the coffee shop.

Despite these quibbles, and they are quibbles, Campbell takes us inside a confusing, incomprehensible, and sometimes terrifying world of toxic national identity and shifting alliances—a world of having something, maybe everything, and then losing it all, perhaps overnight. How people deal with this loss, for better or worse, is based on how much money they have or how many goods they can barter, and these “goods” may include their daughters’ bodies. Deep inside this world, peace and sociability and shopping in markets and sipping at coffee oases give way to a corrosive instinct for survival.

And there they are, hidden in plain sight: the secret police, the spies, and the turncoats, about to ransack your life—a life that, literally or effectively, may be over because someone with a grudge, or someone who perceived an opportunity, told authorities an outright lie about you, or perhaps it was an exaggeration of what was reality. It does not matter. You are in a jail cell, no one knows where you are, you are being interrogated and tortured, and, as for habeas corpus, what is that? If you happen to survive the ordeal be grateful to have escaped with only a little PTSD.