

2011

# THE MIND'S EYE

A Liberal Arts Journal

Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts



Poetry by

Jeffrey McRae

Akili Carter

Fiction by

Laura Stevenson

Ted Gilley

L. C. Smith and the Color of Snakes

by Ben Jacques

Living and Learning in Rwanda

By Adrienne Wootters

Book Review Essay

By Ely Janis

Gender, Race and the Antilynching Crusade in the United States

By Frances Jones-Sneed

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# THE MIND'S EYE

2011

**In This Issue**.....4

## **Poetry**

Pinocchio

Wedding Band

Symbols

By Jeffrey McRae.....5

Imagine

By Akili Carter.....10

## **Fiction**

Liar from Vermont

By Laura Stevenson.....11

Smoke

By Ted Gilley.....26

## **L. C. Smith and the Color of Snakes**

By Ben Jacques.....33

## **Living and Learning in Rwanda**

By Adrienne Wootters.....36

## **Book Review Essay**

By Ely Janis.....53

## **Gender, Race and the Antilynching Crusade in the United States**

By Frances Jones-Sneed.....59

**Contributors**.....74

## In This Issue

“A discerning mind, one that blends science and Springsteen, is the backbone of the creative spirit. . . .”

—Stephen Joel Trachtenberg

In this 2011 issue of *The Mind's Eye*, we offer readers an eclectic view of the liberal-arts mind at work. While some are worried about the prospects of unemployment during these times of tight budgets and few opportunities, we continue to highlight the life of the mind, because it is the only thing that will save us from ourselves.

We highlight poetry by Jeffrey McRae on three familiar subjects that play with a crisp nuance of words and symbols. Akili Carter, an alumnus of MCLA who played basketball and double-majored in English and history, still writes poetry and imagines himself out of the pigeonhole definition of what a black man is in America today.

The short fiction by Laura Stevenson, “Liar from Vermont,” gives us a view of the mind of a seven-year-old growing up in an accomplished family, while Ted Gilley’s “Smoke” gives us a glimpse of the life of a teenage boy coming to terms with difference and Ben Jacques’s piece, “L .C. Smith and the Color of Snakes,” shares with us a bird’s-eye view of a writer’s life. We also feature an essay by Adrienne Wootters on her teaching experiences in Rwanda while on sabbatical last year on a Fulbright Fellowship with her husband Bill.

Ely Janis writes a book review essay on Erika Lee and Judy Yung’s *Angel Island: “Immigrant Gateway to America”*, which brings to light the often forgotten westward entry of more than a half million immigrants through the Angel Island immigration station off the coast of San Francisco from 1910 to 1940. Finally, Frances Jones-Sneed, the 2010 Faculty Lecture Award winner, discusses black women’s roles in the antilynching movement in an essay titled “Gender, Race and the Antilynching Crusade in the United States.” From poetry to nonfiction, we offer something for everyone’s taste, because the purpose of the liberal mind is to open, process, deliberate and expand ourselves in new and creative ways.

Frances Jones-Sneed, *Managing Editor*

# Poetry

## Pinocchio

BY JEFFREY McRAE

I am the king. I rule this fortress of bones.  
My kingdom, my sad land, broken baronies of bone.

*An indiscrete sonne is a grefe unto his father.*  
Boot boot boot. So drum the marching bones.

Storms have worn the mountains to stones.  
Alone with my God I speak the ancient language of bones.

Old Lady Erin bequeathed jasmine, basil, a nest of hair.  
I hold in my hand her amulet, butterfly pin, ring of bone.

From my tower I watch Painted Post burn.  
Other, I fear you most. Next, I fear my crest of bones.

In the dark I crawl like a spider across the page of a ritual.  
Inspire my voice, o you quiet admission of bone.

Exhume and cart the dead beneath the city.  
Heaven help the poor, their wandering bones.

Prodigal son, good for nothing, I inherit the skeleton key.  
Roots pulled from the loam were soft as a baby's bones.

# Wedding Band

BY JEFFREY McRAE

It's the real deal down here at this groom-built house, on groom-cleared land way out at the end of the county. We aren't here to play *Moon Dance* for the honky-tonk women and iron men picking over the tables of salads; for the children playing tag between trash-can chickens, three spitted pigs and cases of beer. Grills spit and snap and smoke towers above the tent. Rain held off all morning and the road is dry, but guests are throwing up in the trees and sprawling on the beaten grass. The newlyweds are leaving the house so we one, two, three, *fah!* kick the *Steppenwolf* full blast and the stage shivers when the Harleys fire all their guns and the drive wheels spin and the scent of exhaust and rubber fills the yard. The bride and groom enter the semicircle of heavy-metal thunder and she beams, teeth flashing like the sun glinting on a crash cymbal and raises her finger for all to dig stone and wedding band together at last. They're late looking for adventure and enter the fray like any wedded couple, grinning, holding hands, ears bursting to rock and hogs; she carries a daisy bouquet;

they step through the burn-out plume  
as the tires begin bursting and fists pump  
and rebels yell and spit beer into the sky  
until just one wheel, a mad dark circle,  
scars the dooryard and drops to a last  
longer gear, picking up more speed  
whining and bursting like a cannon shot  
and the party screams and we're smoking the oldies  
like it was the first time. The trees sway  
in the heat rolling off the bonfires, covering us in ash,  
remnants of something gone up in smoke  
as fast and intense as nature allows.

# Symbols

BY JEFFREY McRAE

We are getting to “The Chrysanthemums,”  
but first I draw a cross on the board.  
“That’s Jesus,” says Rob.  
I draw a swastika, “evil”;  
a dollar sign, “opportunity.” I draw a flag.  
The American flag reminds Peg of patriotism.  
The other Rob announces, “oppression.”  
Patrick thinks it’s a marketing ploy  
for the Fender Stratocaster.  
Sarah states with certainty New York  
was an original colony and thus  
is one of the thirteen original stars.  
Danielle thinks the colors look very 17th c.  
*You’ve got to have some presence*, mutters Gail  
(who told me before class it was her boyfriend  
and his brother and his brother and his brother  
and they could just give her their shit  
and what the fuck was she going to do—  
live on the street? Nothing she could do.  
And their mother, after Gail does the laundry  
and cooks the food, says she’s going to crack  
and fail school. Tells her she’s ugly.  
Gail says she wants to punch someone.  
“I’m thirty-three and don’t own a car— and they’re Scottish.” “So am I,” I say.  
“So am I,” she says, quickly. “And Irish.”)  
Colby says, “Gail, can you please



save your sob story for Thursday?”  
I keep the window open—it is so hot  
in the conference room: We sit around  
fanning our faces. I draw the lidded  
Salinas Valley and inquire into the significance  
of the fence around Elisa Allen’s sandy starter bed.  
Gail fills her notebook with stars and pentagrams  
and a dramatic white unicorn on hind legs.  
“Animals often indicate symbolism,” I mention.  
Tracey notes the dog hiding  
under the junk wagon, lean, slow to fight,  
and that Elisa Allen is *lean* like the dog  
and when her mums are left on the road  
she gives up hope. “*And she gives up hope,*”  
I repeat, looking at Gail, and say, “Gail,  
why can’t she make herself happy?”  
And Gail laughs, “She doesn’t even know  
how unhappy she is.”

# Imagine (in honor of black ice)

BY AKILI CARTER

Imagine if getting your degree and going to college  
Were the stereotype for black men  
Imagine if U.S. colleges were the place where it was 80 percent  
African-American  
Imagine if basketball and football scholarships became a luxury again  
Not a necessity for some young men to get into college  
Imagine if people didn't think it was weird that I have three degrees  
Imagine if I weren't a part of the minority that doesn't call people nigga  
Imagine if rappers stopped saying it in their bars  
What would we do then?  
What would people think of young black men?  
Imagine that fathers didn't run away from their children  
Imagine there were no need for a child-support collection department  
Imagine if the divorce rate weren't almost 55 percent  
Imagine if I could've gotten the same education I did  
If I hadn't grown up in the suburbs  
What if my father hadn't pushed me to be all I could?  
What if my father hadn't been there to give advice?  
Imagine how I would've turned out  
Imagine the stereotypes I would've fulfilled  
Imagine if all coaches made their players write poems  
Imagine if we taught our little boys that girls should be respected  
Imagine if I didn't tell my daughter and son I love them every day  
Imagine if the way I thought weren't so hard to imagine.

# Liar from Vermont

BY LAURA STEVENSON

**T**he year Elizabeth II was crowned Queen of England and Edmund Hillary conquered Mount Everest, I first said I was from Vermont. To me, the three events had equal significance. No glory the Queen might have felt at Westminster Abbey could possibly have matched my pride in my identity; but the problems Hillary encountered in conquering the unvanquished peak seemed inconsequential next to the difficulties of explaining how a child born and raised near Detroit could be a native Vermonter.

My difficulties began in the suburbs of Boston the day after my seventh birthday, at Mary Anderson Memorial School. It was my first day at a public school, and I was only there for a year—the Great Man was spending two semesters at Harvard and I had to be educated in the interim. He and Mother had warned me that Mary Anderson Memorial wouldn't be at all like John Dewey Elementary, where I had gone at home. And it wasn't. We said prayers before class, just as if that were normal, and the chairs were bolted to the floor in rows, too far away from desks that were too high, so we couldn't see anybody but the teacher. The children were different, too. By nine o'clock, the yellow-shaded room was perfectly quiet while they copied the teacher's name, Miss Coffin, off the blackboard. I had never seen perfectly quiet children before—at John Dewey, we'd been encouraged to express ourselves. But Miss Coffin seemed

not to notice how unnatural the silence was. She tapped up and down the aisles of studious heads, upright and immaculate in high heels, straight gray skirt and red lipstick. My row was going to be the next-to-last she came to, I saw. Hurriedly, I wrote her name in thick pencil, then looked out the window and thought about Vermont.

“Vermont” to me was not the state but the sagging farmhouse the Great Man had bought when I was in kindergarten. It didn’t have much paint on it when we first saw it, and it had a privy instead of a bathroom. Mother had running water installed right away, and Joan, our neighbor’s daughter, was so excited by the toilet that she flushed it four or five times whenever she came over. Her privy had three holes, and you washed your hands at the tap in the kitchen.

Joan’s father was a farmer. He didn’t talk unless he had to, but he could lift rocks onto the wall he was building for us as easily as he could boost me up on the back of Tommy, one of his roan workhorses. I liked to watch him swing the boulders into place, smiling to himself while the sweat made his blue shirt stick to his back. His team helped him—patient Tommy, who looked just like him, and Teddy, who was young and not safe for kids to ride. Most of the time, they stood placidly under the apple tree, whisking their short tails at flies. But when he had loaded the stoneboat from the pile of boulders and started to back them towards it, they began to prance. I could feel the ground shake under their bucket-sized hooves from my perch, fifty feet away.

“Whoa!” They stopped, trembled, waited for him to drop the chain over the iron pin.

Clink.

They leapt forward—too soon, too soon!—“Whoa, whoa, Tommy. . .” He had to dig his heels in as they towed him forward by the reins.

“Baaaack, baaack, eeeeasy, now. . .”

Foam floated out of their open mouths, and sometimes Teddy half reared, backing on his hind legs.

“Whoa.” They stopped. Trembled. Waited. I dug my fingers into my hands.

Clink.

“Git!” They jumped forward together into their collars, their huge shoulders leaning over their forelegs, pulling, pulling. . . . “Whoa!” Back, ever so slightly, then, “Git!” and they strained, their heads down to their knees, hooves tearing the ferns, farther, farther . . . and they were there.

“Whoa!” Teddy threw up his head and nipped at Tommy as Joan’s father drove them back to the apple tree. They snorted, rubbed their faces on their

legs, then began to munch grass quietly, shaking their blinders. I fed them sugar out of my trembling, flat hand, wondering at their gentleness.

“Peggy, does this look like what you saw on the board?”

Miss Coffin was standing at my right elbow, frowning. I looked at her carefully, which was how, at John Dewey, you figured out if your teacher was smarter than you were. Most of them weren't. They tended to have eyes like cows—soft and kind, but with only one expression. The Great Man said this was because they had a Theory. But there was nothing theoretical about Miss Coffin's gray-blue eyes. I decided not to sass.

“Well, no. Not exactly.” The letters didn't go the same direction. They'd remarked on this at John Dewey, but they'd said it was a sign of originality.

“Let me see you write it.”

I picked up the pencil in my left hand and started in as neatly as I could, but she stopped me.

“That's backwards. Can you make it go the other way?”

I could, if I really thought about it. But it was hard to concentrate with her watching like that, so some of the letters went backwards, even though the printing went the right way this time. All the other children, still silent, were watching me. I put my hand behind my back, and Miss Coffin, still frowning, finished checking the other papers in my row. I looked out the window again.

In Vermont, my hideout was across the mowing—a granite ledge, gray, streaked with white marble. At its top, moss grew thick, green and moldy-smelling, so deep that when I lay on my back, it tickled my nose. Underneath the ledge, on its sunny side, three-leaved plants bore strawberries between the devil's paintbrushes and buttercups. Some days I lay there all morning, rolling my tongue over the tiny red sweetnesses that tasted like dirt and grass, sniffing the lemon smell of crushed fern, listening to the white-throated sparrows sing their four sad notes in the humid sunlight.

“Boys and girls,” Miss Coffin was saying, “Peggy Hamilton is our new girl this year. Can you tell us a little about yourself, Peggy?”

What was there to tell? They already knew I couldn't write.

Miss Coffin smiled this time. “Just tell us what you'd like us to know about you,” she prompted.

What I'd *like* them to know? Well, that was easy. “I'm from Vermont,” I said

proudly. “My dad has a hundred acres there, and we farm it. We have ten heifers and fifteen milk cows and a bull. And an old tractor and two workhorses, Tommy and Teddy. My dad builds walls, and my mom . . . well, she helps out with the chores and stuff. . . .” I stopped, my fingers crossed inside my clenched fists.

Miss Coffin looked puzzled. “Thank you, Peggy.” She called a reading group to the front, and I stared at the arithmetic on the board. Slowly, I ground my first finger and thumb together as hard as I could on the top of my leg. It had been wonderful, making those quiet kids look interested. But it was a lie, and liars had to be punished.

Grammy was making sandwiches when I came home for lunch. “How was your morning, dear?”

“All right, I guess. My teacher’s name is Miss Coffin.”

“Poor dear! Imagine going through life with a name like that!” Grammy’s name was long and German. It meant “God’s chosen.”

“Maybe she’ll get married,” I suggested helpfully. “She’s pretty.”

“I’m sure she will, then.” Grammy spread mayonnaise over the freshly baked bread. “Are there any nice children in your class?”

“Can’t tell yet.” Nice children were kids who didn’t watch television or read comic books, had mothers that didn’t work, and weren’t either Unitarian or Catholic. They were hard to pick out on the first day of school. “Where’s Mother?”

“At the faculty club with your father.”

“Didn’t she remember I come home for lunch here?”

Grammy’s apron smelled like fresh bread as she gave me a hug. “She knew I’d be here to take care of you,” she said. That was the nice thing about Grammy: Taking care of me was all she had to do.

We ate our sandwiches in the dining room. There was a table in the kitchen, but civilized people didn’t eat there—except in Vermont, where there was no dining room, only the kitchen, big and bright, where everybody who came to visit ended up sitting around the table. But this wasn’t Vermont, so Grammy and I sat across the dining-room table from each other, saying grace. That was our secret. The Great Man didn’t believe in God, and at John Dewey they said He was optional, but He was a private friend of Grammy’s and mine. Sometimes we read the Bible together, when my parents were out. Grammy knew all the best stories.

“Grammy,” I said after we’d finished, “don’t you wish we’d moved to Vermont instead of here?” In Vermont, nobody cared which way my printing went.

“Vermont is nice in the summer,” she said, “but you’d get tired of eating in the kitchen and using paper napkins if we did it all year round.”

I liked paper napkins, but I knew it was useless to argue. “Yes, but wouldn’t it be wonderful to have our own cows, so we could milk them and drink it all warm, right out of the pail?”

“Gracious! Can you imagine me milking a cow?” She was sitting with her back to the window, and the light behind her caught the white hairs that had slipped out of her bun, making her a delicate halo. The hands folded on her place mat were so thin I could see all the little bones that became her fingers where her palms stopped being palms. No, I couldn’t imagine her milking a cow, much less doing the other chores I knew had to be done when you kept cows in a barn.

“Well, I’d milk the cows, then. You could make bread and watch sunsets.”

Grammy laughed. “It would be too cold to watch sunsets in winter, dear.” But as she cleared the plates, I knew she was thinking about Vermont evenings, when she sat on the stone slabs that made the front steps of our house, watching the sun lower itself into the purple-gray mountains and the faraway mirror of the lake. After it was gone, the clouds blazed pink and orange, and Grammy, facing them, became a pastel reflection of their softness—serene, remote, untouched by the world.

“Peggy?” Grammy’s hand patted my shoulder. “The policewoman has come on duty, and here you are, just sitting and dreaming. You’d better hurry.”

I hurried, wondering how I was ever going to be able to explain to the other kids that I lived in Vermont, when they could see I lived right across the street from school.

It turned out not to be a problem; the kids never put two and two together. That made them different from my friends at John Dewey, who would have seen through my fibs in two seconds, beaten me up and then wanted to learn all about the farm. I was glad not to be beaten up, though I knew peer pressure was an important factor in developing a conscience. On the other hand, since everybody believed me, I had to go on lying, and that got harder and harder. Lying to Miss Coffin, for instance, was so tough—she always paid attention to details, and sometimes I forgot which ones I’d added—I didn’t see how I could keep it up for two whole terms. And then there was Mr. Kerry, the principal. Every time it was my turn to take a note to the office, he’d put his head out of his special little room and say, “How’s the little girl from Vermont?” So to keep up face, I’d have to tell him how the cows were doing, or later in the fall, how

we were splitting wood for the stoves—“It’s hard, Mr. Kerry. You have to hit the log in exactly the right place, or your maul just bounces back.”

“Yeah? What’s a maul, Peggy?”

He sure didn’t know much about farming. “It’s like a sledgehammer, only one end is like an ax. You use the ax end to split logs, and the hammer side makes it heavier.”

“You don’t say!” His eyes were large and brown, and he liked to listen to me. Probably he had a Theory. Sometimes he walked me back to my classroom, his white socks flashing between his pants and his shoes. When I got to my seat, I’d pinch myself once for each time I’d fibbed to him. The whole top of my left leg was purple now, and I’d had to start in on the right one. When the nurse who did the physicals asked me how on earth I’d gotten all those bruises on my thighs, I said I’d run into a hedge on my bike. I gave myself two pinches for that later on—one about the hedge and the other because I didn’t have a bike.

A week after the physicals, Miss Coffin gave me a sealed envelope to take home.

“What’s in it?” I asked with John Dewey suspicion.

“A note about a conference that I’d like to have with your mother.” Her voice told me John Dewey suspicion didn’t sit very well with her, but I didn’t take the note, even so.

“Is it about my printing?” Miss Coffin had noticed I threw a ball with my right hand, so she’d suggested I try writing with that hand, too. My right hand didn’t know any more about making letters than my left knew about throwing balls, but Miss Coffin said it would learn if I practiced. It didn’t. After six weeks, I still picked up the pencil in my left hand unless she stopped me, and no matter how hard I tried, the letters wouldn’t stay on the lines.

“That, and a few other things.”

“Mother’s pretty busy with the faculty women’s cl—” oops—“I mean, the Farm Bureau. They really need women to help work for government subsidies, so she doesn’t have much time.”

Miss Coffin smiled a little smile I didn’t like very much and pushed the note into my hand. “I’m sure we can arrange a time when she can see me, Peggy.”

I was sure, too. Miss Coffin never had trouble getting what she wanted. I scuffed my shoes as hard as I could on the sidewalk as I dawdled past the statue of Mary Anderson. It was all going to come out now—and what would



Grammy say when she found out I was a liar? Would she let God forgive me? Maybe He would forgive me even if she didn't, but what good would that do? And what if He turned out to be optional after all?

When I got home, Grammy and Mother were setting the table with the best china and silver.

"Who's coming?" I asked. "Can I eat with you?"

"May I," said Mother, giving me a hug. "It's a special party to celebrate your father's translation of *The Odyssey*."

I liked *The Odyssey*. The Great Man had read bits of it to me as he translated along. The stories in it were cool—every bit as gory as the ones in the Bible. "Can . . . may I help you get things ready?"

"Grammy and I can do it faster by ourselves, dear."

"I wish Pris were home." Pris was my much older sister. She went to Radcliffe.

"We all miss Pris, but she's having a good time on her own, isn't she?"

"Grammy, will you read me a story?"

"Not right now, dear."

As I started upstairs, I remembered the letter. "Oh, Mother! Miss Coffin sent you a note." She put it into her apron pocket, which might or might not be a good sign.

I went to my room and drew a picture of a white farmhouse on a hill. In back of it, I drew a purple line for mountains, and just on top of them I set a big orange-red sun. Carefully, I began to color the sky light pink at the bottom, and darker in the middle, and finally blue at the top. As I added a few dark clouds, I suddenly stopped. I was holding the crayon in my left hand. I looked at my farmhouse, perched peacefully on its green-gray hill. Two small tears spattered down on the page, smearing the sunset. I went into the bathroom, got a Kleenex and tenderly blotted them off.

At quarter to seven, I was dressed in the blue smocked dress Grammy had made me, and sitting on Mother's bed, watching her screw her earrings tightly onto her ears.

"How come you don't get your ears pierced?" I asked.

"Good heavens, dear! Where did you get such a bohemian idea?"

Bohemian ideas seemed not to be good ones, so rather than get Pris in trouble by saying I'd gotten it from her, I changed the subject. "Can we go up to Vermont next weekend?"

"Possibly," she said. "But that will be about the last time until next spring."

“The last time!”

“You forget,” she said, “it’s going to snow up there soon, and they don’t plow the road to our house. So we’ll just shut it down for the winter, the way we do when we’re in Michigan.”

“Do you suppose it misses us when we’re gone?”

Her reflection gave mine a gently reproving smile. “Do you *really* think a house can miss people?”

Did I *really* . . . ? I thought of coming in on weekends, sniffing the damp smell of unheated house as I hurried through the kitchen where the china lay behind glass doors, waiting to be used on the table that stood waiting to be set. Of running up the steep stairs to my room to find the old jeans and sweaters I wore in Vermont and nowhere else. Of hugging the chilly stuffed animals who had been waiting patiently for me to take them out of their silent rows. Thoughts like that made it hard to say houses couldn’t miss people, though even I knew that was supposed to be the truth. But rather than risk lying any more, I said, “Well, I miss *it*—all the time.”

“I know you do.” Mother sighed, and I waited for her to remind me Harvard was Important in a way Vermont somehow wasn’t—but she was absorbed in placing her silver combs behind her ears, making her hair puff out over her earrings.

“Mommy, you’re so pretty.”

“Why, thank you, Peggy.” She turned around and smiled, a smile like Grammy’s, from deep inside her eyes. When she smiled like that, she looked very fragile, and younger than I was. “Shall we do your braids?”

I sat in front of the mirror and watched her hands part my hair into scraggly blonde strands. “Your bangs are crooked, aren’t they?” she said. “Shall I—?”

“People will be here before you’re done,” I said quickly. My hair was straight and fine, and when she tried to even my bangs out, they slipped away from her scissors until they were so short they stuck out in a little fringe.

“All right.” She glanced at the clock and braided fast, pulling the little wisps that grew down my neck. “There!” she said, dissatisfied. They were already beginning to slip out, but there was no time to fix them, let alone ask her about Miss Coffin’s note, even if I had dared. The doorbell was ringing.

Dinner was served at eight. The guests were arranged boy-girl-boy-girl around the table (“so the men won’t just talk to each other”), down to the corner where I sat on Mother’s left. There were lots of people there. The man

next to Grammy was Mr. Steiner, a psychologist—“one of those people who think everything we do has to do with sex,” Mother had explained earlier. One could only pity him. In our family, man was a rational creature, and sex was what dogs did. Then there were some people from the Classics Department, who all looked alike, even their wives, and Mr. Zander. Mr. Zander taught English. He wrote novels instead of real books, but they must have been pretty good, because the Great Man said it wasn’t every day young writers got tenure at Harvard. The important thing about him, though, was that he had a summer place in Vermont, and we had been staying with him there when he’d persuaded the Great Man to buy ours. Ever since then, he’d been my special friend, and tonight he was sitting next to me. He was wearing a blue tie with bulldogs on it, and some words on little shields. I stared at the letters as the Great Man carved the roast.

Mr. Zander smiled. “Can you read yet, Peggy?”

“Sure. I’m in the Highest Group.”

“Well, can you read this?” He held out the tie so I could see it better.

I spelled it out carefully. “The first word is *Lux*. Then *et*. Then *veri—veritas*.”

“Good for you,” he said, his blue eyes crinkling behind his glasses. “Do you know what it means?”

All the guests were smiling as they waited for me to admit that I didn’t, but I could do a little better than that. “It’s Latin,” I said. “And *veritas* is on all the notebooks here, so it must have something to do with Harvard.”

“You’re absolutely right, my little classicist,” he said. “It means *truth*, which Harvard purports to value. What about *lux*?”

“Well,” I hazarded, “it sounds like *luck*, but—”

“—Luck and Truth!” he said, delighted. “Marvelous!”

Everybody laughed, and I joined in, but I didn’t really feel like it. If truth was as big a deal at Harvard and Yale as it was in the Bible, luck wasn’t going to do me much good. I looked down at my napkin.

In my hideout, thick green moss grew over the top, but next to that was a brown, thinner kind that had fairy cups sprouting out of it after it rained. Then there was a taller, leafier kind that smelled like mint when you crushed it, and finally a ground pine that looked like cactus—or might, if you were very small. I weeded around it and made a little track through it. Hundreds of ants passed back and forth on my track, carrying white eggs in their mouths. I wondered if they thought they were in a desert.

Mr. Zander's hand fell on my shoulder. "Hey!" he whispered. "Come back to us!"

"See?" Mother was saying in the bright tone she used when she pretended nothing was wrong, "She just slips away."

"Well, she comes by it honestly," said Mr. Zander, smiling as he looked down the table to the Great Man's abstracted face. "Where do you go when you slip away, Peggy?"

"Vermont." Where else would anyone go?"

He kissed me on the forehead, which sort of surprised me. "Vermont," he said.

"*Veritas*, indeed—and not on a notebook, either. You're a discerning child."

"She's more than that," Mother said, sighing. "I just got a note from her school, saying she's been telling everyone that Edward is a farmer and we live in Vermont. Not just the children—her teacher, and even the principal!"

I stole a glance at Grammy, but she looked busy with her roll, and maybe she really was. She didn't hear very well when lots of people were talking at once. Next to her, though, Mr. Steiner stopped looking bored and stared at me through his funny glasses, and the Classics wife on his far side seemed to be interested, too.

In Vermont, I thought desperately, there's a Model A in the barn cellar. It's rusted apart, but you can still open the door . . . it was no good. Everybody was looking at me now, so I knew I was going to be The Subject of Discussion. That was what happened in our family when you did something terrible, unless the Great Man noticed—in which case he roared at you, and you cried and stopped doing it. Generally, though, it was women who noticed terribleness, and since it was unbecoming for women to raise their voices, we handled things this way.

Because there were so many people, the Discussion was quite lively and a little hard to follow. From what I could gather, the school had said that lying could imply a serious emotional disturbance, which some people said was the case and others said was the kind of cant you got from schools these days. Then there was some stuff about guilt and self-punishment that made me wonder who had told Mother I was pinching myself, but I never found out, because Mr. Steiner was talking loudly about a dreadful condition that started with "skits" and had something to do with dreaming off. Meanwhile, people were passing heaped-up plates to each other—all the way around the table, the way they always seemed to—and filling each other's glasses, and by the time everybody was served, the only clear result was that

as these things went, I was getting off lightly. The guests, though interested in my condition, seemed unconcerned by the depths of my depravity; the Great Man hadn't been paying attention; and Grammy had drifted off to someplace of her own where there was no loud laughing or smoking or drinking.

During the next few minutes, there was nothing but the hungry clanks of forks—no wonder, since it was 8:30 by now—interspersed with comments on how good everything was. Then one of the classicists started talking about Stalin, Mrs. Steiner started talking about her exotic new hairdresser, and a bunch of little conversations started up. Just as I began to feel safe, I heard Mr. Zander say quietly, “Do you have any idea what you’ve done?”

When I turned to see who he was talking to, I saw he was looking at me with the kind of pitying smile you give to sinners before you shape them up. Well, I deserved it, but I felt a stab of betrayal. As a veteran Subject of Discussion, I knew there were some people who just *had* to add a little lecture of their own after everything was over. But it hurt to think that Mr. Zander, third in line after God and Grammy, was one of them. The food on my plate blurred as I looked down at it.

“That’s what I was afraid of,” he said softly, handing me his handkerchief. “Listen, Peggy. Don’t let them get you down. You’ve pulled off a magnificent feat.”

I stared at him over the perfect white folds. “I what?”

“You’ve done something extraordinary.”

“I *have*?”

“Shh,” he said, glancing around the table. “You’ll start them off again. But yes. You’ve told a story that has held the attention of a whole school for six weeks. That’s just—amazing.”

The way my mouth dropped open would have made him think I was a total retard if the Classics wife on his right hadn't rescued me by asking him a question about Stalin. As it was, I had time to pull myself together before he turned back to me.

“Now then,” he said—softly again—“as I was saying, you’re a wonder.”

Maybe I wasn't as together as I thought. “But didn't you understand . . .?”

“I understood enough to realize you told a fantastic story.”

“But it wasn't *true*,” I said. “It was a lie. Like . . . like Stalin. And look—didn't he die? I thought it was a big deal—”

“—Yes, he died, and yes, it was a big deal, but no, what you told was *not* a lie like Stalin. It was a lie like . . . Odysseus.”

“Odysseus? *He* was a liar?”

“A consummate liar. Of the highest order.” He smiled at my shocked face. “Last time you and I talked about Odysseus, we were watching your family play croquet, and you were telling me the story of the Cyclops. Do you remember?”

I nodded. Of course I remembered. The sun had been just about ready to go down, the hermit thrushes had been singing in the woods, and the swallows had been racing over the mowing, diving and snapping at the last bugs of the evening.

“We didn’t mention who tells that story in the poem—but do you know?”

“Sure. Odysseus tells it to a bunch of people at a dinner party.”

“That’s my girl,” said Mr. Zander. “Now, tell me. Do you think the people at the dinner party believed the story?”

My eyes opened wide. “You mean, they didn’t?”

“Well, let’s see,” he said. “Believing it involves believing that Odysseus and his men sailed to an island inhabited by many giants but met only one, that the one was so big that he could pick up two men, smash them together and eat them raw in a couple of mouthfuls, that he spoke fluent Greek, that there was a log lying in the cave right where Odysseus needed it. . . .”

“But if they had said those things, they would have wrecked the story!”

“So you’re saying they didn’t believe the details, but they believed in the storyness of the story and they admired the skill of the man telling it?”

That seemed to be what he wanted me to have said, so while it was a lot more complicated than anything I could have come up with on my own, I said yes.

He smiled. “Fine. Now tell me—does everybody in your school *really* believe you live on a Vermont farm?”

“I. . . .” Come to think of it, did they? They seemed to, but . . . “I don’t know.”

“C’mon, Peggy. It’s a public school, right?”

“What’s that have to do with it?”

“Everything. A public school is supported by town taxes, so it’s open only to kids who live in the town.”

“That sounds fair,” I began judiciously—then I saw what he was driving at. “You mean I couldn’t go to Mary Anderson Memorial if we didn’t live here?”

“Right. Now, most of your classmates, and certainly your teacher and your principal, know that. And yet . . . well, you tell me. When you talk about the way you live on ‘your’ farm in Vermont, what do they do? Call you a liar? Walk away?”

“No. They listen.”

“And why would they do that?”

“Because . . .” I thought of Mr. Kerry’s face, and even, sometimes, Miss Coffin’s. “Because they’re . . . interested.”

“You bet they are. This is undoubtedly the first time any of them have met a second-grader who can make life on a Vermont farm as real to them as Odysseus made the Cyclops real to the people at the dinner party.”

There was something he was missing. I couldn’t quite figure out what it was, but it seemed so important that I objected instead of just shutting up. “Um . . . the life they’re listening to isn’t *mine*,” I said. “It’s sort of Joan’s but not really. It’s the life I . . . er . . . go to, like I did when you—”

—Called you back?” He smiled as he took his handkerchief back, but his eyes were serious. “Sure. That’s why you can tell such a convincing story.”

“But isn’t going to a place like that . . . isn’t that wrong? I mean, I *know* it’s not real, but sometimes it’s so much realer than . . .” I looked around the table. “Well, this. Or school. Isn’t that skits o . . . whatever Mr. Steiner was saying?”

“No, no,” he said, glancing anxiously across the table. “It’s doing what you have to do when you don’t quite fit into the puzzle you’ve got to live in. Unfortunately, the experts who classify the pieces of modern puzzles tend to think that a kid who can share her imaginary life in a way that makes her auditors hear a higher truth has something wr—” He broke off, his face a sudden mask of politeness as he looked past me at Mother. “Splendid dinner, Ellen,” he said. “Absolutely perfect for the occasion.”

“Oh, thank you!” she said, and I knew she was really pleased, because he was a fussy eater—only with adults, you had to call it a gourmet—and she had been worried about cooking something he’d enjoy. “What are you two talking about so seriously?”

“The Vermont we have in common,” he said. “And I was just about to suggest that Peggy write down some of her daydreams for other people to read.”

“Oh, she can’t,” said Mother, quickly, ashamed. “We’ve just learned that her penmanship skills are way below grade level. I’m sure the problem is temporary, but . . .”

Mr. Zander looked from her to me. “A smart girl like you has trouble writing?”

“Only with my right hand,” I said. “My left hand writes okay, except sometimes it goes backwards. That’s wrong, so at school I have to write with the hand you’re supposed to write with—”

“What!?” said Mr. Steiner, Mr. Zander and Mother, almost at the same

time. The next moment, Mother was asking me reproachfully why I hadn't *told* her, and everyone else was agreeing that making left-handed people write with their right hands was a holdover from the Victorians, who seemed to be right up there with the bohemians when it came to bad ideas. In the middle of the noise, the Great Man began to speak, and as usual when he had something to say, everybody hushed. He paused to light a cigarette, then gave me a benign smile from his end of the table. "Peggy," he said, "did you tell your teacher you can type?"

I shook my head. "It . . . it didn't seem to be the issue."

"Not the issue?" he said. I knew something was coming, because he was using the tone that meant he and I were secret conspirators against Rules, Women or Theories, depending. Even so, I was dumbfounded when he began to explain—to everybody, now—that when he'd seen me writing backwards, he'd decided to try teaching me to type, to see if that would help me get used to seeing the way words were supposed to appear on the page. It was news to me that he knew I was left-handed, let alone that I wrote backwards. As for the lessons, I knew that if you wanted his attention, you had to do something with him that he enjoyed, like typing, and you had to catch on fast or he got bored—but I had never dreamed I'd been helping him work out an educational idea. That was nifty, especially when he wound up by giving Mother the modest smile that meant he knew he was right. "Maybe you should talk to that teacher of hers, Ellen," he said. "Tell her Peggy uses all the right fingers, and she can do around 40 words a minute copying—less, of course, if she has to think up spelling for herself."

A murmur of admiration went around the table, and as I began to clear the plates, one of the Classicists said how smart it was to see past the problem of penmanship into the problem of written communication. That gave the Great Man an opportunity to say that typing helped with spelling, too, because your fingers memorized the pattern of the letters, and everybody (including me) saw right away how true that was. By the time Mother had served up Grammy's special angel food cake, everybody was saying what a brilliant teacher the Great Man was, and that turned into talk about his wonderful new translation, with lots of readings from the advance copy of his new book, which I fetched from his study after carefully washing my hands. Then there were speeches and toasts in champagne for the guests and sparkling grape juice for Grammy and me, and finally, the guests went into the living room for coffee, which was my signal to say good night politely and to go upstairs.



I always approached the moment nervously, because while it usually just drew comments on how well brought up I was, sometimes one of the ladies (or worse, one of the old men) asked for a kiss good night, and then, of course, everybody else had to show they liked children, too, and I had to deliver kisses all round. Tonight, though, there were so many people and conversations that only Grammy said good night back, and I slipped upstairs without any comments at all.

It was cool and quiet in my room, and I undressed by the light of the street lamp outside. The voices from the party drifted into the bathroom as I brushed my teeth, and one of them was Mr. Zander's, talking quietly to somebody about a poor kid who was going to have a tough life. I listened a little more, but the only thing that floated upstairs was cigarette smoke, so I closed my door and crawled under my blankets.

You were supposed to be good to the unfortunate people in the world, so I said a special prayer for the kid who was going to have a tough life. Then for a little while, I thought about Odysseus and puzzles, but I was too sleepy to figure it all out. Pulling my pillow over my head, I left Miss Coffin, Mary Anderson, and luck and truth all behind me. I slipped into the real world, where I lay on a bed of green moss, sniffing the lemon smell of a crushed fern and listening to a white-throated sparrow sing its four sad notes in the humid sunlight.

# SMOKE

BY TED GILLEY

“**M**y secret,” Alex said to me and Steve, “is simple: I don’t inhale. That’s where you get yourself in trouble. But if you don’t inhale. . . .” He shrugged and looked at us with slanted eyes.

Did we believe him? I think we did—I wanted to.

Alex took a drag from his cigarette and held the smoke in—but his thin chest seemed to swell. He tilted his head up. Then he blew the smoke out in a blue, liquid stream.

“You are too, inhaling,” I said. “I can tell.”

But I couldn’t.

I’d never smoked, and I was sure Steve hadn’t. I was dying to try—and I would, but not today. Not in front of witnesses. When Alex leveled the pack at me, I shook my head and looked away. Why did I feel shame for refusing? But if Steve shared my feeling, he didn’t show it. He just looked at Alex with a queer, detached stare that reminded me of how I’d once seen my father look at his brother, my uncle Lee, when he showed up late at our house, drunk. “Go home, Lee,” he’d said. I could see the pain in Dad’s face, but I could see the anger, too.

I think Steve was the kind of person who believes some things just don't need saying—obvious things, I guess. Like once when we were in the woods, a couple of years ago, and saw a tree fall. Fantastic—spooky, too. A big old tree, nothing left to identify it, long rotted out and full of holes, standing dead. But—falling *just then*, and our seeing it? Who besides birds and squirrels sees such things? I couldn't shut up about it—I was that excited. But Steve said little. He smiled as we looked over the wreck and said, "It had to fall sometime, didn't it?" His attitude seemed to be, So a tree fell? What was there, really, to say? But as we walked home, I felt an almost tangible space open between us.

Alex put his cigarettes away and zipped his jacket neatly to the collar. It was October. In a month, the president would travel to Dallas, and lots of things would change, and then soon it would be 1964, and nothing would ever be the same again for me or anyone I knew.

"What about lip cancer? Don't you worry about that?" I wanted to get to the bottom of this.

"Hell, no," Alex replied, combing dark hair back over his bony skull. "Gotta die of something."

• • •

Alex got his driver's license *and a car* in the same week. Some mornings he'd swing by the bus stop and offer us a ride, and on those days we arrived in style. I thought so, anyway; Steve sat stiffly in the back seat, cold air from his open window pouring in, smoke from Alex's cigarette streaming out.

I had my license, but I wasn't allowed to drive on my own: Until I paid for my share of the insurance premium, I was restricted to outings with my parents, and those were not much fun—you can't get away from them when they're sitting beside you, offering constructive criticism. My after-school job at a drugstore in the shopping center near our house would take care of the situation, but it was slow going. In the meantime, in a plan to wean Dad away from his car, I adopted it, washing it every weekend and starting it up for him on the cold mornings. After our drives, I'd slip the keys into my pocket so he'd have to ask me for them. ("Sure. Here you go, Dad.") But mostly I walked, adding up how much I saved, how much more I needed.

Coming out of the drugstore one night, I spotted Alex's car in the lot, which at that hour was all but deserted. It was definitely Alex's: a black '56 Ford hardtop, whitewalls, plain silver caps. Two glimmering licks of chrome ran down the doors beneath the windows. The car appeared to be empty, but as I

walked closer, I made out a figure on the driver's side; then, the flaring orange eye of a cigarette, and smoke drifting along the inside of the windshield.

• • •

The cigarette made me dizzy. I laid my head to rest against the window and closed my eyes, thankful, in my embarrassment, for the cover of darkness. Alex was talking, but he wasn't fooled. "First one gets to you, don't it?" A smile pulled his coyote eyes into tighter slits. "You'll get used to it."

We talked. He said that his mother had left when he was a kid. He didn't remember her. (I couldn't imagine this.) He'd been sent to live with relatives for a few years, then brought home by his father, with whom he now lived. "It's just me and him," he said, and keyed the ignition. "Where can I drop you?"

On the way, he told me how he'd got this car. Towed into his dad's body shop after an accident, the car needed a lot of work. Alex repaired the body, got the bumpers straightened and rechromed, stripped and replaced the electrical, lights and most of the glass. He put his finger to, but didn't touch, the spotless glass above the steering wheel. "Fella's head went through right here."

We were rolling down Route 220. Alex extended his right arm. In the light that periodically sliced through the car, I could see a blunt, ugly scar lying across the meat of the palm. "Could've lost my thumb," he said. "Sheet metal curled back at me."

• • •

An incident at school:

I was between classes with the rest of them. I saw Alex and Steve standing at Alex's locker. Steve had his hand out. Alex, looking bemused, reached into his pocket, took out his Zippo and handed it to Steve. Steve nodded and, looking around, spotted me and waved. When Alex turned his head in my direction, Steve slipped the lighter into his pocket. Alex looked back.

When I reached them, two other guys, friends of Steve's, had sidled up, and the three of them were wearing shit-eating grins. Alex glanced at them, and got it. His voice, when he spoke, was soft.

"I want the lighter back."

"Lighter? I don't have a lighter."

"OK. My lighter. I want it back."

Steve took his hands out of his pockets and spread his arms.

"Hey! What would I want a lighter for? I don't even smoke."

People were slowing down, watching. I was standing just behind Alex.

He spoke again—softly still, but his voice shook in the growing quiet of the hallway.

“I know where it is. I want it back. Give it to me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, boy,” Steve said.

“Maybe you should just give it back,” I said.

Steve looked past Alex, at me. “Maybe you should kiss my ass.” He turned his big face back to Alex. “You shouldn’t smoke, anyway,” he said. “It’s bad for you, it’ll stunt your—”

Alex grabbed Steve’s shirt and slammed him into the locker. You could hardly have seen it happen. He put his face—a red, glaring skull—into Steve’s. “Give it BACK. I know you have it and I want it BACK.”

Steve’s face was screwed into a frown, but it was fright. He dug into his pocket and brought out the lighter. Taking it, Alex flipped it open, thumbed the wheel and a yellow-tipped pale flame lolled out. Alex thrust the lighter into Steve’s face and Steve twisted aside, trying to get out of Alex’s grip. Steve’s friends had faded back.

“Jesus, stop, Alex,” I said.

The lighter closed with a click. A little whiff of Steve’s burned eyebrows scented the air.

Someone said, “Holy shit,” and a teacher’s voice rose: “What’s going on? Let me through, people. May I get *through* here?”

People stood watching Alex. I saw him myself as if for the first time: the slicked-back hair, white face, dark eyes, the anonymous, neat, nearly colorless clothes.

The teacher pushed through and demanded to know what was going on. Steve had fled and no one spoke, but sensing the trouble was with Alex, the teacher took his arm. Alex threw the man’s hand off. He zipped his jacket. Without a word to me or anyone else, he closed his locker and walked down the hallway and out of school. He never came back.

• • •

That summer, I worked full-time at the drugstore, and with the extra money, I was able to buy my share of the car insurance. My dad surprised me by having a key made for me. He tossed it to me and said, “Better than having both of us asking for mine all the time.”

My first solo trip was to Alex’s father’s garage. I hadn’t seen Alex around, but I knew he had been working there ever since he left school. I further knew

that his father and Steve's had gone to school to discuss the incident that precipitated his leaving and that voices had been raised.

A girl I knew, who was in the outer office at the time, told me that Alex's dad—a big man in a grease-monkey suit, she said—told Steve's father that he would be happy to step outside with him and settle things and that Steve's dad had apparently declined.

“I'll take your effing head off,” she reported the mechanic saying. “I'm quoting! But don't, you know, quote me.”

Who would I tell? I hardly saw Steve anymore, and when I did, he'd shoot me that queer, puzzled look of his and turn aside. And I didn't much like the jocks he'd begun hanging around with—but that, in part, was a kind of jealousy. The fact that he'd found other friends just reinforced the fact that I hadn't.

I drove slowly, savoring the ride. I had long since found my favorite radio station and locked it in. I turned it on now and let the music carry me down Route 220.

I found Alex sitting in the sun outside the garage. He looked, at first glance, about the same, but as I pulled in and killed the engine, I could see he was thinner. And something was missing—something in him was different. He sat with his arms around his knees and didn't look up until I tapped the horn. Then I saw that both his eyes were blackened.

Alex walked over to the car's passenger door and looked inside. He wiped his oil-stained hands slowly back and forth on the legs of his jeans, then opened the door. “I'm gonna get your car dirty.”

“Don't worry about it.” The car's spotlessness looked silly to me now.

He got in and closed the door.

“What the hell happened to you?”

Alex tilted the rearview and looked at himself. He pushed the mirror back. “I had an accident.”

“When was this? You mean you crashed your car?”

From inside the garage came a thick, sweet drone of country music and the ring of a steel tool striking cement.

“Yeah. Not really. I was in a fight. It was an accident.”

“An accidental fight? Oh, man.”

Alex put his head back on the seat and closed his eyes. “Christ,” he said. “You really don't know anything, do you?”

“No, I don't. Tell me.”

“I'll tell you this,” he said. “A blow to the head—anywhere on the head. It can give you a black eye.”

“Jesus, what happened?”

“Yeah, well, it’s true. I read it somewhere.” He slapped his thighs to end the conversation. “Anyway, it’s no big deal.”

“Yeah,” I said. “You gotta die of something.”

Alex looked over at me and the coyote shadow shimmered over his features. “Is that right? Hell, I guess it is.” He took hold of the door handle. “I better go. My old man’ll be after me.”

“Was it Steve?”

Alex sighed and slumped back. He took two cigarettes from the pack and lit them, then passed one over to me. “Look, man, what can I tell you? I been riding around all my life and I keep running into things. You know?” He smiled. “And what makes you think Steve could touch me? Steve. Steve’s a *child*.”

A big, nearly bald head with a sunburned scalp and a cold, molded-looking face came out of the garage. He was holding a hammer.

“Hey! Coffee break’s over. Get in here.” He glanced at me and shifted the hammer to his other hand, then fixed his eyes on Alex again. “*Now*, boy.”

“I’m coming.” Alex gathered himself and got out of the car, then ducked down and looked back in.

“Watch yourself,” he said.

“I will. I’ll see you.”

“Yeah.” The word was barley spoken.

Alex walked to the door of the shop. His father moved aside to let him pass, but Alex hesitated; he stopped and looked up into his father’s face. Then he slipped into the shadows.

• • •

When ten or eleven days passed and I hadn’t seen Alex around town, I drove over to his house.

I closed up the drugstore at a little after nine—the pharmacist had left at six—and drove out to where Alex and his father lived, down along the Smith River, in the shadow of the Fieldale mills. Their house was a small postwar ranch, a beat-up box in the first stages of decay. It appeared at first to be dark inside the house, but light from a television set played behind the venetian-blinded big window. Two cars, one of them Alex’s ’56, sat crowded together in the driveway.

I walked up the steps of the concrete stoop and raised my fist to knock. But at that moment, there was a crash from inside, then the sound of something big hitting a wall or a floor. The door vibrated. Voices were raised from

somewhere inside—farther back in the house, I thought. It was hard to tell; the windows, the ones that I could see, were shut.

The voices suddenly became close, looming up behind the door. I heard Alex's father shout, "Didn't I tell you? *Didn't I?* You don't listen to me, boy." There was a reply I couldn't make sense of, then a horrifying succession of sounds, a blizzard of crashes and grunts and the deep, popped-water sound of flesh getting punched, then Alex's voice crying, "Please don't, Daddy, please don't, please! Please! PLEASE PLEASE—"

I beat on the door with my fists, then ten, twenty times, as hard as I could. Anything to stop the awful pleading. I stood back and kicked the door, making the cheap wood jump and rattle. Then words came out of my mouth—strange, unmediated words that got me into trouble later. But, of course, by then it didn't matter.

*"I'll burn it down! I'LL BURN it, see if I don't, you bastard!"*

I stumbled down the porch steps, tripped, and fell down. I sat sprawled in the grass and watched the door for a sign, waited for it to open, all the while saying to myself, *Please nothing happen. Please nothing happen.* There was no sound, no evidence of movement from the house. The blue television light continued to flicker like heat lightning behind the blinds. Gradually I began to be aware of my scorched breath, my pounding heart.

• • •

I drove fast up into the hills that night, pushing Dad's car to do more than it wanted to do. By the time the pavement had disintegrated into a gravel one-lane, I'd slowed down. I drove steadily, then, into the night. I went quite a distance, and each trip since has taken me farther away from Alex.

It wasn't me who burned the garage down.

It did burn, though, a week later, and beautifully, filling the night sky with rich, rolling black smoke. The police talked to me about it, but since Alex had vanished on the night of the fire—and after what I told them—they left me alone.

I still go up into the hills, though I am now far from that place. If it's summer, I might stay out late, sitting in my car, smoking. I would like to quit, but I don't. Not yet. I sit out late, sometimes all night, waiting for the light, waiting for the trees to become visible again. Listening, toward morning, for the sound one of them would make if it fell.



# L. C. Smith and the Color of Snakes

BY BEN JACQUES

I recently read that Cormac McCarthy's old typewriter, a portable Olivetti on which he wrote *No Country for Old Men*, *All the Pretty Horses* and much more, was sold at Christie's for \$254,500.

Which put me in mind of my first typewriter—a black L. C. Smith, a heavy birdcage manufactured by Smith and Corona. I found it in 1972 in a Goodwill store in Tucson.

First, I removed the worn roller and took it to a shop to have it replated. Then I stopped at a gas station and with an air hose blew the dust out of the cage. At home I set it on a newspaper, sprayed it with WD40 and let it marinate.

Cleaned with a toothbrush and a cloth, it gleamed. The black roman key letters, some tilting on their axes, looked sharp in their round frames. The chrome carriage return lever, shaped in a crescent, felt smooth on my left index finger. Twisting open a paper clip, I dug out the ink from the tiny loops in the “e,” “a” and “g” keys.

At the drugstore, I bought two black-and-red ribbons. Finally, the typewriter was ready. My wife sewed a cover from scraps of black velvet, on which she embroidered flowers. I wrote her a poem, using the asterisk key to insert red asters between each word.

I was between college and graduate school, working odd jobs—mostly unskilled labor—picked up at Manpower, Inc. For several months, I worked at the Anaconda research center east of Tucson.

At seven a.m., I would stop for breakfast at Danny's, a downtown café where workers gathered. There I would meet Sam Vogel. An older man with receding, slicked-back hair, Sam was from Brooklyn. He had survived both a failed marriage and the collapsed garment industry. I met him at a lumberyard, stacking two-by-fours. It was hot and the work was monotonous, and we were both happy to get assigned to Anaconda.

I was also, at this time, writing poems. On my L. C. Smith, I began typing them out and sending them to small magazines and journals. One day I took a letter with me to breakfast and passed it across the eggs and hash to Sam. It was my first acceptance. *California Quarterly* would publish a poem in an upcoming issue.

Sam read the letter, then looked at me sideways.

"How much they payin' you?"

I explained that they weren't paying me anything. But I would get four copies of the journal.

"Pass me the salsa," Sam said.

Over the next year, Sam and I became close. He often joined us and our three-year-old daughter for holiday meals and helped out when I needed an extra hand. Sometimes in the evening we would step into our tiny yard to smoke cigars and watch the light fade to a dusky purple on the mountains.

But it was our work together that gave me fodder for poems. At the research center, we stocked equipment, delivered supplies, painted, cleaned the warehouse and kept up the grounds. Constantly joking, Sam, nevertheless, tackled every task with a boyish zeal. He despised clock watchers. Once, walking through the administrative wing, Sam glanced at an executive tilted back in his chair. "*Himl-kuker*," he muttered. Sky gazer.

One day Sam was clearing weeds that had sprung up around the water tower. He was using a scythe, cutting around the clumps of marigolds that brighten the desert floor in March.

I'll let the following poem, one of the first typed on my L. C. Smith, published by *Wormwood Review*, tell the rest of the story:

Sam, from Brooklyn,  
out cutting desert weeds  
around the water tower,  
spies a snake—

“Whaddy ya mean, ‘What color was it?’”  
he snaps at me at lunch.

(I simply wanted to know.)

“You a wise guy or somethin’?  
I’ll tell ya what  
color it was.  
It was *snake* color!”

I'm no Cormac McCarthy, and no one is likely to bid on my L. C. Smith. A relic, it now anchors a table I use for conferencing with students. I'll keep it where it is—to remind me of Sam and those early days. It also reminds me how deliberate, and how precious, the act of writing is—something I'd like my students to know.

# Living and Learning in Rwanda

BY ADRIENNE WOOTTERS

**T**o some living outside the academic bubble, sabbatical leave is a luxury. I beg to differ. Sabbatical, in the sense of taking a Sabbath rest, is crucial to rejuvenation of the sabbatical-taker's soul. For an academic, it is generally one's scholarship that is rejuvenated, but often it is more than one's publications that benefit. Sabbatical leave affords time to think and reflect. If travel is part of the leave, it gives a chance to see and experience people and places on levels that cannot happen in a two-week vacation trip.

If a good sabbatical is characterized as one that challenges even as it restores, then I had a *great* sabbatical experience. In 2009, I applied for and was granted a Fulbright Award to teach physics at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology (KIST) in Rwanda for six months last year. My job at KIST was to teach two courses to physics majors: solid-state physics for juniors and statistical physics for seniors. The semester began January 11 and finished with finals in mid-April. For the remaining few months of my stay, I worked with five students on senior research projects and with the physics department on program review and assessment. I will elaborate later on these experiences.



**Intore dancers.** Intore dancing is the traditional folk dancing. Children learn Intore dancing in the same manner that American children go to Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. These dancers are a group of young teenage boys from the village we were visiting. The joy of the dance was palpable.

Rwanda today is stable, clean and orderly. Its capital city, Kigali, is considered the safest city in all of Africa. It is a country that businesses around the world want to work with and in. In spite of its poverty, it has one of the highest literacy rates in Africa—77 percent, and growing. Being an educator, I paid closest attention to the education system in Rwanda. The country is in desperate need of trained people in science, technology, business and economics to build and maintain its economic infrastructure. In this article, I will share some of my experiences of the country and my understanding of the current state of its educational system. So as to give as complete a picture as possible, I want to give some background about Rwanda, the genocide of 1994 and the current state of the country.

## **Rwanda 101**

Rwanda is a landlocked country in the center of the African continent. Approximately, it shares its border with Uganda to its north, Tanzania to its east, Burundi to its south and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) to its west. It is a small country, only slightly larger than Massachusetts. Its main exports are coffee, tea and tin ore, but the vast majority of Rwandan citizens have always been and continue to be subsistence farmers. The population of this tiny country is approximately ten million; it is the most densely populated

country in Africa. If you can imagine ten million people in Massachusetts living primarily off the land, you begin to see the great challenge that Rwanda faces. For each Rwandese, there is approximately 0.3 acre of arable land. The land of Rwanda is beautiful and fertile, but there just is not enough of it to sustain its people.

Hundreds of years ago, this region was inhabited solely by the Twa, a pygmy race. Some hundreds of years ago, a Bantu tribe known as Hutu moved into the area. There is no record of conflict between the Hutu and the Twa people. (There was no written record until the Europeans came in 1894, but neither is there any verbal record of conflict.) Maybe 100 years later (remember, there are only verbal records), another tribe, the Tutsis, moved into the area. They were also Bantu, but their geographical origin remains unclear.

The Hutus were primarily farmers and the Tutsis were primarily cattle-men. Over the centuries, the tribes coexisted. The common understanding is that they lived together more or less peacefully, albeit with typical struggles for land and power by various families and alliances. Over time, the cattle-owning Tutsis became the kings and rulers of the region that approximates Rwanda and Burundi. Cattle became a sign of wealth and a form of legal tender. The Hutus served the Tutsis in a feudal system. Most, but not all, argue that over time the distinction of Hutu and Tutsi became more economic than genetic. A man of Hutu origin who came into wealth and became an owner of more than ten cows would have been considered a Tutsi. The original Tutsis were tall, thin and light-skinned, while Hutus were short, stocky and dark. However, there had been enough intermarrying between the tribes over the centuries that by the middle of the 20th century, definitive genetic determination of a Rwandan's tribal affiliation was difficult, if not impossible.

In 1894, Germans colonized the area that is now Rwanda and Burundi. They sent their missionaries to educate and convert the people to Christianity, but otherwise they left the Rwandan kingdom to govern itself. They did support the tradition of the Tutsi as the elite ruling class, and supported efforts to quell any Hutu rebellions. After World War I, Belgium was given Rwanda by the League of Nations mandate to rule. The Belgian presence in Rwanda was much more pronounced, particularly in terms of supervising education, agricultural production and public works. The Belgians kept the existing Tutsi royal family in power as their representative. In what is widely considered a move to keep political control, the Belgians further strengthened the status quo by issuing cards in 1934 that identified each person as Hutu, Tutsi or Twa.

The classifications were generally based on physical characteristics. In the case of physical ambiguity, the number of cattle the head of household owned determined the label. If a head of household with indeterminate physical characteristics (who may have had light skin but was of short stature, for example) had ten or more cattle, he and his children were given Tutsi designation. His wife's status would have been determined by her own physical characteristics or her father's label. Before the racial strife of 1959, card-carrying Tutsis made up about 15 percent of the total population but owned the vast majority of the country's wealth.

## The Genocide

The strife that led to the genocide of 1994 was 100 years in the making. Throughout the first half of the 20th century, with the help of the Belgians, Tutsis became even more powerful; Hutus became more resentful of their lower-class status. Both wanted to be free of the Belgians, but in different ways. Beginning in the 1950s, while Tutsis worked for independence from Belgium (while maintaining their political power), many Hutus longed for and worked toward emancipation from what they considered a feudal society run by the Tutsis. Those years of tension culminated in the first real modern conflict between Tutsis and Hutus, known as the *muyaga*, or "wind of destruction." The *muyaga* erupted in November 1959, after the suspicious death of Rwanda's king in July of that year, and immediately following the near-deadly beating of a popular Hutu politician. In that uprising, Hutus killed on the order of 20,000 Tutsis, and some 150,000 others fled to Uganda and other neighboring countries.

In 1961, the country voted to become a republic; the Hutus held power for the next 34 years. In those years, Tutsis were systematically marginalized and persecuted by the Hutu government. There were several instances of isolated violence against Tutsis, and a few instances of larger, coordinated events. For example, in 1974, after a coup (Hutu replacing Hutu) and a pledge to make Rwanda better by getting rid of the Tutsis, hundreds of Rwandan Tutsis were killed and many more thousands were forced into exile.

While the Hutus were in power for those 34 years, many Tutsi refugees languished as second-class citizens in refugee camps in Uganda. Refugees were allowed to live only in designated camps, and work was difficult to come by. Children born in those camps were not afforded Ugandan citizenship. Unable to be assimilated into Ugandan society, those Tutsis longed to go home. In time, a group of Rwandan refugees organized themselves as the Rwandan

Patriotic Front (RPF). This army was led by Paul Kagame, who is now president of Rwanda. (Kagame was a toddler when his family fled to the Ugandan refugee camps.)

In 1990, the RPF invaded Rwanda in the hope of restoring a government that would allow the 500,000 diaspora Tutsis to return home. That invasion turned into a four-year civil war that would culminate in genocide.

The roots of the genocide can be found in radio broadcasts and newspaper commentaries. Rwandese usually have one ear to their radios, and the dominant voice during the period 1993—1994 was Radio Télévision Libre des Mille Collines (RTL). That station broadcast racist propaganda against Tutsis and any person or group that sympathized with them. Calling Tutsis *imyenzi* (cockroaches), the radio announcers called for their “extermination,” the wiping out of all Tutsis in Rwanda. As the announcers spewed forth their hate radio, others in the government and military were planning the systematic wiping out of Tutsis and any who would oppose their plan. Detailed lists of where Tutsi families lived were compiled, while men were trained to use the lists to go from house to house to find and kill them.

One government official who was less on board with the notion of wiping out the Tutsis was the president of the country, Juvénal Habyarimana. In a move to end the civil war, he had gone to Arusha, Tanzania, to work out a peace deal with the RPF that featured a sharing of power by Hutus and Tutsis. With this compromise government, diaspora Tutsis would be able to go home. After the signing of the Arusha Peace Accords on April 7, 1994, Habyarimana flew home to Kigali with his colleague, the president of Burundi, whose country was going through its own Hutu/Tutsi conflict. As the plane prepared to land at the Kigali airport late that night, it was shot down, and all on the plane died. By the following morning, the systematic killing of Tutsis and moderate Hutus began. The killing would continue for 100 days, when Kagame’s RPF army would finally take over Kigali, ending the civil war. The final death toll is estimated at 800,000.

The details of the genocide are as horrific as one can possibly imagine. I remember exactly where I was when I first heard about it on the radio. I was driving along a lovely stretch of road in the Berkshires, in the bloom of spring, exulting in the beauty of the day. On that day, the announced death toll was only 100,000, which was difficult enough to comprehend. Jolting myself out of my local reverie, as I drove I tried to comprehend what it would mean for 100,000 people to be killed. All of Berkshire County? Maybe. But even that



was difficult to envision. I then imagined what it would be like if each human killed were represented by a single piece of paper being pulled off a stack of paper, wadded up and thrown away. The act of taking, wadding and throwing away a single piece of paper could take three seconds. One hundred thousand pieces of paper would correspond to 200 reams, which would be a 33-foot-high stack. It would take three and a half days working around the clock to take, wad and toss each piece. Given the actual number of deaths, the image is even harder to absorb: Eight hundred thousand pieces of paper corresponds to a stack of printer paper about as tall as a 25-story building. It would take four weeks to name each victim in that manner.

Frankly, it's difficult for me to write any more than this about the genocide. The systematic hacking of body parts with machetes, the rape of women in front of their dying husbands, the torture of children in the presence of their bleeding parents, the complete disintegration of any form of civil society, are graphically explained by many others in books, songs and videos. In this article, I want to focus on Rwanda's recovery and where it is now, 17 years later.

### **Rwanda Today**

In the aftermath of the genocide, the country had to be rebuilt. After getting food and clean water, the most urgent need was stability. One of the government's first decrees was the abolition of identity cards. There is no longer any official designation of Tutsi or Hutu, and to label someone or some group with either term is taboo. "We are all Rwandans now" is the rallying cry.

Vital to stability was dealing with the nearly 200,000 "*genocidaires*" who had participated in the killing. Rwanda's historic *gacaca* courts, which are local courts presided over by town elders, sent 90,000 *genocidaires* to overflowing prisons. In 2003, in a move to relieve the severe prison overcrowding, 25,000 inmates who were guilty of participating in the killing but not initiating or leading were released. Assimilating the killers back into the villages was no mean feat, but through counseling, reparation work and government support, murderers and victims now live side by side in relative harmony. One example of government effort to facilitate peace is a program in which those convicted of genocidal crimes build houses for the widows of their village. Another example is *Umuganda*, a mandatory monthly get-together for *all* members of a village. On the last Saturday morning of each month, villagers (or city neighborhoods) work together on a common public project, such as repairing a wall, weeding a lot or painting a school.



**The road to Ruhengeri from Kigali.** All main roads, which connect the larger towns to Kigali, are well maintained by the government. A motor vehicle on the road that is not public transportation or a truck is rare. The vast majority of the people walk or take public transportation, and a few own bicycles.

Kagame's model country is Singapore: clean, orderly, efficient, productive. Kigali's streets are well maintained and swept every day. Plastic shopping bags are illegal, because they become street litter. Most selling of goods on the street is forbidden, as is begging. (That's not to say it doesn't happen, but the people who do it make themselves scarce if the law drives by.) Rwanda is also expensive to live in. Housing in Kigali can reach New York prices. Food prices are similar to those in America. Here's why: After the genocide, hundreds of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) moved in. As the economy grows, European, Chinese and American entrepreneurs are also moving in. Rwandese landlords and shopkeepers can get the prices they want from the rich foreigners, and prices remain high for all. (Currently, a washing machine costs \$1,200; an oscillating fan goes for \$70.) The rationale for expensive goods is that the country is landlocked, and while the roads in Rwanda may be new and well maintained, the roads leading to Rwanda from Uganda and Tanzania are not.

Things we Americans "need" are generally luxury items for Rwandese. Only five percent of the country's households have electricity or running water. People get their water from a neighborhood tap or well. Bathing is done when it rains. Most clothing worn is either secondhand or simple traditional garb. The marketplaces have stalls filled to the rafters with clothes we Americans have given to Goodwill. The traditional Rwandan diet is simple white

starches (rice, potatoes, plantains, cassava) garnished with beans, a few vegetables (tomatoes and avocados are affordable) and an occasional chunk of meat. Only the rich have gas stoves; cooking is done on charcoal stoves.

The government's mission is laid out in *Rwanda Vision 2020*, a collection of outcomes and benchmarks created with the goal of making Rwanda a middle-income country by 2020. As with any government initiative anywhere, Rwanda is currently altering its goals as a result of its 2010 review. A middle-income country is currently defined as having an average annual household income of \$3,500. The current average income in Rwanda is \$450 per year, up from \$230 in 2000 but far from middle income.

Integral to *Rwanda Vision 2020* is finding work other than farming for the Rwandese. The vision is for Rwanda to become the technological hub of Africa, the Singapore of Africa. In order to reach that goal, the country needs scientists and engineers, and it needs a way to create that workforce.

## **KIST**

Kigali Institute of Science and Technology was started in 1997 and graduated its first class in 2000. It is a public university, subject to the rulings of the Ministry of Education. Its campus sits on the former Rwandan army base near the center of Kigali. It was on those grounds that the *Interahamwe*, the Hutu paramilitary organization responsible for the genocide, trained.

Getting into KIST is highly competitive, and students apply to a particular major when they apply for admission. As a technical university, KIST offers majors in civil, mechanical and electrical engineering, biology, chemistry, physics, math and food science. There are many more students who want to major in engineering than there are slots in that field. Many of those students are accepted into their second- or third-choice major. Such students accept those majors because it is their only shot at a university education. Most of my students, who were all physics majors, would have preferred to study engineering.

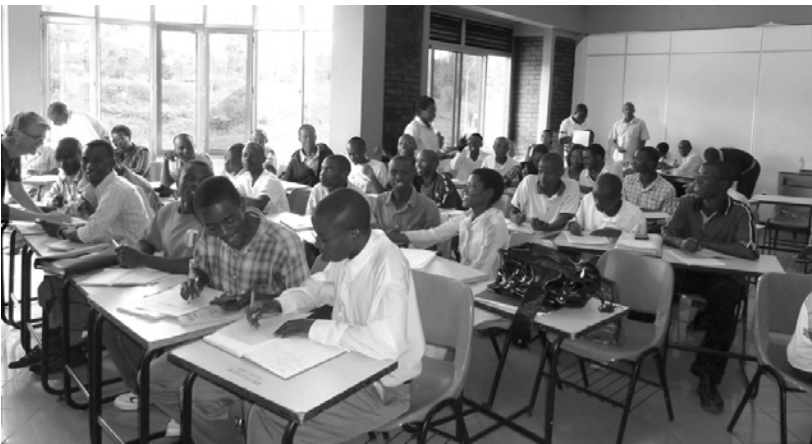
With few exceptions, the students are there courtesy of the government; 100 percent of their tuition and fees are paid, and they receive a living stipend of approximately \$45 each month. KIST provides subsidized meals at a dollar per meal. Of the 3,000 students, 250 live on campus free of charge. The others usually share small houses in the adjacent neighborhood. A typical living situation is for six students to share a small one-bedroom house that has neither electricity nor running water

## Teaching at KIST

Teaching at KIST was the most challenging teaching experience of my career to date. To begin with, the students do not have textbooks; they are simply too expensive, even the discounted international versions. The KIST library has a haphazard collection of books, all of them donated. Other than the professor, the Internet is the only potential source of information for the students. My struggles with KIST began and ended with the quest for adequate technology for the students.

A very small number of students are wealthy enough to own computers. As of this writing, regular computer access for KIST students is limited to five desktop stations in the library and any computers that a department can get for its own students. In the new science laboratory building, there is a room of 50 computers for teaching, but students have access to them only if they have a class in that room. When there is no class, the room is kept locked. The physics department managed to find four old computers that it keeps in its teaching labs for student use whenever the doors are open.

Even when a student can get onto a computer (which is usually infected with several viruses), there is the challenge of getting online. In the physics lab, the Internet was accessible 70 percent of the time. When one could get online, the download rate on a *good* day was 40 kilobytes a second, comparable to dial-up speed. (I do not exaggerate. I took data!) On slow days, the download



**Third-year physics majors.** This is a course in solid state physics. The students in the picture are working on an in-class group problem.

rate could be as low as two kilobytes a second. Virus infections also slowed and in one case shut down a computer for a few days. Some students use Internet cafés, but most cannot afford regular time at one.

All this is to say that I was the sole source of information for my students. In the classroom, I had one (four-by-eight-foot) blackboard at the front of the room on which to write. Instructors also write out notes for the students to photocopy. I was asked to keep the notes to two pages per week so the students could afford the photocopy fee of three cents per page. (KIST will not pay for their copies. To keep professors from overusing the one copier in the building, they must fill out a request form to be signed by the head of department any time copies are needed, even a single copy of one page.)

At KIST, all classes are taught in English. It is a rare student who is fluent in English when entering the university, and all students take five semesters of English language within their first two years. By their third year, it is assumed they are fluent readers, writers and speakers of English. This was not my experience. I had a class of 47 juniors learning solid-state physics and a class of 38 seniors learning statistical mechanics. In either course, perhaps ten of the students were fluent in English. Even fewer of those could understand my American accent and keep up with my normally fast rate of speaking. I tried as hard as I could to slow down and enunciate clearly enough for them, but it was not sufficient. My poor students! With the lack of a textbook, limited access to the Internet and the inscrutable speech of their professor, their reliable information each week was limited to two pages of typed notes.

I do think the weekly discipline of writing those notes made my lectures better, but I will never know, because I never could determine how much of my lectures were understood. Out of politeness or timidity, the students would not ask me to repeat if they did not understand. As all professors know, one cannot assume that students understand because they do not ask questions. Even when one asks for questions, students tend to keep mum. That is why many of us use active learning techniques in class, such as group work. When students engage with one another in learning, both professor and students are able to assess whether they really understand and can utilize the information—it is a great reality check. At first, I did not do much in-class group work, because I felt the pressure to present content material. Even quizzes took from precious class time. About halfway through the semester, though, I reminded myself that presenting information that is not absorbed is simply wasting time. I made the decision to cut down on the amount of content and



**Fourth-year-project students.** These are three of my five project students: Anastase, Phocas and Alphonse. Here we are looking at and trying to understand Anastase's data.

focus a bit more on problem solving. It was at that point that I realized just how clueless my students had been.

One would think that I would have gotten feedback from the students' homework. However, the homework that they turned in was generally not their own. Grading was easy because the homework was largely identical, down to the careless mistakes. I emphasized to the students that they were hurting themselves by not attempting to do the homework themselves, but to no avail. After some asking around, I found that copying homework is the done thing, and that professors generally look the other way. It seemed that the beauty of the finished product (done in ink, with impeccable penmanship) was more important than the product itself.

### **Physics Program Review**

At the same time I was teaching, I worked to guide the physics department through review of their relatively young program. When doing program review, looking at curriculum is a minor portion of the task. Fundamental components of program review are understanding where the students are coming from, what their goals are, what the department's goals for them are and how the program can help the students attain those goals. I met with a subcommittee of the department regularly during the course of five months, and it was through those conversations that I came to better understand who my students were.

These students are among the cream of the crop of Rwanda's current educational system. They have come to KIST naively expecting that when they graduate, they will be presented with a well-paying job in a technical field or in civil service. In general, they are not interested in pursuing the esoteric questions of physics; they are interested in supporting themselves and their families. (I had several students who were responsible for finding funds for their younger siblings to go to school.)

For the most part, my KIST students were very good at working math problems that were presented as straightforward problems. They can solve calculus problems when presented with exercises. However, if they are given a word problem that requires calculus to solve, they often do not know what to do. I often tell my students that math is a box of tools that are used to answer a question. Continuing with that metaphor, imagine a student who knows how to hammer nails but does not know how to use the hammer to put together a wooden box.

We professors in America complain often and loudly about our students' poor writing and reasoning skills. But we take for granted that they have had many opportunities, from high school on, to learn to make reasoned arguments. In Rwanda, one cannot make that assumption. Those students have not read or written regularly. (There is currently not a single public library in the whole of the country.) They take English-language courses, but they do not take a course that features either regular reading or writing. Physics students currently do not write a single paper while at KIST until their fourth year, when they must write a 30-page thesis. There are students at KIST who have never written a paper in their lives.

In response, the physics department came up with a list of small changes to their curriculum that it hopes will lead to good, measurable results. First, students need to read and write regularly. To that end, in one course per year, they will weekly read and summarize scientific articles. Second, students need to develop their scientific-thinking skills. Currently, they do one large research project their last year, but there is no other formal research experience to prepare them for that capstone assignment. Beginning this year, first-, second- and third-year students will do one miniproject each year that will be incorporated into the course work of one of their classes.

As I worked with my colleagues to understand our students' backgrounds and needs, I found out more about their primary and secondary educational experiences, and how they contributed to their university education.

## **K–12 Education**

Primary school, kindergarten through eighth grade, is compulsory and free in Rwanda. However, the quality of that education depends on whether the child is in a private or a public school. The vast majority of the country's children are in publicly financed schools. The average class size is 50–70 students in a single room, even for the youngest kindergarteners. In that classroom, there will be one teacher, one chalkboard, no books. Access to paper, pens, etc., is limited, as those are precious commodities.

Primary education largely consists of rote learning. Critical thinking, sharing different points of view and problem solving are not part of the curriculum. In math, it is the working of exercises, but not the solving of problems, that requires thought. Similarly, science education consists of memorization of facts. Students are called upon to give back memorized answers, but they are not encouraged to ask questions for clarification.

From what I suspect is the Belgian influence on education in Rwanda, from early on students are given pens to write with, not pencils. (While there, I tried to buy a pencil once, and had a hard time finding them in the store. The pencils were as expensive as the nicer pens.) It seems also that good penmanship is prized, but not necessarily the content that is written.

Secondary school is optional and not free. The average cost for tuition, uniform and supplies is \$300–\$500 each year. About 20 percent of children go on to secondary school. Some are able to win scholarships or get loans and tuition reduction from the government; for most families, sending a child to secondary school is a huge sacrifice. Secondary schools vary greatly in terms of class size, resources, etc. However, it seems that the value of learning by rote and doing exercises devoid of context continues.

## **The Role of the Government**

Rwanda's Ministry of Education sets the learning standards for all education in the country, kindergarten through university. It is engaged in creating curriculum that will prepare students for the jobs in technology that the government is hoping to create. The Ministry has created partnerships with other countries that have resulted in advice on policy and donations of educational materials. As an example, KIST has an ongoing relationship with Universität Kaiserslautern in Germany, which has furnished KIST's physics department with equipment for teaching labs and regularly visits and makes recommendations for educational improvements. The university also accepts and funds



15 students each year from KIST as transfer students to its undergraduate programs in Mainz.

Historically, Rwanda's people were bilingual: All Rwandans speak Kinyarwanda and many speak French. From 1994 to 2008, English was added to the list of official languages. In 2008, as a snub to France, the government decreed that the official languages would be Kinyarwanda and English only. As of January 2010 (the same year Rwanda joined the Commonwealth), all classes from fourth grade through university are now to be taught in English only. The teachers were given two months of language instruction to prepare them for the move from French to English in the classroom.

In response to recommendations that students need research experience, in 2007, the Ministry decreed that all students graduating from any university in Rwanda would undertake a fourth-year project in which they researched a problem in their field and at the end of their last year, write a thesis and present their work in a 15-minute talk. The average thesis size is 30 pages. This is a laudable effort to increase the quality of the students, but the manner in which it was implemented is problematic on several levels. This new requirement is an unfunded mandate. Each student must do an individual project under the guidance of a faculty member, but the departments are not given more resources or faculty to cover the added responsibility. The physics department at KIST has six full-time faculty members, and there were 37 students in last year's fourth-year class. There are 48 students in this year's graduating class. I and my husband (also a physicist, who was along for the trip) were able to take five students each, as did most of the other faculty, on top of their already overloaded teaching schedules.

Students write a proposal for research at the beginning of their fourth year, in January. If the proposal is accepted by their department, the student receives approximately \$200 from the government to pay for research materials and printing and binding costs of the thesis. Unfortunately, the money does not appear until the month the students defend. This means that they are dependent on their departments for materials and means to do their work. Individual departments do not have budgets, so if the materials are not already at hand, the project cannot be done.

At KIST, one of the students' English-language courses is ostensibly a technical-writing course. They have no other formal writing or reading course. Students are required to write their theses in English. While this requirement is consistent with the English-only classroom, the students are not fluent

enough in English to write even a short paper, let alone a 30-page thesis. Additionally, they do not have the reading and writing experience that enables them to write, in any language, such a momentous piece. Predictably, plagiarism is a problem.

### **Final Impressions and Thoughts**

In spite of my negative words here, I have great hope for the future of Rwanda. It has come a very long way, but there is still a very long way to go.

While working at KIST, my struggle to get Internet access and virus protection on the computers for the students dominated many of my days. Those whose jobs it was to fix these problems either denied that there was a problem or were often missing. Any success I had was short term, and the computers are now back to the status quo. The administration was not interested in hearing about what did not work. The buildings in which I taught were built in 2001 and 2009 and are prematurely aging. There was insufficient furniture in the classrooms, and what was there was falling apart. In the big lecture halls, for instance, only half of the seats had functioning desks. Meanwhile, the administration is working on creating a new architecture major and building a large new facility to house the nascent program. Maintaining the current structures and providing for the current students is not a priority. As it was for my students' homework, it seems that appearance is more important than substance.

The slowness of the Internet is due to Rwanda's limited access. For a few years the country has been working toward laying an optical cable that will bring high-speed Internet to all corners of the country. While in the country, we saw many crews digging ditches and laying the cable; it is expected that it will be functional by next year. When that happens, one hopes that Rwanda's schools and universities will be able to take full advantage.

It is not enough for the country to be hooked up to high-speed access to the Internet. For the schools and universities to utilize it, their students must have easy access to an adequate number of virus-free computers. They must be able to get at the information available, and that information must be free. There is a lot of open source information in the introductory sciences. The challenge is that because there is so much information out there, it can be difficult to figure out what the best free sources are. The technical majors at KIST have the opposite problem: There are few reliable sources that are useful in upper-level courses. This is where science, technology, engineering and

math (STEM) college and university faculty in the developed world can make a difference. We can write those texts and, instead of taking our writing to publishers, we can put our work on the Web, either through our professional education sites or through one of the open-source Web sites, such as Connexions (cnx.org).

In order for Rwanda's vision for prosperity through technology to be successful, there must be a paradigm shift at the administrative and government levels from focus on program, building and status to focus on student achievement. There also has to be support from developed countries in terms of providing open-source texts for upper-level engineering, science and mathematics students. As Rwanda's universities grow and develop, the hope and expectation is that they will produce a growing number of graduates who can think and reason through complex problems. They will thus be able to adequately develop and maintain the country's technological infrastructure. Some of those graduates will become teachers, who will lead a new generation of children to ever greater heights. It's a dream worth pursuing.

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## *Book Review Essay*

BY ELY M. JANIS

*Angel Island: “Immigrant Gateway to America,”*

by Erika Lee and Judy Yung

Oxford University Press, 2010

Ask many Americans what they know about the history of immigration to the United States and quite a few will mention Ellis Island, celebrating its place as an immigrant gateway or perhaps recalling its role in their own family’s immigration story. Or some might recall Emma Lazarus’s poem, “The New Colossus,” engraved on the pedestal of the Statue of Liberty, declaring, “Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. . . .” But New York harbor and Ellis Island were only one of many points of entry for immigrants coming to America in the 19th and 20th centuries. Erika Lee and Judy Yung in *Angel Island: “Immigrant Gateway to America”* bring to light the often forgotten westward entry of more than a half million immigrants through the Angel Island immigration station off the coast of San Francisco from 1910 to 1940. The history of Angel Island provides a very different view of American immigration history, illustrating the long-standing tension that has existed in the United States between welcoming and allowing immigrants to become Americans and improve their lives and treating immigrants as unwelcome foreign interlopers to be kept out or deported.

The Angel Island immigration station opened in 1910, 18 years after Ellis Island. But whereas Ellis Island was conceived as a grand symbol of governmental power with elegant towers and Great Hall to awe and inspire entering immigrants and facilitate their entry into the United States, Angel Island was built like a prison, whose primary purpose was to detain and deport those immigrants, mainly Asian, deemed to be unassimilable and unwelcome in American society. Its relative inaccessibility and isolation from San Francisco was seen as a positive by federal immigration officials, who desired a virtually escapeproof entry point that would allow them to detain and interrogate immigrants, removing them from the help of family and friends who might try to coach them on how to pass inspection. It was also believed that it would protect Americans from contagious disease and other perceived threats from immigrants.

Nationality, race and economic and social status played large roles in how immigrants were treated. First-class passengers, usually rich, white Americans or Europeans, were inspected privately in their cabins, avoiding the trip from their passenger ship to Angel Island for further examination. For those immigrants for whom further examination was deemed necessary, race continued to play a large factor in their treatment. There were separate entrances and staging areas for whites and for Asians. This segregation continued in the detention quarters and dining facilities, where whites were given superior accommodation and food. The next step was medical examinations for physical infirmities or contagious disease. Here, too, race played a role, with Asian immigrants having higher rates of medical exclusion than Europeans. It was then off to interrogations conducted by immigration officials. Those who passed inspection were then ferried to San Francisco and on to their various tasks and endeavors in America.

Immigration officials at Angel Island initially targeted Chinese immigrants. Hostility toward Chinese immigrants had its roots in the late-19th century. In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which forbade all Chinese laborers from entering the country for ten years and prohibited Chinese immigrants from becoming naturalized citizens. Only Chinese students, teachers, diplomats, merchants and travelers could visit and carry out business in the United States, provided they did not stay or permanently settle. This law was renewed in 1892 and 1902, becoming permanent in 1904. Chinese merchants and native-born Chinese-American citizens were excluded but had to undergo rigorous examinations upon reentry to America

after visits abroad. In response, a system of false papers and documentation emerged, in which American-born Chinese men, who were allowed as U.S. citizens to bring their wives and children into the country, would falsely claim to have fathered children in China. These children were allowed entry into the United States, but immigration officials did their best to keep such “paper sons and daughters” out of the country, setting up a cat-and-mouse game between officials and immigrants. The restrictions on Chinese immigration and naturalization were not lifted until 1943.

Chinese immigrants coming through Angel Island faced a wide variety of obstacles before being allowed entry into America. Upon arrival, men and women, including husbands and wives, were separated and not allowed to see one another or communicate until a decision had been reached to admit or deport them. Children under the age of 12 remained with their mothers, while boys over 12 stayed with their fathers. Chinese immigrants underwent medical examinations by public-health inspectors who carried them out with little explanation or bedside manner. The order to strip naked and to provide stool samples was resented by many immigrants and was particularly embarrassing to Chinese women. Immigrants were then harshly interrogated by officials, usually for hours but sometimes days. Officials attempting to trip up immigrants asked questions as obscure and minute as how many steps were in front of immigrants’ houses in China or which direction their house faced. In some cases, the typed transcripts of these interviews ran 40 or 50 pages. Chinese immigrants detained on the island experienced cramped and unsanitary living conditions, substandard food and a prohibition on visitors until a judgment was rendered on their immigration status.

The treatment meted out to the Chinese detained on the island often led to despair and bitterness among them. One tragic example is found in the experience of Soto Shee, an immigrant from Hong Kong in 1924 who was detained along with her seven-month-old son Soon Din pending further examination of her credentials. While in detention, Soon Din died. Immigration officials refused to allow Soto Shee to attend the burial of her child on the mainland or release her to the custody of her husband, who was already resident in the United States. Unable to bear this tragedy on her own, three weeks later Soto hanged herself. Fortunately, a passing official saved her life and eventually she was released to her husband on bond. Or take the case of Ouock Shee, the wife of merchant Chew Hoy Quong, who was detained on Angel Island for 600 days—because of officials’ suspicion that she was part of a supposed plan

to import Chinese prostitutes into the United States—before being admitted. While these are extreme examples, the experiences of many immigrants on Angel Island left them with lasting feelings of anger and shame, leading them to conceal these memories from their children and grandchildren.

Lee and Yung also recount the experiences of Asian immigrants beyond China, detailing Japanese, Southeast Asian, Korean and Filipino entry through Angel Island. Japanese immigrants were the second-largest group after the Chinese to be processed at Angel Island. They fared quite better than their Chinese counterparts, with less than one percent excluded or deported. Their interrogations usually consisted of fewer than 20 questions and they were generally admitted after a day or two. This difference in treatment was largely explained by Japan's limitation of the numbers of immigrants allowed into the United States and of help by the Japanese Association of America, an ethnic support group for Japanese immigrants. South Asians from India faced discriminatory treatment, having the highest rejection rate of all immigrants processed at Angel Island. Many white Americans claimed that South Asians were unable to assimilate into American culture and were a threat to American workers. Immigrant officials' perception of Korean immigrants as being mainly temporary students and housewives facilitated their entry into the country. Filipinos' experience at Angel Island demonstrates the impact of imperialism on immigration policy. Initially, as "U.S. nationals" because of the United States' colonization of the Philippines, Filipinos were allowed into the country with little trouble. Once the Philippines was granted commonwealth status and promised eventual independence in 1934, however, Filipino immigrants' treatment shifted dramatically. They were now classified as "aliens" and treated like other Asian immigrants, leading to increased detentions and reduced numbers allowed into the United States. Together, this broad examination by Lee and Yung of the treatment of Asian immigrants demonstrates the racism inherent in much of American immigration policy during Angel Island's existence.

Further evidence of this race-based discrimination is evident in Lee and Yung's examination of Russian and Jewish immigrants' passage through Angel Island. Russians were given more lenient medical examinations and preferential treatment than Asians. Their questioning usually consisted of fewer than 20 questions, they were not required to provide witnesses to vouch for their good character or provide written documentation of their finances. Jews fleeing Russia, Poland and Lithuania were also treated leniently. Poor Jews were



given assistance by the prominent Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, which helped with appeals and finding sponsors. It was only the restrictive quotas of the 1924 Immigration Act that led to diminishing numbers of Russians and Jews entering the United States. What explains the different experience of Russians and Jews compared with Asians at Angel Island? The most important factor, simply, was race. They were European, white and treated with a different set of immigration laws and policies.

Efforts to preserve Angel Island and commemorate its importance as part of America's cultural heritage have proved challenging. A fire in 1940 in the main administration building led to the closing of Angel Island in 1941, beginning more than 20 years of neglect and deterioration. In 1968, the remaining buildings were slated for demolition and removal. It was seasonal park ranger Alexander Weiss who led to the preservation of the immigration station's remains. Exploring the ruins on his own, Weiss discovered hundreds of poems in Chinese and other languages etched into the wooden barrack walls by detainees conveying their fear and anger during their detention. In December 1997, a coalition of scholars, journalists and community activists succeeded in stopping the demolition and securing a designation for Angel Island as a National Historic Landmark. In the last decade, remaining buildings were stabilized and the poems were chronicled and preserved. In 2009, newly restored detention barracks, as well as special lighting and audio kiosks to help view and interpret the Chinese poems on the walls, were opened to visitors. President Barack Obama proclaimed January 21, 2010, National Angel Island Day. California's ongoing budget crisis has prevented further work, but it would seem that Angel Island is now safe as a national site of contemplation and remembrance.

The legacy of Angel Island leaves us with a much more complex and challenging view of American history than the triumphal façade of Ellis Island. It is one of the most troubling artifacts of America's unfair treatment and racism toward the rest of the world. But, as Lee and Yung convincingly show us, it is an important legacy to consider. For many Asian-Americans, Angel Island, once a symbol of anger and shame, can now serve as a symbol of the need for inclusiveness in America. As Paul Chow, a Chinese-American engineer involved in the effort to save Angel Island, eloquently declared on the island's being designated a National Historic Landmark, "This will give us our Valley Forge, our Statue of Liberty and an eternal reminder that we do belong in America." The United States has drawn immigrants from all points of the

globe and it is the hard work, skills and sacrifice of generations of immigrants, European and non-European alike, that have molded the America we know today. Angel Island is a living memorial to this fact.

Lee and Yung conclude their rich study by briefly examining current immigration and detention policy. Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, changes in immigration policy have led to huge increases in immigrant detention. In 2008 alone, Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) detained more than 407,000 people on immigration-related issues. This dwarfs the number of immigrants detained during the peak of immigration restriction and exclusion in the early 20th century. These numbers do not include only illegal or undocumented immigrants who have only recently entered the country. They also include long-term residents with green cards, asylum seekers, parents of U.S. citizens and others who have often been taken into custody for nonviolent crimes, including traffic infractions and other violations. Immigration laws similar to that passed recently in Arizona seem to signal the possibility of these numbers' continuing to rise. What these policies will mean to us as a country and as a society is still unknown. Angel Island can help serve as a guide and signpost in our current debates about immigration policy and immigrants' role in America. One poem etched on the walls of Angel Island poignantly reminds us:

There are tens of thousands of poems composed on these walls.  
They are all cries of complaints and sadness.  
The day I am rid of this prison and attain success,  
I must remember that this chapter once existed.

We would do well to remember Angel Island as we debate the place of immigration in the fabric of 21st-century American society and to help guide us to create an immigration policy that serves our economic needs while treating all immigrants with empathy, respect and humanity.

# Gender, Race and the Antilynching Crusade in the United States

BY FRANCES JONES-SNEED

*“Only the BLACK WOMAN can say, ‘When and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole . . . race enters with me.’”*

—Anna Julia Cooper, 1892

## INTRODUCTION

**T**he fight to abolish lynching in the United States is the story of three organizations and one woman, Ida B. Wells-Barnett. Any discussion of gender and lynching must begin with Wells-Barnett and her crusade to end lynching in this country. She presents a difficult analysis of the role of gender—in that she championed the fight against black male oppression at a time when her male counterparts were busy with other causes. Her work demonstrates the power of an individual to bring change and awareness to a situation to which polite society was turning its back. The groups that followed and supported her efforts were the National Association of Colored Women’s

Clubs (NACWC), the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL). Ida B. Wells-Barnett defined the agenda for African-Americans for half a century. She determined where and when blacks entered the fight against injustice through her crusade against lynching.

This article discusses the ways in which lynching was used as a political tool to silence and control blacks in the United States from the legal abolition of slavery to the end of the Jim Crow era and the ways in which Wells-Barnett and three groups led the fight to end the practice of lynching. Their strategies and focus differed, yet each had a uniquely gendered view of the lynching phenomenon and the ways to curb the mob violence of its perpetrators.

### **Black Women and Solidarity**

Black female solidarity developed as a response to slavery. According to Debra Gray White, “The victimization of black women continued for over seventy-five years after emancipation. . . . Discrimination and terrorism made for a desperate, solitary struggle, one which allowed black women few opportunities to assume roles other than those they had assumed during slavery.”<sup>1</sup>

Toni Morrison said of the black woman, “[S]he had nothing to fall back on; not maleness, not whiteness, not ladyhood, not anything. And out of the profound desolation of her reality she may well have invented herself.”<sup>2</sup> This call for self-invention is what began the foundation of black women’s political, cultural and intellectual traditions in this country. This legacy set them apart dramatically from white women and had a powerful effect on the roles that free black women undertook in terms of creating organizations and movements that promoted moral, social, political and intellectual awareness of what it meant to be a black woman in America.

[I]n a patriarchal society, black men, as men, constituted a potential challenge to the established order. Laws were formulated primarily to exclude black men from adult male prerogatives in the public sphere and lynching meshed with these legal mechanisms of exclusion. Black women represented a more ambiguous threat. They too were denied access to the politico-jural domain, but since they shared

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<sup>1</sup>Debra Gray White, *Ar’n’t I a Woman?: “Female Slaves in the Plantation South”* (New York: Norton, 1985), 163.

<sup>2</sup>Jacqueline Bobo, Cynthia Hudley, Claudine Michel, *The Black Studies Reader* (Boston: Routledge, 2004), 277.

this exclusion with women in general, its maintenance engendered less anxiety and required less force. Lynching served primarily to dramatize hierarchies among men. In contrast, the violence directed at blacks illustrates the double jeopardy of race and sex. Black women were sometimes executed by lynch mobs, but more routinely they served as targets of sexual assault.<sup>3</sup>

The lynching motif is a power struggle for economic and social control. White women were used as pawns, and black women became the invisible victims while they and their fathers, husbands and sons were lynched in grand ceremony. Black women were actual victims of the lynch mobs and when not lynched, remained rape victims. As Jacquelin Dowd Hall points out, there is a historical connection between rape and lynching. Yet black women stand at the center of this motif as “mother” to them all—white males, black males and white females—and became the earliest activists against lynching in this country.

### **Black Women as Lynch Victims**

Until recently, there has been little research about the special nature of black women as lynch victims. In 1980, Robert L. Zangrando wrote the definitive book about the NAACP’s crusade against lynching—*The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950*,<sup>4</sup>—yet he makes no distinction between male and female victims. In the first chapter, he gives a short background of the extralegal violence against blacks in the country and states:

What follows is not a history of the NAACP; nor is it a social or psychological study of lynching and its practitioners. Rather, this book was designed to analyze the role that the Association played in the struggle against lynching and to explore the consequences of that role for the organization itself and for the emergence of the twentieth-century civil rights movement. No such movement for human rights could have occurred, in the form it took, without the NAACP’s campaign against the mob.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Jacquelin Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry* (New York: Columbia UP, 1993), xvi.

<sup>4</sup>Robert L. Zangrando, *The NAACP Crusade Against Lynching, 1909–1950* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1980).

<sup>5</sup>Zangrando, 18.

What Zangrando does in the ten chapters of the book is to detail the NAACP's legal fight to pass an antilynching bill in Congress from 1918 through 1949.<sup>6</sup> He explains, "Lynching became the wedge by which the NAACP insinuated itself into the public conscience, developed contacts within governmental circles, established credibility among philanthropists, and opened lines of communication with other liberal-reformist groups that eventually joined it in a mid-century, civil rights coalition of unprecedented proportions."<sup>7</sup>

It becomes clear that the issue of lynching launched the NAACP as a national organization and allowed it to make connections and coalitions like no other organization that predated it. In Zangrando's study, the NAACP is the champion of the cause and nowhere is any credit given to the long years of work by Ida B. Wells-Barnett or the NACWC, who prepared the groundwork. Even more important is that in the figures he gives of the actual lynching cases, gender is the missing variable.<sup>8</sup> Between 1877 and 1950, there were 4,743 lynchings in the United States and of that number, 3,446 were African-Americans.<sup>9</sup> The recent estimate is that about ten percent of the total were black women.<sup>10</sup>

An example of a black female lynch victim is Laura Nelson, who was lynched in Okemah, Oklahoma, on May 25, 1911, two years after the founding of the NAACP. The Nelson case was similar to a number of other lynchings of women, in that it involved a suspected crime by her husband, Austin Nelson.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Zangrando, 5.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Some of the recent studies that focus on black female victims include: Maria Delongoria, "Stranger Fruit: The Lynching of Black Women: The Cases of Rosa Richardson and Maria Scott," Ph.D. dissertation (U of Missouri Columbia, 2006); Crystal Nicole Femister, "Ladies and Lynching: The Gendered Discourse of Mob Violence in the New South, 1880–1930," Ph.D. dissertation (Princeton U, 2000); Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, African-American Women's Networks in the Anti-Lynching Crusade." In *Gender, Class, Race and Reform in the Progressive Era*, ed. Norelee Frankel and Nancy S. Dye (Lexington: U of Kentucky, 1991); Johnnie P. Stevenson, *The Lynching of Laura* (Philadelphia: Xlibris, 2003); Mary Jane Brown, "Eradicating This Evil: Women in the American Anti-Lynching Movement, 1892–1940." In *Studies in African American History and Culture* (Boston: Routledge, 2000); Patricia Schechter, "Unsettled Business: Ida B. Wells Against Lynching or How Antilynching Got Its Gender." In W. Fritz Brundage, ed., *Under Sentence of Death: "Lynching in the South"* (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1997); Patrick J. Huber, "Caught Up in the Violent Whirlwind of Lynching: The 1885 Quadruple Lynching in Chatham County, North Carolina," *North Carolina Historical Review* 75 (1998): 134–60; Michelle M. Kuhl, "Modern Martyrs: African American Responses to Lynching, 1880–1940" (SUNY Binghamton, 2004).

On the morning of May 1, 1911, Deputy Sheriff George Looney, accompanied by several other men, arrived at the home of Austin and Laura Nelson in Paden, Oklahoma, to apprehend Austin, who was accused of stealing a cow from his neighbor.

Paden, Oklahoma, was a small settlement of mostly African-Americans who settled there in the early years of the 20th century, before Oklahoma was a state. More black towns were established in the Oklahoma Territory than in any other place. After Reconstruction, many blacks left Deep Southern states to travel to the new western territories, believing that it would offer them a greater chance for freedom and land. The migratory pattern of the Nelson family was probably typical of many of the black families in the area. Austin Nelson was born in Waco, Texas, in 1873. He was the third youngest of six children of Dave and Rhoda Nelson, who were both born in slavery in the state of Georgia. According to the 1880 census, Dave Nelson worked as a molder in a foundry in Waco, which was good employment during that time; but by 1900, he had moved the family to Pottawatomie, Oklahoma, in the Oklahoma Territory. By that time, Austin had been married to Laura for four years and they had a three-year-old son, L. D.

The Oklahoma Territory was still a rough western area where vigilantism ruled. The population was mixed. Native Americans' land was ceded or taken and whites were the majority of the population. In 1892, the governor of Oklahoma reported that the population of the territory was "about 85 per cent white, 10 per cent colored, and 5 per cent Indians. About 5 per cent of the whites are foreign born. Nearly every State and Territory in the Union is represented . . . but the great majority of our white population is from the adjoining States."<sup>11</sup> The African-American population continued to increase, especially after statehood led by the boosterism of black leaders such as Edward P. McCabe and Booker T. Washington. It is believed that as many as 50 black towns were founded in Oklahoma. With the burgeoning population of blacks came the same problems they faced in the South—discrimination based on color. "By the time delegates met in the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention in Guthrie in 1906 to organize a new state, both law and social customs had created an atmosphere for a completely segregated society."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Report of the Governor of Oklahoma, Guthrie, Oklahoma, October 1, 1892: 470 (Oklahoma Historical Society <<http://www.users.icnet.net/~frizzell/ohspage.html>>).

<sup>12</sup>Donald Greene, "African Americans" (Oklahoma Historical Society <<http://www.users.icnet.net/~frizzell/ohspage.html>>).

Given this history, life in Oklahoma was as difficult for the Nelson families as it must have been in Texas and Georgia, the states in which they lived before migrating to the Oklahoma Territory. Yet they arrived expecting better opportunities in Oklahoma. Okemah was the county seat of Okfuskee County. The town was founded on the hope that a major railroad would be built there. It never happened, so the employment opportunities were meager at best. African-Americans were not the only group that suffered from poverty, yet they were the group that was hindered from developing any further opportunities. Land was not available to most of them, so they eked out a living from the land that they rented from larger farms. Theft was a common crime. It was treated harshly, usually by lynching if the accused was found guilty, so when the men arrived at the Nelson home on that fateful morning, the Nelsons had plenty of reasons to be afraid. Shots were fired and the deputy sheriff was killed. It is believed that the Nelsons' son fired the fatal shot, yet Laura Nelson confessed to the crime. The men took the entire family to jail. Austin Nelson confessed to theft after he was arrested. He was arraigned and sentenced to three years in the state prison. Laura and her son were held in the jail to await trial on the charge of murder. Early on the morning of May 25, 1911, a crowd arrived at the jail and demanded that Laura and her son be released to them. According to the jailer, the mob rushed him, tied him up and took the prisoners. After the jailer freed himself, he could find no traces of the prisoners or the mob.

The next day, the bodies of Laura Nelson, 27, and her 14-year-old son were found hanging about five feet apart from the steel bridge that crossed the North Canadian River. Laura had been raped and beaten before she was hanged. A picture of the lynching of Laura Nelson is the only extant photograph found of a black woman lynch victim. The photograph of her body swaying, suspended from the bridge, with the flowing river below and the images of sky and trees beyond with white onlookers presents the lonely image of the black female as she is remembered in the history of lynching in this country. Laura Nelson, like the majority of black female lynch victims, tried to protect her family and paid the supreme price. Whether the mob was angry that Austin Nelson received only a slight sentence or whether they lynched Laura and her son as an example for the black community is not known. Before that time, there had been many other lynchings in Oklahoma, almost 50 before Laura and her son. Unlike other lynching photographs, the one of Laura Nelson and her son was not published in any newspapers or made into postcards. The photographer, G. H. Farnam, kept the negative and may



have provided copies for those who wished to have a memento of the mother and son. The hangings achieved their purpose. Laura Nelson's family, Austin's brothers, refused to claim the bodies, so it was left to Okemah's town officials to cut them down and provide a burial place.

A grand jury was called in June of 1911 to investigate the hangings, but it failed to indict anyone. By the 23rd of the month, the white citizens received word that blacks were very angry about the lynchings and were going to attack and burn the town. No action was taken by the black citizens, but according to town lore, the white citizens were frightened enough to arm themselves and stay inside their homes. Nine years later, the Tulsa Race Riot occurred, when blacks were killed and their property destroyed because a lynching was foiled. Race relations in Oklahoma continued in this manner until the 1950s, when segregation was challenged and eventually abolished as a result of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision.

The case of Laura Nelson is one of many like it that need to be unearthed and studied. A number of mysteries remain. In the 1910 census, Austin and Laura were listed with two children, their son 13 years of age and a two-year-old daughter, Carrie. What happened to Carrie Nelson after the jailing of her parents and brother? Some claim that her body was found floating below the bodies of her mother and brother in the North Canadian River. What happened to Austin Nelson after he served his three-year term in prison? Some suggest that if he survived, he may have changed his name and moved from Oklahoma. Moreover, what of the Nelsons' other relatives? We lose them after 1920 and the stories behind the other victims are yet to be unearthed.

## **IDA B. WELLS-BARNETT**

Ida B. Wells-Barnett's fight was to end lynchings of Laura Nelson, her son and other women and men like them. Wells-Barnett was born a slave and experienced victimization firsthand. Lynching was about white, male dominance and control of the political, economic and social world of blacks. It was an instrument of coercion that created a climate of fear in the black community during Reconstruction. As Wells-Barnett pointed out, "[T]he real purpose of these savage demonstrations" (lynchings) "is to teach the Negro that in the South he has no rights that the law will enforce."<sup>13</sup> From the inception

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<sup>13</sup>Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "Lynch Law in Georgia" (Chicago, June 20, 1899), 1.

of her publication of *Southern Horrors*: “Lynch Law in All Its Phases” in 1892, her crusade against lynching subsumed her life until her death in 1931.<sup>14</sup> She was a lone voice until the founding of the NACWC in 1896, the NAACP in 1909, the Anti-lynching Crusaders campaign in 1922 and the ASWPL in 1930.

Frederick Douglass, the grand fighter against slavery, was an ardent antilynching advocate during Reconstruction. Most notable among his editorials was “Lynch Law in the South,” in which he asserted that the true reason for the murders of blacks was that the “negro meets no resistance when on a downward course. It is only when he rises in wealth, intelligence, and manly character that he brings upon himself the heavy hand of persecution. The men lynched were murdered because they were prosperous.”<sup>15</sup> Douglass was a great admirer of Wells-Barnett, who became a one-person machine against lynching. He wrote a letter that she included in her landmark 1892 text on lynching, *Southern Horrors*: “You have dealt with the facts with cool, painstaking fidelity and left those naked and uncontradicted facts to speak for themselves. Brave woman! you have done your people and mine a service which can neither be weighed nor measured.”<sup>16</sup>

The lynching of her friends Thomas Moss, Calvin McDowell and Henry Stewart on March 9, 1892, was the beginning of Wells-Barnett’s lifelong passion to ferret out injustice against blacks wherever she found it. She studied the situation and presented the facts behind the lynchings of many black men and women. Most important, she exposed the hypocrisy of the southern white justice system. She was the most famous black woman of the period, international symbol of fearlessness, crusading against injustice. Wells-Barnett was able to mobilize northern white and black support, including money, and gain access to media outlets. She believed the focus on an antilynching campaign was the most pressing issue for African-Americans because it acted as group terrorism and retarded the success of the movement toward total freedom. Wells-Barnett realized that southern whites used lynching as a tool of group terror, intimidating many others by physically victimizing a few. She made

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<sup>14</sup>Paula J. Giddings, *Ida: A Sword Among Lions*, “Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching” (Amistad, NY, 2008).

<sup>15</sup>Frederick Douglass, “Lynch Law in the South.” In Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, *Civil Rights and African Americans: a Documentary History* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1991), 286.

<sup>16</sup>Wells-Barnett, *Southern Horrors and Other Writings*: “The Anti-lynching Campaign of Ida B. Wells-Barnett, 1892–1900” (New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1996), preface.

the choice to leave the South in order to name the injustice and challenge it directly, rather than work within the system to gain a small measure of power.

In an editorial in *Memphis Free Speech* on May 21, 1892, she wrote: "Nobody in this section of the country believes the old threadbare lie that Negro men rape white women. If southern white men are not careful, they will overreach themselves and public sentiment will have a reaction; a conclusion will then be reached which will be very damaging to the moral reputation of their women."<sup>17</sup>

Wells-Barnett became a crusader carrying her story throughout the United States and traveled to Europe to appeal to a world audience about the injustice of the American system. It was one of those trips that enraged a white Missouri newspaper editor. Missouri was one of the first states to organize a black women's club and the state that provided the rallying issue for the formation of a national organization of black women. She confronted the false stereotype of the black male sexual predator.

Wells-Barnett ripped the cover of respectability off those assumptions, so that many in the North, and even some in the South, began to object to "Judge Lynch." Race liberals, as these whites were called, felt compelled to protest what was obviously a subversion of the U.S. Constitution, while ignoring such issues as economic and political discrimination against blacks. It gives us an idea of the tenor of race relations at the time when we realize that those who objected to lynching were designated liberals, a dangerous label in the South. When southern women activists moved away from the racial-superiority angle when fighting for women's rights (like the earlier suffrage movement) in the 1920s and '30s, they did so in part by attacking lynching, seeing it as a means of keeping down white women as well as blacks.

Along with her longtime friend Mary Church Terrill, Wells-Barnett used the antilynching campaign to galvanize middle-class black women across the country. While many of those women had been involved in charity work or in self-help organizations, the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs gave black women an arena in which to express political as well as social concerns. With the establishment of this group, black women had a place to express both their racial and their gender identities. The NACWC became the leading voice for woman suffrage in the black community. Rather than depend on black men or white women for a political voice, they developed a voice of their own. Black women were now defending black men, which was the opposite of what southern race relations dictated.

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<sup>17</sup>Wells-Barnett, Editorial, *Memphis Free Speech*, 21 May 1, 1892.

## National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACWC)

In 1893, John W. Jacks, a Missouri newspaper editor, sent a letter to the members of the British Anti-lynching Society denouncing black women, but most especially Miss Ida B. Wells-Barnett, who was touring England at the time, lecturing on the evils of lynching.<sup>18</sup> The general tone of Jacks's letter represented a popular image of black women in the country at the turn of the century. Although black women were quick to establish that Jacks's letter was only an indication of other problems, they spent the next decades of club activity in rebuttal of the charges. An impetus of the Jacks letter was one of the largest and most successful meetings of black women in the country. It also led to the formation of the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs. Indeed, the activities of the NACWC and the contents of its literary organ, *The Woman Era*, reveal that a significant number of middle-class black women at the turn of the century were socially responsible and politically aware, a far cry from the pejorative stereotype.<sup>19</sup>

Ida B. Wells-Barnett's activism spurred the formation of the organization and she was heavily involved in club work. Her activism, however, defied categories, because she did not limit herself to the definition of "woman's place" of her time. She did not wait for the support of men—black or white. She was destined to do this work and because of that, she did not often receive support from the traditional black organizations, such as the church or even the NAACP, of which she was a founding member. Patricia Schechter and Paul Giddings's recent works on Wells-Barnett further detail the aspects of her struggles with not only black male authorities but also black and white women's organizations. Wells-Barnett was a singular force against the barbarity of lynching and laid the groundwork for all future activism in that area.

Black women's organizations were early promoters of intellectual, moral and political activities for young black women. The National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, founded in 1895, was the first national organization founded by blacks after slavery, predating the NAACP by a decade. African-American women became early members of local organizations that affiliated with the NACWC. The focus of the national organization was on suffrage,

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<sup>18</sup>John W. Jacks, "Letter to Miss Florence Balgarnie," 19 March 1895, Mary Church Terrell Papers, Moorland-Spangarn Collection (Washington, D.C.: Howard U).

<sup>19</sup>Emma L. Fields, "The Women's Club Movement in the United States: 1877-1900," master's thesis (Howard U, 1948), 60.

temperance, antilynching, education and social reform. The women of this organization were some of the leading women of their day.

The efforts by largely middle-class black females to “demand justice, simple justice, as the right of every race” by gathering together and demanding reforms gave them a special power, rooted in their gender, during the Jim Crow era. Black men dared not speak so openly or defiantly about the brutalities of Jim Crow lest they be lynched as would-be molesters of white women. The inability of white supremacists to attack black women in this way enabled them to speak defiantly in places and in ways that no black man ever could. In time, the black female voice of protest even won over many white club women who joined with them in the 1920s to campaign against lynching.<sup>20</sup>

Lillian Smith, in her classic work *Killers of the Dream*, paints a portrait of a scarred psyche of the souls of white men—torn between their desires for the black-mammy figures of their youth and a continuing desire for black women against the societal taboos of the South. They wished to control the lives of white women, black men and black women.

As the Jim Crow era terrorized black men with mob violence, deprived them of their political voice with disenfranchisement, and shut them out of jobs in American industry in favor of white immigrants, it often fell upon black women to hold the black family together—both in the rural South and in the urban North. They did this by working as domestics in the homes of white people, by creating networks of kin and female friends to support one another as they eked out a livelihood, and by participating in their churches and mutual aid groups. This cooperation among black women produced a sense of pride that came not from their social status or from their work but rather from their families, neighborhood, and church.<sup>21</sup>

### **National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)**

Early in the history of the NAACP, the executive board included lynching as one of the major items on their platform for attacking the Jim Crow

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>Ronald L. F. Davis, “Resisting Jim Crow: In-Depth Essay” <<http://www.jimcrowhistory.org/history/resisting2.html>>.

system. In fact, “the NAACP started with a lynching 100 years after the birth of Abraham Lincoln, and in the city, Springfield, Illinois, which was his long-time residence,”<sup>22</sup> where white mob violence took the lives of seven blacks and destroyed more than \$200,000 worth of property.<sup>23</sup> “When the N. A. A. C. P. really went out to expose and report on lynchings, many ‘good’ people resigned in disgust.”<sup>24</sup> Nonetheless, their view of lynching was male centered. As an example, in the historic march down Fifth Avenue in 1933, the marchers displayed placards reading, “I AM A MAN.” This language speaks volumes about their understanding of the gendered nature of violence. Each issue of Du Bois’s *Crisis*, the official publication of the NAACP, included a section on lynching that came to be called “Our Burden.” After a detailed explanation of each lynch victim, there was always a list titled “Negro Men Lynched.” In 1934, the heading of the list changed to read “Negro Men and Women Lynched.” It was at that point that the organization revised the language to reflect the gendered nature of the movement. Du Bois and his relentless inclusion of the lynching figures kept the subject of lynching visible for all liberal-minded Americans.

As Patricia Schechter points out, it was with the 1922 Anti-lynching Crusaders—established to support the Dyer Bill under Mary Talbert, president of the NACWC—that the NAACP relied on women to be the fundraisers—essentially the foot soldiers of the movement—that things began to change.<sup>25</sup> The male contingent, James Weldon Johnson, Du Bois and Walter White, were the public faces and voices of the movement. Hence, the analogy made by historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham about black churchwomen and their invaluable support of the black religious institution is true of the support of black women in the antilynching crusade.<sup>26</sup> Even men such as Du

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<sup>22</sup>W. E. B. Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, 1868–1963, Chapter 15: “The NAACP” in *The Autobiography of W.E.B. DuBois: “A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century”* (New York: International, 1968), 254.

<sup>23</sup>James L. Crouthamel, “The Springfield Race Riot of 1908,” *The Journal of Negro History* 45, No. 3 (July 1960), 164.

<sup>24</sup>Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, 1868–1963, Chapter 1: “About Birthdays” in *In Battle for Peace: “The Story of My 83rd Birthday.”* Shirley Graham (New York: Masses and Mainstream, 1952), 7.

<sup>25</sup>Patricia Schechter, *Ida B. Wells-Barnett and American Reform, 1880–1930* (U of North Carolina P, 2001).

<sup>26</sup>Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham.

Bois, who knew the value of black women, still ignored the significant role of black women in the antilynching movement and failed to decry the brutal murder, rape and mutilation of black women victims.

An important part of black women's contribution to the NAACP was its campaign for the Dyer Bill and the establishment of an organization that publicized the horrors of lynching and provided a focus for campaign fund-raising. The Anti-Lynching Crusaders, founded in 1922 under the aegis of the NAACP and the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs, was a women's organization that aimed to raise money to promote the passage of the Dyer Bill and for the prevention of lynching in general. The Crusaders sought to include white women but were largely unsuccessful despite the efforts of their director, Mary Talbert, who sent 1,850 letters to "white women known to be sympathetic to social reform." The Crusaders' slogan was, "A Million Women United to Stop Lynching" and their aim was to get one million women to donate "at least" one dollar each toward the NAACP anti-lynching campaign.<sup>27</sup>

Congressman Leonidas Dyer of Missouri introduced his Anti-Lynching Bill—known as the Dyer Bill—into Congress in 1918.<sup>28</sup> Although it had not done so initially, from 1919 onward, the NAACP supported Dyer's antilynching legislation. The Dyer Bill was passed by the House of Representatives in 1922 and was given a favorable report by the Senate committee, but a filibuster in the Senate halted its passage. Efforts to pass similar legislation were not taken up again until the 1930s with the Costigan-Wagner Bill.<sup>29</sup> The Dyer Bill influenced the text of antilynching legislation promoted by the NAACP into the 1950s, including the Costigan-Wagner Bill.<sup>30</sup> An antilynching bill was never ratified, though W. E. B. Du Bois believed that:

... a number of plausible and attractive explanations of the decline of lynching [exist] from 226 in 1896 to 11 in 1928. Some attribute

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<sup>27</sup>Angelica Mungarro, "How Did Black Women in the NAACP Promote the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill, 1918–1923?" <<http://womhist.alexanderstreet.com/lynch/intro.html>>.

<sup>28</sup>Anti-Lynching Bill," 1918, Senate Reports (7951), 67th Congress: 2nd Session, 1921–1922 (Vol. 2), 33–34.

<sup>29</sup><<http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAcostiganwagner.html>>.

<sup>30</sup><[http://www.naacp.org/about/history/anti\\_lynching\\_bill\\_background/index.html](http://www.naacp.org/about/history/anti_lynching_bill_background/index.html)>.

it to prayer, and others to inter-racial resolutions; but I see it differently. I see lynching increase and decrease indifferently, until in 1919 a nationwide agitation was begun by the N. A. A. C. P., backed by statistics, advertisements and meetings. The curve of mob murder fell lazily. Then suddenly in a single year it dropped 75%. I study the occurrences of that year, 1922. And that study leads me to believe that the effective check to lynching was the organized political power of Northern Negroes that put the Dyer Anti-Lynching Bill through the House of Representatives January 26, 1922, by a vote of 230 to 119.<sup>31</sup>

### **Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching (ASWPL)**

It was not until white women joined the antilynching campaign in earnest that the numbers of lynch victims began to decline. Black women appealed for white women's support from the earliest campaign of Ida B. Wells-Barnett and Mary Burnett Talbert's appeal for the 1922 NAACP campaign. Yet, with the exception of a few individuals, white women did not join the campaign in large numbers until Jessie Daniel Ames spurred the formation of the ASWPL in 1930. Even then, it was an all-white female organization because of their fear that an interracial committee would repel white southern women.

Ames and the ASWPL used Wells-Barnett techniques to convince whites of the fallacy of the lynch rationale that they were protecting the virtue of white women from the bestial nature of black men. Ames proved that "the justification for lynching was false. Perpetrators claimed that they were defending the virtue of southern white women. Yet statistics that Ames gathered showed that only 29 percent of the 204 lynchings from 1922 to 1929 involved allegations of crimes against white women. . . . By 1938, the number of lynchings had fallen by 50 percent. . . . In 1942, when Ames discontinued the organization, lynching was rare."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt, 1868–1963, "The Negro Citizen." In *Crisis* 36, No. 5 (May 1929), 154–56, 171–73 (New York: Crisis, 1929), 154–73.

<sup>32</sup>Bonnie L. Ford, "The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching" <<http://www.answers.com/topic/association-of-southern-women-for-the-prevention-of-lynching>>; Jessie Daniel Ames, *Southern Women and Lynching*: "Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1775–2000" <<http://womhist.binghamton.edu>>; Henry E. Barber, "The Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching, 1930–42." *Phylon* 34, No. 4 (Dec. 1973), 378–89; Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, "Jessie Daniel Ames and the Women's Campaign against Lynching" (New York: Columbia UP, 1979).



## CONCLUSION

It is interesting to note the differences in the nature of lynching between that of black men and that of black women. Most women were lynched protecting black men, children or themselves. The selfless nature of black women's sacrifices from the abolition of slavery to the end of the Jim Crow era and Wells-Barnett's focus on the infamous charges of rape against black men are illustrative of the work that needs to be done in unearthing the stories of black women.

The murder of Emmett Till in 1955 served as a turning point for the post-World War II generation and demonstrated that southern whites still used violence as a tool of terror—just as they had in the post-Civil War era. This legacy of oppression gave Emmett Till's murderers the license to murder a child for alleged infraction of the southern code of behavior. Emmett Till's murder was not an anomaly. It was not the first or last murder of a black man in Mississippi by white terrorists. Yet his murder was publicized more than any of the others before or after. Many believe that the reason we remember the big doe-eyed boy child is because of his mother, Mamie Till Bradley. She made the preservation of the memory of her son a crusade. She insisted that there be an open coffin so that the world could see what had been done to her boy. If the picture of Till in his Sunday suit, white shirt, hat cocked at an angle and those large brown eyes is not haunting, the picture of his battered body is the stuff of nightmares. In spite of the acquittal of the two white defendants, Till's memory is etched in our collective memory. Mamie Till Bradley made sure we would remember. She knew that the murder of her son would have historic meaning for the majority of black Americans. The photograph of Laura Nelson and her son hanging from the Oklahoma Bridge in 1911 is also etched in our memories. Both are historic markers of the violent nature of our democratic society. Mamie Till Bradley is an extension of a long line of activist black women and Laura Nelson is an example of the invisible victims. Americans must recognize that oppression and violence remain a problem in American society that needs to be addressed with the same attention it received in the past century by the three leading organizations of their time—the NAACP, the NACWC and the ASWPL—and one small brave woman who was not afraid to speak truth to power.

# Contributors

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**Laura Stevenson** studied the literary power of Elizabethan pastoral in her book *Praise and Paradox* and later followed the pastoral thread in her studies of the *Golden Age of Children Literature*. As a novelist, she juxtaposed Vermont and California in her young-adult book *Happily After All*, and she used many themes of Elizabethan pastoral romance in her young-adult fantasy *The Island and the Ring*. In her most recent novel, she has portrayed the world of Vermont summers in *Return in Kind*. She and her husband, the poet F. D. Reeve, live in her family's Vermont farmhouse.

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