

what the *Boston Globe* has done. They've said, if you want print we'll give you print, but you're going to pay a lot for it.

It seems that destination news sites—those you would habitually visit, the way you would read a morning newspaper—are becoming outdated. Can you comment on the difference between the ways the generations consume news?

I do almost all my news reading online, and yet I still approach it as, now I'm going to read the *New York Times*, now the *Globe*. That isn't how young people are consuming news. They're coming at it from all different directions. That's where a niche publication like the New Haven *Independent* has an advantage over a general service newspaper. In this postindustrial age, there's no reason for any one publication to have international news, the funnies, sports. It doesn't make any sense. The *Independent* is focused on a fairly small city. If it happens over the border in Hamden, they're not going to cover it. The *Register* is stuck with still trying to appeal to a broader audience.

Do you think that relatively low-paying community journalism has any appeal for young people entering the field?

I teach journalism, and I don't get the impression that many of my students want to do local community journalism. They want to do fashion and sports, but there are certainly a few who are interested in local community journalism, and venues like the *Independent* are a good place for them. But the old career ladder, the idea of moving up and up and up, just doesn't exist anymore. I do wonder if we're returning to a more traditional vision of community journalism. There's always going to be a need for great national and international reporting, but there won't be places to do it.

Your book seems to lean toward the nonprofit model as the way to go.

When Bass started the website, he looked at the for-profit model and said that selling advertising is too much work. As a nonprofit you're getting huge chunks of funding. But the IRS has put the clamp down on nonprofit journalism, rejecting applications for nonprofit status. It's hard to know why. Some investigative news sites have received nonprofit status, but the IRS told them that they need to take the word "journalism" out to gain approval. But if local nonprofits are able to tap into local money, that's more sustainable. Donors can't make guarantees, but they seem to understand that strong local journalism deserves ongoing funding just as much as funds for poor mothers and the local orchestra. Certainly public radio has proven to be sustainable.

You spent so much time with Bass and clearly came to admire him. Did that ever create a conflict or threaten your objectivity?

It's very tough when you're covering somebody very closely like that. I never stayed at his house. I always stayed at a hotel, although I've accepted his dinner invitations on a number of occasions and I've taken Paul and his wife out to dinner as well. This is someone I admire. It was nevertheless an independent effort. He had no say in what I was going to write. At the very end, I gave him a chance to fact-check the galleys, but he understood, if you don't like the book, that's too bad.

What kind of feedback have you been getting?

People get passionate about this subject. The first talk I gave on the book was for retired Northeastern alumni, who were pretty elderly. What I loved about it was that this was the last generation that was addicted to reading newspapers. They were very skeptical about this online thing.

REVIEWS

Fiction and Poetry

sharp blue stream

David Lawton (CFA'82)

Three Rooms Press

WITH TITLES LIKE "SONNY ROLLINS," "When the Chelsea Was The Chelsea," and "The Other Stooges," Lawton's poems are soulful icons of his boomer vintage. His verse alights, for example, on Jackie Gleason, the Marx Brothers, Jim Morrison, and Schimmel's knishes. The poem "Satisfaction" reveals his Irish Catholic mother's infatuation with, of all people, Mick Jagger. Anyone steeped in the canon of Spencer Tracy will delight at Lawton's observation of the man who fights "Irish gentility" with a playful ease:



*But when the fleshy face crinkles
With his wry whiskey smile,
His eyes project the stations of the cross.*

The 95 poems in this collection, the playwright, actor, and musician's first, also brim with humor and heart. His riffs on life swoop from the sublime to the quotidian. In "P.S. from My Estranged Wife" a doleful rant is inspired by this woman's suggestion that "if there is old flour in the cupboard, throw it out." He gleefully milks the metaphor:

*I'm jealous of you, flour. I'm almost
mad at you.
But I cannot do you in, for I'm becoming
old too.
If I dump you in the trash, I'm no
better than her.*

Like the actor he is, Lawton the poet channels many voices. In "April Is Gone," he is frankly sentimental:

*How long, my dear, How long?
How long will you and I be part of
this song?
The spring will come as long as Time
will go on
But we are like the blossoms:
We are here, and then we're gone.*

Elsewhere Lawton's verse seems like a mischievous nod to the Beats, as in an ode

to a feeling that is “close to combustibility” over a woman with a gold nose ring in “Vision South of Rivington”:

*Check it:
Downtown boho beauty conveyed
Mystic cryptic knowledge with her
Optic twinkle and her flower-sniffer's
crinkle.*

In “Solstice,” he recalls young love in what, for BU alumni, is familiar territory:

*On the corner of Harvard and Comm
In Allston
What we called the student ghetto
Of Boston
I met my green-eyed Jewess
enchantress
On a day in summer
When we both still were young*

With poems like this, Lawton offers a version of the past through a tender and strangely optimistic lens. We have all been on that corner. ss

So Spoke Penelope
Tino Villanueva (GRS'81)

Grolier Poetry Press
“WHAT WE HAVE IN *So Spoke Penelope*,” writes Nigerian poet Ifeanyi Menkiti in his introduction to Villanueva’s incandescent collection, “is a work many years in the making, a work indicative of hard-worn recog-

.....
nition on the poet’s part that the whole range of human experience is contained in Penelope at Ithaca.” The 59 poems in this slim volume spill from one to the next and invite a second or third reading. That we come to these poems already

sympathetic to the long-suffering, noble Penelope of Homer’s perpetually retold and reinvented epic *The Odyssey* only enhances their tenderness and power.

Penelope’s desolation, rage, and resourcefulness in her 20 years of waiting for her beloved husband’s return from the Trojan War reflect all the complications and agonies of

enduring love. In the beginning her words are suffused with hope, and she finds release in “sweet sleep.” The first poems have a dreamy quality:

*I’m a woman waiting, in love
with a man,
and in love with the love we had.*

Over time, although no less love-sick, Penelope bares her pragmatic side. Villanueva’s restrained Penelope, who has “grown stubborn all these years,” finally ignites in her account of the persistent suitors, “those blasted blustery brutes, the crudest of the crude...befouling the air with the rough language of their praise.”

Weaving by day and unraveling by night to keep the brutes at bay, this is a Penelope who could exist among us, a feisty, independent woman consistent in her affections. When her maidservants—“those tarts”—sell her out, she wearily declares:

*Here and now I say: I’ve done no ill.
No ill to crass and boorish men
who know
Nothing about weaving anyway.*

When Odysseus finally “washes ashore,” and Penelope, desire “washing over” her and melting at the knees, pulls him into “a claiming embrace, teary-eyed,” Villanueva offers a meditation on transcendent love that reads like the most lyrical and inspired of wedding vows:

*wrapped in each other’s arms,
Odysseus and I, wordless,
in the wisdom that love, as ever,
is the light we live by. ss*

Women in Bed: Nine Stories
Jessica Keener (CAS’79)

The Story Plant
“THIS IS TEMPORARY. ALL OF THIS is,” concludes the narrator of “Secrets,” one of the nine quietly moving stories in Keener’s new collection, which comes on the heels of her critically acclaimed first novel, *Night Swim*. Pervaded, like that novel, by matters of love, loneliness, and loss, these evocative stories hone in on women in various phases of life as

they struggle to be honest with others and with themselves.

Keener explores a succession of relationships—friends, lovers, spouses, siblings, student and professor. The characters approach, recede from, and dance around each other, but, as in life, there is no tidy resolution beyond an increment of self-awareness. In its descriptions of dodged hope and alienation, Keener’s prose is spare but pitch-perfect. Of a misguided coupling in “Shoreline,” she writes, “We pushed and pulled but we never found the insides.” Or this, from “Boarders,” “The bus surged forward and she felt her spine burning without love.”

Keener also employs a nuanced irony. In “Bird of Grief,” an emotionally wounded film student describes how her boyfriend of two years declared that he felt “claustrophobic. With five states separating us, a fourteen-hour bus ride, twelve hours in my car if I drove from Rhode Island to North

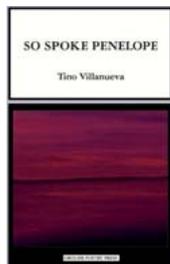
Carolina on the highway late at night, the time apart didn’t add up, he said.” When she asks him what he means, he simply says, over the phone, “People change.”



As the collection’s title indicates,

Keener’s characters spend a lot of time in beds, but much of it is dreaming or taking refuge. In “Woman with Birds in her Chest,” Cynthia abruptly quits her job caring for the elderly and stays in bed for weeks, reading magazines. Keener is generous in her physical description of beds, some of which are inspired. “Think about it,” says the narrator of “Heart,” flopped on the bed of her Miami apartment in a converted garage as she speaks with the lover she is about to meet in Paris. “This very second my bed is supported by a concrete floor, and underneath me is a meter of pure sand and underneath that a millennium-old layer of coral rock. Eons ago my bed would have been under water.”

Reminiscent of those of some of the masters of the short story genre, from Katherine Mansfield to Raymond Carver, Keener’s tales are gently



plotted with dialogue that is only the mist hovering above a turbulent emotional sea. BU alumni are likely to experience a touch of nostalgia reading the stories set in and around Boston, with characters navigating the streets of Allston, Coolidge Corner, and Kenmore Square. SS

Nonfiction

America's Romance with the English Garden

Thomas J. Mickey (COM'73)
Ohio University Press

IN THIS THOUGHTFUL, THOROUGHLY researched book, writer and gardener Mickey explores Americans' enduring love affair with the English style of gardening. Featuring sweeping lawns, carefully sited trees and shrubs, flower beds overflowing with annuals, perennials, and exotic plants, the style became popular with middle-class Americans during the latter half of the 19th century, thanks in large part, says Mickey, to the hundreds of seed companies that sprang up during the period.

Drawing on research he conducted at the Smithsonian Institution, he describes how advances in printing, transportation, and mail delivery made it possible for seed companies to publish lavishly illustrated catalogs that shaped Americans' preference

for a particular style of gardening. Not only did the companies sell seeds and plant stock, they functioned as tastemakers, selling a burgeoning middle class on a carefully marketed ideal of gardening. And

Americans, anxious about their social status, were only too happy to comply.

The book is populated by colorful characters, such as Delaware Quaker Joseph Shipley, who spent more than two decades in England before returning home, where he created one of the nation's first English park-like gardens at his Wilmington estate, Rockwood.

Seasoned horticulturists will recognize other names as well, among

them one of the nation's leading proponents of the English style of gardening, W. Atlee Burpee, who became interested in breeding plants as a teenager in Philadelphia. By his death in 1915, he had created the largest mail order seed business in the world—a company still in business today.

It was perhaps inevitable that Americans would favor the English style of gardening over the Spanish, Dutch, or French, all of which were brought to the United States by horticulturists who settled here. American colonists brought plants like English ivy from their homes in England, and passionate gardeners George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were deeply influenced by English gardens.

Readers will be fascinated to learn that the English perennial garden is indebted to America, as well. Anxious to introduce new plants into their own gardens, British horticulturists gathered seed from American natives like black-eyed Susan, bee balm, goldenrod, and phlox, cultivating them at home, where they were treated as exotics. It was not uncommon, writes Mickey, for an English landscape to have a garden area with these plants, referred to as the American garden.

The book ends on a cautious note. Mickey ponders whether Americans can continue to afford their love affair with the English style of gardening. "The question of a sustainable landscape now confronts the American gardener," he writes. "Thirsty lawns drain the supply of water-short communities...We grow fussy exotic plants even though we know that plants native to each gardening zone require less care and promote habitats friendly to wildlife."

Can we be satisfied with a traditional variety of species rather than one just discovered on the other side of the globe? Can the lawn—the centerpiece of the English garden—be designed to require less maintenance, or should it be banished altogether? These, he says, are questions we must address if we're to continue gardening responsibly and sustainably. JOHN O'ROURKE

Attempting Normal Marc Maron (CAS'86) Spiegel & Grau

MARON'S BEHAVIORAL RÉSUMÉ reads like a curse: addiction, infidelity, temper tantrums, and just generally being a jerk, not to mention a penchant for harboring vicious feral cats. He is also hilarious, smart, and really, really trying to be, as the book's title indicates, normal, or at least less contemptible.

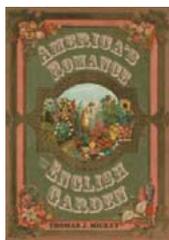
Dubbed "a diaphragm baby" by his mother, Maron took this to mean that he has "an innate ability to overcome obstacles." Dedicated to "everyone who is successfully defying their wiring," the book is littered with the wreckage of relationships and laced with self-loathing, clinical confessions about a string of misdeeds fueled by recreational drugs, Viagra, and mistrust of everyone, most of all himself. Woven throughout are priceless anecdotes: for example, his bit about a misguided, prideful attempt to eat what the locals do at a Nashville dive will make readers gag with laughter.

These days his career is soaring. He is the host of the hugely successful podcast *WTF with Marc Maron*—



generated from his Los Angeles garage—and parading his trademark angst on a fledgling IFC television show titled *Maron*. But he labored for 25 years in stand-up comedy's far-flung trenches, time spent, he writes, "passionately banging and thrashing up against the ovum of show business." When dreams die there are no funeral parades, he says. "The wind is just sucked out of you in a last sigh and you surrender." For Maron, comedy isn't just hard, it's soul-jangling: "I'm not funny enough, that joke didn't work, why can't I stop sweating, f**k these people."

Maron's tormented psyche can fashion a Gordian knot out of thin air. "Do I say thank you? I try to remember to say thank you," he writes. "Sometimes I'll go back and say thank you if I've forgotten or skipped out on a favor or



act of kindness or a service, which I do a lot. It's not that I'm ungrateful, but I kind of am."

His world can be instantly turned upside down by his own reflection in the mirror. In the chapter titled "I Almost Died #2: Mouth Cancer," he spots an irregularity in his licorice-stained gullet, goes a-Googling, and proceeds to distill the Jewish cultural trait of hypochondria into what could be one of the most darkly funny paragraphs ever written on the subject. Even his attempts at generosity are undone by his neuroses. "You don't cook for people, you cook *at* people," his long-suffering girlfriend tells him. On his ambivalence (to put it mildly) about fatherhood, he offers a kind of free-verse litany of fears: "The baby will be born dead. The baby will die.... The baby won't like me. I will drop the baby. I will ruin the baby."

Like most of his comedic peers, Maron can be predictably crude. His Pollyanna-ish coda to having "beaten" the imaginary mouth cancer ends in him fighting "the urge to masturbate on the floor" in front of a breakfast buffet.

But most of the book is suffused with a poignancy that elevates it above pure provocation or a merely mischievous rant. A chapter about an injured hummingbird (Maron is mesmerized by the small dramas of backyard wildlife) quickly becomes a meditation on the nature of mercy.

The existentially tortured Maron taunts himself with questions like, "Why don't I give blood?" What is it in us, in our wiring, as he puts it, that sabotages our good intentions? In our quest to be grown-ups worthy of love and respect, we are all to some extent Maron-ites. We screw up, again and again, though most of us want to believe we are trying our best not to.

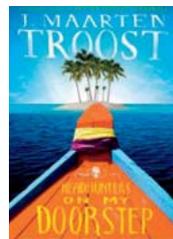
At one point he writes, "Whatever your loyalty is, whatever rules you think you won't break in your life, sometimes you just can't fight being in love." That could describe us, turning the last page of *Attempting Normal*. This man is a royal pain, probably not a person you'd want to be under the same roof with, but you've got to love him. ss

Headhunters on My Doorstep: A True Treasure Island Ghost Story

J. Maarten Troost (CAS'91)
Gotham Books

BEST-SELLING AUTHOR TROOST was fresh out of rehab and still battling an uncontrollable urge to drink when he realized something: bad things happened to him on large land masses. So he packed his bags and headed to the South Seas to re-create the trip taken by *Treasure Island* author Robert Louis Stevenson. Unlike Stevenson, he couldn't charter his own ship, so he flew to Tahiti, where he hopped on a ship bound for the Marquesas. "I never tired of the sensation of seeing land recede from my vision," he writes. "Something elemental takes over, a kind of universal awareness of the beauty and fragility of life. It induced no fear in me."

As a travel writer, Troost had lived for short periods in Fiji, Kiribati, and Vanuatu and was no stranger to the inner workings of the world's smallest atolls. In *Headhunters*, his fourth book,



he explores the Marquesas on board a small cruise vessel. That is, of course, until he jumps ship in Nuku Hiva.

Regaling the reader with humorous tales of art, food, adventure, and battles with *nonos*, "the planet's most irritating insects," he laces his narrative with literary and pop culture references from Herman Melville and Nike shoes to the Kardashians and *Huckleberry Finn*.

Troost still struggles with the lure of the bottle, but finds release in running for miles across whatever island he happens to find himself on. And in watching others drink and talking to a drunken hobo on the beaches of Tautira, he realizes that he really hates alcoholics.

In his usual tell-it-like-it-is manner, he offers insight into the emotional state of a recovering alcoholic as well as the liberating act of falling off the map. He interjects his own tales with those of Stevenson's life and adventures in the Marquesas and beyond. After leaving the Marquesas, he follows

the author's trail and sets off for the Tuamotus, Tahiti, the Gilberts, and Samoa, making a final pilgrimage to Stevenson's grave on the summit of Mount Vaea. He gives his own take on each island and paints an engaging portrait of the people who inhabit these remote atolls with nicknames such as "the Man-Eating Isle," "the Island of Merrymaking," and "the Bay of Penisises."

With typical wry wit and humor, he goes off on small tangents about the missionaries who once settled on the Marquesas, the history of naval travel, the motivations behind his running habit, and his desire to be a "serious snorkeler." He offers a history of cannibalism and a look at cross-dressing and transgendered Polynesian men.

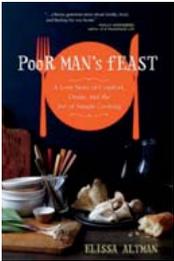
Somewhere among getting his first tattoo, being attacked by wild island dogs, and swimming with hundreds of sharks, Troost manages to convey the distinct beauty of each island he visits. The picture he paints of South Seas atolls like Fakarava and Fatu Hiva is enough to stir wanderlust in the most steadfast homebody. MADELINE ROSENBERGER (COM'14, CAS'14)

Poor Man's Feast: A Love Story of Comfort, Desire, and the Art of Simple Cooking

Elissa Altman (CGS'83, CAS'85)
Chronicle Books

WHEN ALTMAN WAS GROWING UP in Queens, N.Y., her rail-thin mother, a fur model, forbade Altman's father to eat anything rich. The pair would eventually divorce, but until they did he got his revenge on Saturdays after his wife left for her beauty appointments, when he'd whisk his daughter off to legendary Manhattan restaurants like Lutèce, Le Périgord, and La Grenouille. These "hushed halls of haute cuisine were my father's temples of peace and reason," Altman writes. It was during these lavish father-daughter bonding rituals that the young Altman's foodie fate was sealed, over plates of foie gras, partridge, and mille-feuille. *Poor Man's Feast* is an engaging, often mouthwatering homage to Altman's great loves—her father, her partner, Susan, and inspirational, artfully prepared food.

The food editor and award-winning blogger heaps her narrative high with family stories, meals memorable for being splendid or awful, and details of her courtship with Susan, whom she met online, their initial conversation ignited by descriptions of meals. Altman had always longed for a partner who actually likes food, and in Susan



she's found one who curls up alone in bed with a vintage edition of *Larousse Gastronomique*. But Susan, content with meals of bread and cheese, is a calming counterpoint to the culinary ortho-

doxies of Altman, whose small Manhattan apartment contains pricey implements like a French salamander, a Hackmesser cleaver, and a set of timbale molds her ex described as “thimbles on steroids.” Altman traces her almost fetishistic attachment to such gadgetry to her days working at upscale grocery store Dean & DeLuca.

Susan plucks greens from her garden while Altman grazes at Zabar's and prepares labor-intensive “tall” meals for herself, spending a small fortune on cuts of beef or *culotte d'agneau*. One of the book's most entertaining chapters is devoted to the purveyor of said *agneau*, a brusque but lovable Upper East Side butcher named Arnaud, who resembles “a taller, younger version of Mr. Magoo.” Altman captures Arnaud in his Gallic splendor—at one point he expresses his exasperation with a weary “*oui*” that “came out like a soft wool from a dying dog.” Arnaud becomes a kind of culinary Svengali to Altman, who writes of their “wildly sensuous, heart-pounding, knee-weakening, totally nonsexual relationship that revolved solely around food.”

Altman is a sensualist whose description of a meal can read like a bodice ripper. But when she describes her Jewish upbringing, one can hear echoes of Philip Roth and Isaac Bashevis Singer, achingly human stories that reflect, as the author's grandfather used to say, the Yiddish truism *mensch tracht, Gott lacht* (man

plans, God laughs). This lively memoir contains recipes ranging from peasant fare such as *gribebenes*—Jewish fried chicken skin—and warm tomato sandwiches to poached asparagus with prosciutto and duck eggs to Susan's Simple Sunday Roast Beef. The recipes are nods to both women's culinary histories, folded into the tale of how those histories, and appetites, entwine. The reader roots for this likeable couple, and would like to be a guest at their table. ss

With *Éclat*: The Boston Athenaeum and the Origin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Hina Hirayama (GRS'99)
University Press of New England

WITH OVER A MILLION VISITORS a year and collections totaling more than 450,000 pieces, the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) is one of the largest museums in the world. But as Hirayama notes in her fascinating account of its early years, its creation and initial survival might not have been possible without the vital support of another venerable institution—the Boston Athenaeum. When it was incorporated, in 1870, she writes, the MFA “possessed no building, no collection, and few financial resources.” The Athenaeum, by contrast, exerted enormous influence. This book brings to life a unique collaboration almost unimaginable today.

Established in 1807 as a subscription library for educated, affluent white men, the Athenaeum had become the third largest library in the nation by 1822, and by 1827 its mission had expanded to include collecting and exhibiting art. However, after a costly move to its new home on Beacon Street, near the State House (where it remains), the Athenaeum was forced to retrench, and by the late 1860s its influence as a repository for art had waned.

At about the same time, plans to create a bona fide art museum—the city's first—took on a new urgency after years of preliminary discussions. When the MFA finally opened in 1876 (the original building was in Copley Square), it owed an enormous debt

to the Boston Athenaeum. Not only had the Athenaeum provided gallery space to show off the MFA's nascent collection before the museum's building was finished, it loaned more than 1,200 pieces from its collection, and even more remarkably, purchased works for the new museum out of its own budget.

With Éclat is at its most engaging in relating the story of the two men most responsible for the extraordinary cooperation between the two institu-



tions: Charles and Edward Perkins. Descended from one of Boston's oldest and wealthiest families, the brothers had vastly different temperaments, but both were devoted

philanthropists. Charles, the younger and more gregarious, was a noted art historian. After spending nearly two decades in Europe, he returned to Boston in 1869 determined to establish an art museum. Edward, writes Hirayama, saw art as “neither passion nor a profession, but an expected part of life, like a fine house.” But it was his role as an Athenaeum trustee and chairman of its fine arts committee and Charles' as a founding member of the MFA that made possible the intimate, and by modern standards, amazingly informal relationship between the two organizations.

Hirayama, the Boston Athenaeum's associate curator of paintings and sculpture, provides a fascinating description of the MFA's evolution. The museum's initial mandate—to educate the public about art, largely through reproductions and plaster casts—gradually shifted: its new aim was “to collect original works of art of great rarity and aesthetic contemplation.”

As the MFA's mission changed, says Hirayama, the Athenaeum's central role in its establishment faded. Still, as this book makes clear, the Athenaeum offered crucial support to the MFA at a critical juncture in its history. Hirayama has brought to light a fascinating, nearly forgotten footnote in Boston's cultural history. JO ■