note of uncertainty. It was important for us to not have anything tied up in a neat little bow. But a lot of the work we did to broaden the book’s appeal was removing things.

Such as?
ROBINSON: We took out a masturbation scene.

Do readers often assume you each wrote alternate chapters?
ROBINSON: We do get asked about that a lot. Some people will say the seams really show, that you can tell that one guy wrote this part and the other guy wrote the other part, and they are often wrong. One reviewer was certain Gavin wrote a section, but I wrote it. People have preconceptions about what a coauthored book is like. But we spend so much time together, we’ve been writing together for so many years, that we learned what the narrator of the book sounds like and we can do an impersonation of that narrator. It’s our joint voice, which is different than our solo voices.

Chris, who were your mentors at BU?
The person I spent the most time with was Pulitzer Prize–winning poet Louise Glück, a former visiting professor in BU’s Creative Writing Program and former US poet laureate. Ever since leaving BU I go back and visit Louise whenever I can, and I show her some poems, which is really generous of her. The other person was John Paul Riquelme, a College of Arts & Sciences professor of English, who taught a Joyce class, my favorite. He’s a brilliant guy and some of the stuff I wrote for him made it into the book, including Corderoy’s essay.

Whose work do you love to read?
KOVITSC: I probably read more nonfiction than fiction, great storytellers like Barbara Tuchman and William Manchester. But David Foster Wallace is my favorite hands down.

ROBINSON: I read a lot of short fiction and poetry. I love George Saunders; he’s probably my top short-fiction writer, and I love Louise Glück and Terrance Hayes.

Fiction and Poetry

A Long High Whistle: Selected Columns on Poetry
David Biespiel (CAS’86)
Antilever Press, 2015

For people reluctant to do the intellectual heavy lifting they believe poetry demands, the only thing more inaccessible than the form itself is what’s written about poetry. But both the novice and the aficionado will delight in Biespiel’s A Long High Whistle. As engaging as they are enlightening, these short essays come from the acclaimed poet’s (Charming Gardeners, The Book of Men and Women) popular monthly column for the Oregonian.

Among the 100 or so poets Biespiel considers are John Keats, Emily Dickinson, Pablo Neruda, and Seamus Heaney. None longer than four pages, the essays range all over the literary landscape, from Ovid to Alexander Pope to Elizabeth Bishop, from ancient China to contemporary Greece. Read as a whole, the collection is akin to a poetry course taught by a witty, passionate professor who is the very definition of well versed.

In “To See the Invisible,” drawing largely from Donald Justice’s lovely, sparse “Memory of a Porch: Miami, 1942,” Biespiel writes about poets’ attentiveness to “invisible geographies,” to “see what exists, into what exists, nearly what exists, and beyond what exists.” His amusing essay “Continuous Music” hits a common chord with its discussion of the haunted dismissal (“It happens more than I care to admit”) of poems that rhyme. “The worst offenders,” he writes, “are aspiring poets.”

Biespiel’s warmth and respect for his readers is reflected in prose that, like William Zinsser’s classic On Writing Well, makes us care about, and be alert to, the wonders of metaphor, simile, and inspired restraint. Biespiel reminds us that every poem poses three questions: “First, can a poet measure meaning? Second, can that measurement influence thought? And finally, if a poet can measure meaning,” can a poet, as Herbert strives to do in his poem reflecting, as Biespiel puts it, “one man’s resilient humanity” against authoritarianism’s dogma, “describe even the ‘simplest emotion’ from the intimate to the political in the service of humanity?”

The question may not have a simple answer. But as in all of Biespiel’s charming meditations, it whets the appetite for poetry of all kinds, and reminds us that poetry matters.—SUSAN SELIGSON

Quality Snacks
Andy Mozina (GRS’90)
Wayne State University Press, 2014

Mozina’s latest collection delivers what its title promises: an array of palatable stories, each with a distinct, satisfying flavor. He spins 15 fabulist tales, most set in and around Milwaukee and Chicago (it doesn’t get more delightfully Midwestern than this story opening: “Two grown men at the Dairy Queen…”).

Mozina is at home with this form, combining both variety—the smorgasbord of stories ranges from a man’s account of his “nonsexual affair” to a tale that has Santa Claus playing Major League Baseball—and cohesion in the collection. Many of these stories involve impossibly broken relationships. The best of the collection feature narcissistic male protagonists.

Take “A Talented Individual.” Mozina’s wry prose shines in this tale of a condescending businessman approaching middle age who has been passed over for a promotion. He’s driven to reassess his life and while he mopes around during a vacation with his wife and children, he ruminates on how everything that once seemed bright and shiny is no longer: his MBA from Northwestern hasn’t snagged him a higher-paying position, and to his dismay, his “smart and physically fit” wife has parlayed her attributes into becoming more successful than he ever imagined. It’s clear from the start that he’s edging closer and closer to a
In the United States. But what would New York be if not the most interesting city? Shaik’s strengths as a writer are in creating everyday dialogue, in painting her characters’ lives, in moving her plotlines quietly and slowly along. She brews her characters—their status, their intellect, even their skin color—slowly, like tea steeping in a porcelain pot. A few of her stories have abrupt endings, but this New Orleans native and St. Peter’s University professor sure can turn a phrase.

In the story “Life Is for the Living,” she reflects how “true integration could be demonstrated by the Creoles showing the unity of all races and human appetites when holding the French bread, Spanish onions, Italian tomatoes, and Louisiana hot sauce.” It’s a line that deftly serves up the city’s cuisine, culture, and racial reality. One of the strongest stories is “Achille’s Jass,” about a talented horn player whose career fizzled in an instant long ago: “Can’t you shut your trap,’ he was famously quoted in the newspaper when he shouted at a patron in The Blue Room. Musicians all over town called to thank him. But none would take him up on the bandstand anymore.” The story chronicles a last performance at a friend’s second-line funeral.

Another top-notch tale, “Maurice in the City,” tracks a New Orleans exile hiding among New York’s throngs after being suspected in the killing of his girlfriend. The author captures the dynamics of both cities beautifully, switching between them with ease, sometimes pausing gently to compare. In New York, she reflects, “most streets were numbered, not named, like in New Orleans, for dreams, saints and myths.”

The last few stories have plotlines wedded to the calamitous flooding caused by Hurricane Katrina, and this book is being published on its 10th anniversary. By matter-of-factly relaying the unfolding horrors that challenge her characters as the water relentlessly rises, Shaik personalizes and deepens the tragedy in a way that a litany of statistics would not. In compelling fiction such as this, there is power, and truth.—JIM CONCANNON