

Alumni Books

NONFICTION

Bleaker House: Chasing My Novel to the End of the World

Nell Stevens (GRS'13)
Doubleday

WHEN STEVENS APPLIED for the Creative Writing Program's Global Fellowship, a grant that allows graduates a stay of up to three months abroad, she did not elect to travel to a tropical locale or a cosmopolitan city, as did most of her classmates. Instead, Stevens chose sparsely populated Bleaker Island in the Falklands, land of penguins and rain. There, she believed, the solitude would help her work on the novel she'd always wanted to write. And although the manuscript she wrote on Bleaker Island was never published, the trip was the impetus for her debut novel.

Bleaker House, a titular nod to the island and to the Charles Dickens

novel *Bleaker House*, is a personal narrative of sorts. Part memoir, part travelogue, the book traces Stevens' writing path. She includes scraps of her unpublished novel, highlighting her structured writing process in passages titled with headers like "Situation," "Complication," and "Climax." She also weaves in aphorisms by Leslie Epstein, a Boston University College of Arts &

Sciences English professor—"Limit your similes to two a page"—as well as flashbacks to her pre-MFA days, when she worked at a human rights organization and would write fiction in the columns of expense spreadsheets.

She takes readers through her time on the dreary island, plunging introspectively into her neuroses concerning the novel she is trying to write and her dwindling food supply (she had to bring most of it with her in a suitcase). Anyone who has aspired to write a novel will empa-



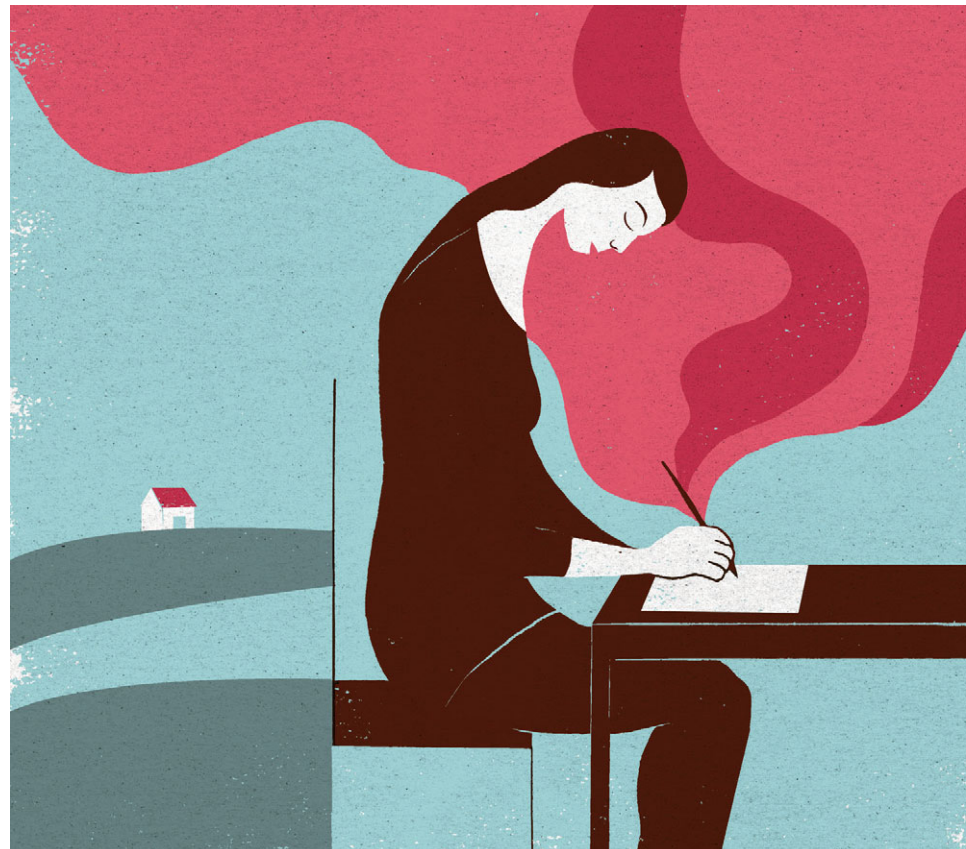
One of the challenges Stange faced was describing a figure as contradictory as Poe. "For every fact you think you can state about Edgar Allan Poe," he says, "there's an equal and opposite fact. You can say he was a loving, doting husband to his wife, Virginia, but at the same time he could be terrible to her. And you can say he was a wonderful poet, and some of his poetry is just brilliant and beautiful, and then there's some really schlocky, terrible poems."

He also had to contend with a lack of visual materials. "Any film subject that dates before the era of photographs and film is going to be a challenge," he says. Part of his solution was to film dramatized scenes, with an actor in period costume reading from Poe's letters, diaries, and other writings.

The actor who portrays Poe—Denis O'Hare, a Tony-winning Broadway performer also known for playing vampire Russell Edgington on HBO's *True Blood*—had no rehearsal before filming but came fully prepared for the role. "When we film these scenes," Stange says, "we're spending a lot of money, hiring a big crew—stuff that as a documentary filmmaker I don't usually do—and so it's an incredible sense of relief and gratitude to have an actor who takes it seriously and delivers."

Several BU alumni worked on the film with Stange, including director of photography Boyd Estus (Questrom'65) and still photographer Liane Brandon (CAS'62, SED'67). The film is dedicated to the late Wallace Coberg, who attended the College of Fine Arts and whose enthusiasm for Poe was the film's impetus. Coberg secured initial funding for the project and had planned to cowrite the script but died of a heart attack soon after he and Stange began collaborating. "Wally convinced me very compellingly that Poe was a good subject for a film," says Stange. "It would not have been my idea, but he was so passionate and so informed. He was a great guide to get to know Poe."

Stange says he hopes the film fulfills Coberg's goal of correcting the record about Poe, bringing him out from the shadow of his own horror stories. Still, PBS plans to air the documentary on October 30, and Stange suspects it will show the film around Halloween in future years.



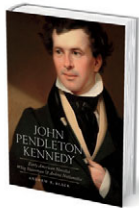
thize with Stevens' passion and desperation as she becomes a prisoner of this manuscript, trudging through its sluggish plot. The chains are broken at the end of her stay, when she acknowledges what she has known for some time: the novel is bad. What she does not realize until later is that she has left Bleaker Island with the foundation for a great book—just not the one she had expected to write.—MARA SASSOON

John Pendleton Kennedy: Early American Novelist, Whig Statesman & Ardent Nationalist

Andrew R. Black (GRS'12)
Louisiana State University Press

LONG BEFORE JOHN FITZGERALD Kennedy stepped onto the American political stage, there was John Pendleton Kennedy (1795–1870), an eminent statesman, lawyer, and novelist from Baltimore. This Kennedy (no relation to JFK) would play an important role in the establishment of the Whig Party, which advocated economic protectionism to stimulate manufacturing.

In his absorbing biography of Kennedy, Black brings to light this long-forgotten antebellum figure. While a few other books have been written about him, Black's purports to be the first to explore the relationship between Kennedy's fiction and his political beliefs.



He shows us how Kennedy grappled unsuccessfully with the institution of slavery in his literary work, particularly *Swallow Barn*, a novel about plantation life in Virginia. Kennedy refused to own slaves, but privately he believed that free blacks were “a dishonest and worthless class,” and he often depicted them in racially disparaging language in his fiction. His ambivalence reflected the Whig Party's inability to form a cohesive policy on slavery, one of the issues that led to its downfall in the early 1860s, less than three decades after it was formed.

Kennedy believed deeply in national unity and patriotism. The son of a failed businessman who immigrated to Maryland from Northern

Ireland, he was shrewd and ambitious, with what Black calls a “zealous campaign for self-improvement.” And his views were shaped by the political uncertainty that gripped the nation during its infancy. Drawn to public life at an early age, he served as a congressman and later as secretary of the navy under President Millard Fillmore. As an author, he enjoyed some measure of success, earning the admiration and friendship of writers Washington Irving and J. Fenimore Cooper, and later, Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Dickens.

Kennedy lived through some of the most tumultuous political moments in the nation's early history, including the War of 1812, which spurred his sense of nationalism, and the Civil War. By the time of his death, he had seen the United States transformed from an agrarian nation into an industrial powerhouse.

As Black writes, Kennedy's “youthful jingoism” had been replaced with a conservative restraint, but the moral certitude that had governed his literary and political passions remained very much intact.—JOHN O'ROURKE

Book Briefs

Romance, Compassion, and World War I Battle Sites

A good book can provide a brief distraction from the dissatisfactions of the real world. For Neave, a protagonist in **THE ROMANCE READER'S GUIDE TO LIFE** (Flatiron Books, 2017) by Sharon Pywell (GRS'89), that book is the steamy romance *The Pirate Lover*. Neave starts to read the book as an escape from her closed-minded Massachusetts town, and from

living in the shadow of her glamorous older sister, Lilly. For years, she returns to the book to avoid life's hardships, but when Lilly goes missing, Neave must finally learn to contend with the real world. Pywell's command over her characters' nuanced voices shines as she alternates chapters from many perspectives—Neave's, Lilly's, and even that of their dog, Mr. Boppit. And of course, the reader is treated to excerpts from *The Pirate Lover* as the parallels between the romance and Neave's own life unfold.

It's time to be less self-involved. That's what Christopher Kukk (CAS'92) proclaims in **THE COMPASSIONATE**

ACHIEVER (HarperCollins, 2017), a four-step guide to becoming a more compassionate person. Kukk suggests that success doesn't come from looking



out only for yourself, but from caring about others. He outlines the steps a compassionate person should take in what he calls the LUCA (listening, understanding, connecting, acting) program, and explains each element in depth,

reviewing case studies and providing methods of execution. Kukk practices what he preaches—he is the founding director of the Center for Compassion, Creativity and Innovation at Western Connecticut State University.

Travel to the French countryside with Richard Rubin (GRS'91) in **BACK OVER THERE** (St. Martin's Press, 2017). Rubin traces a chronological route through the sites of World War I battles, combining historical accounts and interviews with locals and other historians. Inspired by Rubin's 2014 *New York Times* series, this colorful travelogue underscores the profound impact of the war.—MARA SASSOON