



Literary New York

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In Search of Literary New York

by Keith Gessen





JULIUS LANDO/IMPACT/HP/THE IMAGE WORKS

Not long after running away to New York City, aspiring author Keith Gessen learned to appreciate the literary association of the ever-present giant pretzel, such as this one purchased on a New York City street. Having achieved established writer status, Gessen considers the \$1 pretzel “just what any writer needs.”

Running away has always been the first and finest act in an American life. The country began when English religious fanatics ran away — to Boston. A century later, young Benjamin Franklin ran away from Boston to New York; unable to find work, he continued on to Philadelphia, which for the next century enjoyed what would turn out to be the height of its cultural prestige. In 1838, Frederick Douglass escaped from slavery and came to New York, but kept going, settling eventually in New Bedford, Mass., at the time a prosperous port town (the whale ship in *Moby-Dick* embarks from there). Some years later, in 1860, young William Dean Howells left Ohio for a pilgrimage to the literary greats — Emerson, Hawthorne, Thoreau — also in Boston, where he eventually became editor of the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* and published the works of Henry James and Mark Twain. Eventually, though, in 1891, Howells ran away to New York, and everyone since then has run away to New York too.

Keith Gessen was born in Moscow and educated at Harvard and Syracuse. He is a founding editor of *n+1*, a literary magazine, and the author of *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, published by Viking in 2008. His work has also appeared in the *New Yorker* and the *London Review of Books*. He lives in Moscow and New York.



ANNE DIEBEL

What are they looking for? It's hard to say. A dozen years ago I also left Boston for New York, and in the years to come I would see with my own eyes all the places that make it the center of American publishing. I visited Farrar, Straus and Giroux, publishers of Joseph Brodsky and Jonathan Franzen, just off Union Square; New Directions, early publishers of the great international novelists (Nabokov, Borges, Sebald), as well as Ezra Pound, at the edge of Greenwich Village; and even mighty Random House, at Broadway and 56th Street, occupying a huge skyscraper in whose lobby are displayed the works of Random House authors, so that you can imagine that those authors with their books raised the building themselves in the center of the most expensive city on earth. I visited *Harper's Magazine*, at Broadway and Houston, the *New Yorker* in Times Square, and then the *New York Times* itself, in its sprawling old warren-like building on 43rd Street, and then its sleek postmodern tower around the corner on 8th Avenue. At the *New Yorker*, with a fact-checker looking on, I pulled a dozen books from a paper bag and pointed out quotes or other facts about the book I had reviewed for the magazine. Eventually I would write a book of my own, which meant visiting the offices of the publisher Viking to go over corrections and the radio station WNYC to be interviewed for its literary program. The other guest that day was the great football player Herschel Walker, who had also written a book; he went first.

RICK MAIMAN/GMACORBIS



Throughout his years in New York City, author Keith Gessen has visited “all the places that make it the center of American publishing,” including Harper’s Magazine, the oldest general interest monthly in America, at Broadway and Houston.



AP IMAGES

Author Keith Gessen visited the the New York Times at its sprawling old warren-like building on 43rd Street and its sleek postmodern tower around the corner on 8th Avenue. Gessen notes that in the wake of the financial crisis and the growth of the Internet, even the Times “counts its pennies and glances over its shoulder with a hunted look.”

But this was all much later. When my wife and I first moved to New York right after college it was because a friend was vacating his apartment in Queens, because his wife, in turn, couldn't stand the planes flying overhead from Laganardia Airport. We knew that New York was a great literary center, but for us it was more important that New York was a financial and shopping center, and that therefore there was plenty of low-skill, temporary work, and that we wouldn't starve. I landed work as a specialist in the presentation program PowerPoint (I was a typist, essentially) at a large investment bank in midtown, and Anya found work at a vintage poster gallery in Soho, the kind of business that's only possible if tourists are willing to spend a thousand dollars on an original poster for the film *Easy Rider*. And thus Manhattan and its tourism, willy-nilly, subsidize the arts.

New York didn't notice me, and as long as I kept up with my rent I could read and do whatever I pleased. Literary New York was the *Village Voice* newspaper, where we learned about free movie showings and art exhibits. It was the library around the corner from our Queens apartment, where I could read the sophisticated book reviews in the *New Republic*, and I could take the 7 train to the library in midtown Manhattan that kept its fiction collection on the ground floor so that you could walk in, find your book, and walk right out. It was on that ground floor that I read for the first time all the authors I'd not had time to read in college: Don DeLillo, Saul Bellow, V. S. Naipaul. Down the street from the library, Herman Melville's house at East 26th Street had been turned into a branch of a large office supplies company. New York

accepted its writers and artists carelessly and spit them out just as carelessly. In Bellow's *Humboldt's Gift*, a book largely based on the life and death of the troubled poet Delmore Schwartz, the narrator keeps thinking back to the moment when he realized, not long before the poet's death, that Humboldt was doomed: He'd seen him walking down the street with a giant pretzel, looking crazy. After reading that book I tried to buy a giant pretzel whenever I could — in addition to its high literary associations it was one of the most affordable meals to be had in New York City, and still is.

But most of all New York meant admitting that I wanted to be a writer. It meant accepting the consequences of that decision for me and for those around me. I could have done this elsewhere, but New York was hospitable because there were so many others like me, or somewhat like me. Whatever stupid job you were currently doing, in New York it was assumed you were *actually* doing something else — you were an actor, or a dancer, or you had sold your soul to rock and roll. And I was a writer: That too was ok. “I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or ever so many generations hence,” Walt Whitman had written, directly, to the generations of New York writers that followed him, “I am with you, and know how it is.”

Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt; Just as any of you is one of a living crowd, I was one of a crowd; Just as you are refresh'd by the gladness of the river and the bright flow, I was refresh'd.



On the ground floor of the New York City Public Library, author Keith Gessen read for the first time authors he had not had time to read in college: Don DeLillo, Saul Bellow, V. S. Naipaul.

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/PFFHLAI

To live in New York was to accept Whitman's patrimony, his gift: not his talent or genius, but merely his permission. I soon found friends who wanted the same thing as I — one was a poet, another a philosopher, and a third friend was a filmmaker. We had no money and it didn't matter. We ate our meals at our houses instead of restaurants and bought beers at delis instead of bars. Half of the time I was convinced that we were all geniuses, and the world would know of us; the other half of the time, or maybe a little bit more than half, I was convinced we'd get trapped in the temporary jobs all of us were doing to pay the rent, that these routines would freeze on our lives like grimaces on our faces. Every day I tried to write a story, or rewrite a story, on a typewriter I'd bought the summer before at a rummage sale, and after about six months I sent a couple of the stories to two small magazines. One of the magazines sent me a nice note of rejection, explaining that my story was too much like the lives its readers already led, and the other magazine still hasn't written me back. And nonetheless I persisted. At the end of about a year in New York we threw a dinner party, and Anya encouraged me to read one of my stories to my friends after we'd eaten, and, feeling foolish, but proud, I did. No magazines or publishers agreed at the time, but Anya thought I was a writer, and so did my friends,

and that's what New York meant to me when I was starting out, and it was everything.

In the years since then, some things have changed. If young writers had trouble paying Manhattan rents and grocery store prices by the time I got to New York in the late 1990s, but were welcomed in Brooklyn and Queens, now there are even neighborhoods in Brooklyn and Queens that have become unaffordable! So young artists and writers adapt, and move further out, and set up their strange culture of coffee shops, with strong coffee, and dive bars, with weak beer, wherever they land. All the secret bulwarks of our life — the big publishers, the big banks, even the bloated art market — are failing or undergoing changes in the wake of the financial crisis and the growth of the Internet. Even the *New York Times* counts its pennies and glances over its shoulder with a hunted look.

But none of this would have mattered to us in that Queens apartment in 1998, had we known about it, and I suspect it doesn't much matter to the people who gather in such apartments now. My friends the poet and philosopher and filmmaker did, incredibly, become a poet, philosopher and filmmaker, just as they'd planned, though all sorts of other things happened, some of them good and some of them bad, which we had not planned at all. None of us, it turned out, were geniuses,

but we're OK, and with the exception of the filmmaker we're all still here in New York. There is no better place to run away to, even now, and I recently found a place in midtown where a giant pretzel can be had for \$1, which is just what any writer needs.

The Fabulous Strand Book Store

by Karen Hofstein



STRAND BOOKS

BROADWAY
E 12th St
STRAND BOOKSTORE

LIBRARIES BOUGHT
OLD RARE NEW

LIBRARIES BOUGHT

STRAND BOOKSTORE

LIBRARIES BOUGHT
OLD RARE NEW

18

MILES OF BOOKS

828

REVIEW BOOKS 1/2 PRICE
OPEN SEVEN DAYS

NEW YORK'S LARGEST SELECTION
OF ART BOOKS

LARGEST USED BOOK STORE IN THE WORLD

NEW OLD AND RARE BOOKS



COURTESY STRAND BOOK STORE

Fred Bass and his daughter Nancy Bass Wyden operate Strand Book Store at the corner of Broadway and East 12th St. Boasting a collection of “18 miles of books,” the Strand has been a major cultural presence in New York City for 83 years and remains a gathering place for literati around the world.

There’s nothing pretty about the inside of the Strand Book Store: Its floors are scuffed, the book tables are old and the chairs are strictly of the functional variety. But these things only add to its charm, and even though they may have never been there before, people around the world who visit the shop for the first time experience a sense of déjà vu. That’s because its interior is familiar to anyone who has seen the movie *Julie and Julia*, or the television shows *Sex and the City* and *Absolutely Fabulous*. Such media exposure has made the 83-year-old shop the prototypical book store.

Located in an unassuming building on the corner of Broadway and East 12th Street, the Strand occupies five floors, four of which are open to the public. High ceilings accommodate bookshelves that reach up to 8 feet (2.4 meters), with a ladder always on hand to give customers access to the top shelves. Owner Fred Bass estimates that the Strand contains 18 miles (29 kilometers) of books, and the store’s logo, emblazoned on bags, mugs and t-shirts, shows a red oval with the slogan “18 Miles of Books.”

Founded in 1927 by Bass’s father, Ben, the store was named after the famous publishing street in London. Now operated by the third generation of the Bass family, the Strand continues to have an international flavor. Influenced by the bookstalls near the Seine River in Paris, the store operates similar book kiosks by Central Park. The Strand’s clientele are fiercely loyal and frequently invoke the word “love” to describe their feelings about the

store. Authors including Umberto Eco, Fran Leibowitz and Frank McCourt have said it is their favorite book store. Evoking such feelings, the Strand has been a major cultural presence in New York City for 83 years and remains a gathering place for literati around the world. The store regularly hosts readings by such famous authors as David Sedaris, James Ellroy and Jhumpa Lahiri, and artists from Chuck Close to Christo and Jeanne-Claude have exhibited their work at the Strand. The shop's readings, lectures and exhibitions are widely attended, and for those who can't be there in person, the Strand's Web site features streaming coverage of live events. Ever mindful of their customers, the Strand also allows people not attending an event to pre-order signed copies of books.

Nancy Bass Wyden, who runs the Strand with her father, says, "We consider ourselves to be a real booklover's book store. We are a destination. All our books are discounted. We are only one store, family run and independent." In a city with innumerable corporate-owned bookstores, the Strand has survived and thrived. It offers books and services that other stores do not. In addition to new books, it sells out-of-print and rare editions. The Strand also provides unique services, such as assembling libraries for customers, and many celebrities, such as the pop star Moby, have used this service for their homes. Wyden says, "The thought of putting books that we love on someone else's shelves is really thrilling. Almost everyone here has a college degree and has majored in literature. So we don't just sell books. We love books."



JILL WALKER

Its floors are scuffed, the book tables are old, and the chairs are strictly of the functional variety, but all this simply adds to the charm of the Strand Book Store.

Roughly 6,000 to 8,000 people visit the store each day. In an informal weekday survey, Wyden noted that 22 percent of customers came from overseas and 33 percent were from outside the New York area. Many people seek books not available in their home countries or states, and, as Wyden notes, “We will ship anywhere — even overseas.” Not surprisingly, the Strand has a thriving Internet business, and with relatively minor exceptions all stock in the store is available online. Art books are especially popular, and the store has one of the world’s largest art book sections. Wyden says, “The fun thing about actually shopping in the store that you don’t have on the Internet is [the feeling of] serendipity, the tactile experience of touching the books. Some people come in every day looking for things that are unusual. It is a treasure hunt.”

The highlight of any visit to the Strand is the rare book room. Located on the third floor of the store, the rare book department is staffed by a team of experts. A sign on the wall states “Collectibles for Everyone.” In the center of the room is the “gold vault,” a large former bank safe that now contains the most valuable books in the store. Peering into the window of the gold vault, one can see an illustrated copy of *Ulysses* signed by both James Joyce and Henri Matisse; a first edition of *Gone with the Wind*; and a

complete set of Mark Twain’s books signed by the author with his pen name and his real name, Samuel Clemens.

Referring to a \$150 book signed by Norman Mailer, Wyden says, “A lot of old books are really affordable. These are meaningful [as gifts] — the signed book is a connection to the author.”

To maintain its stock, the Strand purchases tens of thousands of used books. Its buying desk is open six days a week. Many customers resell their books to the store. Wyden laughs and says, “We like to say ‘reuse, recycle, reread.’ ” Bass, now 82 years old, is the head buyer. He notes, “We buy several thousand a day over this counter, and then there are private collections where we get in maybe 50, 60, 70 boxes at a time.” The books range from used copies to fine rare editions, Bass says. “I deal with a lot of antiquarian books.”

When asked if he thinks competition from the Internet or e-readers (like Nook and Kindle) pose a risk to the Strand, Bass says, “It is not a threat, but it changes the business quite a bit. I think in a way it is going to stimulate the business. A lot of people actually want to see the book before they buy it. Our prices are actually quite comparable so that it may be cheaper to

buy the book.” Bass adds, whimsically, “You know, when TV first came in we thought people would not buy books.”

With an eye on the future, the Strand has an expansive children’s department. Every Thursday at 3:30 p.m., a family hour features readings of books for children, followed by a related arts and crafts project. On a recent day, the reading was from *Forever Friends*, an inspirational story, and the project was weaving friendship bracelets.

Bass, who grew up working in the store and returned to it after a stint in the U.S. Army, says, “I’ll tell you one thing, a tremendous amount of young people are shopping here. They come into the store day and night.” He chuckles. “And a tremendous amount of old people like me. It is stimulating to see what is going on. The book is not dead yet. Reading is not dead yet. We have great hopes for the future.”

Karen Hofstein is a freelance writer based in New York.



Downtown: My Manhattan

Pete Hamill reads from his memoir.

Introduction: *Pete Hamill is a novelist, essayist and journalist. For more than 40 years, he has covered some of the most consequential events in United States history and authored many critically acclaimed books.*

Hamill has been a columnist for the New York Post, the New York Daily News, New York's Newsday, the Village Voice, New York magazine and Esquire. As a journalist, he has covered wars in Vietnam, Nicaragua, Lebanon and Northern Ireland, and he has lived for extended periods in Mexico City, Dublin, Barcelona, San Juan and Rome. At home in New York, he wrote about the great domestic disturbances of the 1960s, and he has written extensively on art, jazz, immigration and politics. He witnessed the events of Sept. 11, 2001, and their aftermath and wrote about them for the Daily News.

In 2004, he published the book Downtown: My Manhattan, a non-fiction account of his love affair with New York. Here is an excerpt from that book, read by the author.

Pete Hamill: The city is, in a strange way, the capitol of nostalgia. The emotion has two major roots. One is the abiding sense of loss that comes from the simple fact of continuous change. Of the city's five boroughs, Manhattan in particular absolutely refuses to remain as it was. It is dynamic, not static. What seems permanent when you are 20 is too often a ghost when you are 30. As in all places, parents die, friends move on, businesses wear out, and restaurants close forever. But here, change is more common than in most American cities. The engine of greatest change is the cramped land itself. Scarcity can create a holy belief in the possibility of great riches. That's why the religion of real estate periodically enforces its commandments, and neighborhoods are cleared and buildings hauled down and new ones erected, and all that remains is memory.

This book is littered with casualties of time and greed and that vague reality called progress. Just one example here: I was in high school in Manhattan when I came to know the Third Avenue El. Sometimes I took it as a ride, not just a means of getting from one place to another. I loved its rattling noise, the imagery associated with the 1933 movie *King Kong*, the stark shadows cast by its beams and girders, and the rows of tenements and Irish saloons that I could see swishing by from its windows. I had no memory of the Second Avenue El, or the Sixth Avenue El, or the Ninth Avenue El. They were all gone. But in some ways, the Third Avenue El seemed as permanent as the Statue of Liberty, and for me it provided a ride through more than simple space. It hurtled me through time as well. They started tearing it down in 1955. By the time I returned from Mexico in 1957, the Third Avenue El was gone too.

There would be many other disappearances, including too many newspapers. Buildings went up, and if you lived long enough, you might see them come down, to be replaced by newer, more

audacious, more arrogant structures. I came to accept this after the El had vanished and some of the worst office buildings in the city's history began rising on Third Avenue. There was no point, I thought, in permanently bemoaning change. This was New York. Loss was part of the deal. In the same year that the Third Avenue El disappeared, so did the Brooklyn Dodgers and the New York Giants. The demise of the Third Avenue El was a kind of marker, the end of something that had outlived its time. But for many people, the flight of the baseball teams was an example of unacceptable losses. Some never got over it. After a long while, I finally consoled myself about the Dodgers by saying, well, at least I had them once and I will always have them in memory. That nostalgia lives in me today. It erupts whenever I see a fragment of black-and-white newsreel showing Jackie Robinson heading for home. But to talk about the Dodgers' departure without cease would be to live as a bore. New York teaches you to get over almost everything.





Brookland

Emily Barton reads a passage from her novel.

Introduction: *This passage from Brookland takes place during the Revolutionary War, in January of 1782. Prue Winship is a 9-year-old girl who lives up on the cliffs of Brooklyn Heights. She has always longed to visit New York, a place she sees constantly across the water, but because her story takes place a hundred years before the real-life Brooklyn Bridge was constructed, this has always seemed impossible until this morning, when the East River has frozen clear across, allowing people the novelty of walking back and forth between Brooklyn and New York. Prue's father, Matthias Winship, runs a gin distillery at the foot of what is now Joralemon Street, and he's about to take his wife and three daughters on a jaunt across the frozen river.*

Emily Barton: The ice was unlike that of the millpond, so meticulously swept clean for skating: This ice was a bumpy, dull gray, and dirty with ash, twigs, trapped fish, and bits of the week's papers. As her father stepped onto it, with Prue on his back, Prue half expected it to give way and groan. Her mother drew in a sharp breath. Matty cast her a dismissive glance over the shoulder and continued out onto the ice. "Look," he said, "half the persons of our acquaintance are out and don't seem to be coming to any harm."

Prue noticed the ice was also supporting dozens of people she didn't recognize, and with no more danger than an occasional loss of one's footing. A group stood in a circle clapping and blowing into their hands while one man jumped with all his might, as if it were possible to break through. One of His Majesty's brigs was frozen just offshore, her sailors sliding along on the brackish ice. They hallooed and whistled as people passed, and one called out, "Hey, Matthias Winship — get back to your place and make the gin!"

"Never you fear, sir," Matty called back. Prue beamed with pride to be thus aloft on his shoulders. "It's a year in the casks before its minute in your tankards," he said. "I'm sure it's your hope as well as mine you'll all be home by then."

"Amen," the sailor said quietly, but sound carried well in the crisp atmosphere. He spat over his shoulder for emphasis.

Prue's father let her down to the ground, where she slipped on the tricky surface, eliciting his laughter. Her sister Tem got a running start and came skidding on top of her, hooting with joy. Her other sister, Pearl, who was trying to skate in her shoes, arrived more slowly; but the neighboring Horsfield boys were never far off from a commotion and came to jump on the pile like piglets, with Ben, as usual, in the lead.

A few dozen yards out onto the ice stood Black Peg, as she was known, with a large tray suspended from her neck. "Hot pears, nice hot pears!" Peg cried. She was tall, and the fringed red ends of her muffler streamed down her back. "Piping hot! Get 'em while they're hot! Hot pears for a penny!" Tem shot up like a rocket at Peg's cry, and bit Ben hard on the exposed skin of his wrist when he tried to wrestle her back into the pile.

"You get 'im, Temmy!" their father shouted to her. She roared at Ben in reply, then ran off toward Peg.

Their mother said, "Don't encourage her," then shouted out to Ben, "Are you all right?" But he was already up, trying to keep the others from arriving first.

Prue dusted herself off and went over to her father for money. He fished a sixpence from his pocket and gave it to Prue, saying, "For the Horsfields as well. Check she didn't draw blood." Prue noticed the concern with which her mother was watching Ben shake out his injured wrist, then ran off, slipping, to catch up with the other children.

Even as she held her goal of a hot pear in mind,

Prue realized what a wonder it was to be able to run across the East River. The buildings that so fascinated her were drawing nearer, and she couldn't wait to see them up close.

Once they had their sweets in hand, the children walked along more sedately, sucking on their pears and the sheepy fibers of their mittens. When Prue turned to see where her parents were, they were walking gloved hand in gloved hand. When Prue turned forward again, she drew in a breath of delight, for before her were the sights she'd dreamed of all her life, even larger and more vivid than she'd imagined. When she'd peered at Manhattan previously, she'd looked down from the top of Clover Hill; but now she was looking up, and the warehouses along the waterfront loomed over her.

As the party drew nearer New York, the ice grew ever more thickly littered with trapped boats. Little shallows and sleek periaguas were left where they lay, with buckets and lengths of rope strewn in their hulls. Groups of boys approached them with obvious curiosity, but either found nothing worth pilfering or else desisted in the clear view of such multitudes. Some distance north, Prue thought she saw the flat-bottomed ferryboat, tethered to what looked to be the market wharf and in no danger from the huge freighter that rested nearby. There were also more mongers on the New York side — an old man selling chestnuts from a kettle fire, and a blind woman shaking a tankard for pennies in exchange for paper twists of popcorn from a basket at her feet. Two slaves were out making music with a mandolin and a Jew's harp; and some New Yorkers were trying their wooden-bladed skates on the bumpy, uncongenial ice.





Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test

Tom Wolfe reads Chapter 6, "The Bus."

Introduction: *Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, which is the story of how Ken Kesey and his psychedelic commune, who worshipped the great god Lysergic Acid, set out to start a primary religion, like the start of Zoroastrianism or start of Christianity, and from which they expected to really set the world on fire with a new worldwide religion, a modest aim, a modest aim.

Anyway, this is chapter six. It's entitled "The Bus" because it describes the bus trip across the United States that Kesey and the Merry Pranksters made in 1964, which was to be really the beginning of their great adventure in religious conversion.

Tom Wolfe: I couldn't tell you for sure which of the Merry Pranksters got the idea for the bus, but it had the Babbs touch. It was a super prank, in any case. The original fantasy, here in the spring of 1964, had been that Kesey and four or five others would get a station wagon and drive to New York for the New York World's Fair. On the way they could shoot some film, make some tapes, freak out on the Fair and see what happened. They would also be on hand, in New York, for the publication of Kesey's second novel, *Sometimes a Great Notion*, due out early in July. Or so went the original fantasy.

Then somebody — Babbs? — saw a classified ad for a 1939 International Harvester school bus. The bus belonged to a man in Menlo Park. He had a big house and a lot of grounds and a nice set of tweeds and flannels and 11 children. He had rigged out the bus for the children. It had bunks and benches and a refrigerator and a sink for washing dishes and cabinets and shelves and a lot of other nice features for living on the road. Kesey bought it for \$1,500 in the name of Intrepid Trips Incorporated.

Kesey gave the word and the Pranksters set upon it one afternoon. They started painting it and wiring it for sound and cutting a hole in the roof and fixing up the top of the bus so you could sit up there in the open air and play music, even a set of drums and electric guitars and electric bass and so forth, or you could just ride. Sandy went to work on the wiring and rigged up a system with which you could broadcast from inside the bus, with tapes over microphones, and it would blast outside over powerful speakers on top of the bus. There were also microphones outside that would pick up sounds along the road and broadcast them inside the bus. There was also a sound system inside the bus so you could broadcast to one another over the roar of the engine and the road. You could also broadcast over a tape mechanism so you said something, then you heard

your own voice a second later in variable lag, and could rap off of that if you wanted to. Or you could put on earphones and rap simultaneously off sounds from outside coming in one ear, and sounds from the inside, your own sounds, coming in the other ear. There was going to be no goddamn sound on that whole trip, outside the bus, inside the bus, or inside your own freaking larynx, that you couldn't tune in and rap off of.

The painting job, meanwhile, with everybody pitching in in a frenzy of primary colors, yellows, oranges, blues, reds, was sloppy as hell, except for the parts Roy Seburn did, which were nice manic mandalas. Well, it was sloppy, but one thing you had to say for it, it was freaking lurid. The manifest, the destination sign in the front, read "Furthur," with no e but two u's.

They took a test run up into northern California and right away this wild-looking thing with wild-looking people was great for stirring up consternation and vague befuddling resentment among the citizens. The Pranksters were now out among them, and it was exhilarating — "Look at the mothers staring at us!" — and it was going to be holy terror in the land. But there would also be people who would look up from out of their poor work-a-daddy lives in some town, some old guy, somebody's stenographer, and see this bus and register delight, or just pure open-invitation wonder. Either way, the Intrepid Travelers figured, there was hope for these people. They weren't totally turned off.

The bus also had great possibilities for altering the usual order of things. For example, there were the cops. One afternoon the Pranksters were on a test run in the bus going through the woods up north and a forest fire had started. There was smoke beginning to pour out of the woods and everything. Everybody on the bus had taken acid and they were zonked. The acid was in some orange juice in the



refrigerator and you drank a paper cup full of it and you were zonked. Cassidy was driving and barreling through the burning woods, wrenching the steering wheel this way and that way to his inner-wired beat, with a siren wailing and sailing through the rhythm.

A siren? It's a highway patrolman, which immediately seems like the funniest thing in the history of the world. Smoke is pouring out of the woods and they are all sailing through leaf explosions in the sky, but the cop is bugged about this freaking bus. The cop yanks the bus over to the side and he starts going through a kind of traffic-safety inspection of the big gross bus, while more and more of the smoke is billowing out of the woods. "Man, the license plate is on wrong, and there's no light over the license plate, and this turn signal looks bad, and how about the brakes, let's see that hand brake there."

Cassidy, the driver, is already into a long monologue for the guy, only he's throwing in all kinds of sirs: "Well, yes sir, this is a Hammond bi-valve serrated brake, you understand, had it put on in a truck rodeo in Springfield, Oregon, had to back through a slalom course of babies' bottles and yellow nappies, in the existential culmination of Oregon, lots of outhouse freaks up there, you understand, sir, a punctual sort of a state, sir, yes sir, holds up to 28,000 pounds, 28,000 pounds, you just look right here, sir, tested by a pure-blooded Shell Station attendant in Springfield, Oregon, the winter of 1962, his gumball boots never froze, you understand, sir, 28,000 pounds of hold, right here," whereupon he yanks back on the hand-brake handle as if it's attached to something, which it isn't, it's just dangling there, and jams his foot on the regular brake, and the bus shudders as if the hand brake has a hell of a bite, but the cop is thoroughly befuddled now, anyway, because Cassidy's monologue has confused him, for one thing, and what the hell are these people doing.

By this time everybody is off the bus, rolling in

the brown grass by the shoulder, laughing, giggling, ya-hooing, zonked to the skies on acid, because "Mon, the woods are burning," and the whole world is on fire, and a Cassidy monologue on automotive safety is rising up from out of his throat like weenie smoke, as if the great god Speed were frying in his innards, and the cop, representative of the people of California in this total freaking situation, is all hung up on a hand brake that doesn't exist in the first place. And the cop, all he can see is a bunch of crazies in screaming orange and green costumes, masks, and boys and girls, and men and women, 12 or 14 of them, lying in the grass and making hideously crazy sounds — Christ almighty, why does he have to contend with — so he wheels around and he says, "What are you, uh — show people?"

"That's right, officer," Kelsey says. "We're show people. It's been a long row to hoe, I can tell you, and it's gonna be a long row to hoe, but that's the business."

"Well," says the cop, 'you, you fix up those things and' — he starts backing off toward his car, cutting one last look at the crazies — "and just watch it next time." And he guns on off.

That was it! How can you give a traffic ticket to a bunch of people rolling in the brown grass wearing DayGlo masks, practically Greek masks, with only Rat phosphorescent élan, giggling, keening in their costumes and their private world while the great god Speed sizzles like a short-order French fry in the gut of some guy who doesn't even stop talking to breathe.



An Around the World Reading

by Karen Hofstein





COURTESY PEN AMERICAN CENTER

*Author Tommy Wieringa of the Netherlands read in Dutch from his novel *Joe Speedboat* at the Sixth Annual PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature April 26-May 2, 2010, in New York City.*

The baldheaded man leapt to the stage at Joe’s Pub in Greenwich Village. Tommy Wieringa, a highly respected author from the Netherlands, chatted amiably with the largely American crowd about his visit to their city, telling them in perfect English, “Now I am going to read in Dutch — it’s a language. I understand it was spoken in New York for quite a while. Maybe you should have stuck to it and then I wouldn’t sound so foolish.” The listeners, possibly recalling that New York once was New Amsterdam, laughed. Wieringa proceeded to read from his novel, *Joe Speedboat*, a coming-of-age story about a 14-year-old wheelchair-bound boy. Behind him, projected on a screen, the English translation floated in white letters on black background. When his reading was complete, the audience burst into an appreciative round of applause.

The reading at Joe’s Pub was one of the many events at the Sixth Annual PEN World Voices Festival of International Literature, which took place April 26 through May 2, 2010, in New York City. Sponsored by the PEN American Center, the weeklong festival, which played to packed audiences, included interviews, panel discussions, performances and authors’ readings. According to the festival brochure, the events were designed to “foster international understanding and promote literary culture” by bringing together 150 authors from around the world.

The acronym PEN stands for poets, playwrights, essayists, editors and novelists. The 85-year old organization, which includes 3,400 members, has spearheaded international

efforts opposing censorship and fighting for the rights of writers around the world to speak with a free voice. At each event during the festival, an empty chair was placed on the stage dedicated to a writer in prison somewhere in the world for expressing his or her ideas.

The event this particular night, titled “An Around the World Reading,” featured nine authors from countries including Holland, the United States, Canada, South Africa, Norway, Germany and Australia. Readings by authors covered a range of topics that included love and parenthood; sexuality; and the environment and natural disasters.

Karl Knusgaard, a tall lanky man with a beard, read a selection in Norwegian from his novel *A Time for Everything*. His highly praised book recasts biblical stories in a manner that conveys an immediacy not typically found in traditional scripture. His selection dealt with the story of the great flood and its aftermath. The tale was particularly anguished, noting “300-foot-high walls of water,” miles of dry land changed into ocean and people searching for loved ones. Some American listeners may have been reminded of New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina in 2005.

Anne Landsman, a writer originally from South Africa who now lives in the U.S., read a selection

from her critically acclaimed novel *The Rowing Lesson*, which tells the story of an adult daughter maintaining a deathbed vigil by her father. Sitting beside the comatose man in his hospital room, the daughter relates her father’s own life story to him. The excerpt Landsman read recounted a boating trip taken by the man and the then 10-year-old girl. The story, written in the unusual second-person present tense, was enormously touching and drew upon the commonality of the parent-child bond. Her closing words (“This rainy afternoon will paste itself into your life as a special day . . .”) caused more than a few people in the audience to dab tears from their eyes.

Some international authors chose not to read in their native tongues, such as Monique Proulx, who is from Quebec. “I speak and write in French, but I will read in English... You will find my accent charming.” Proulx, a vibrant woman with a mane of blonde curls, said that most of her writing involves cities and the urban landscape. Her most recent work, however, is atypical in that it deals with the countryside. She smiled at the audience and said, “I think it is important to share with you this incredible joy it is to know that we are part of something so big, so vast that we call ‘nature.’ But it is such a *little* word to talk about this living organism that is helping us to survive.” She read a selection from her novel *Wildlives* about a couple’s

summer stay at a lake cottage in an isolated rural area replete with bears and enormous insects. She read, “It was impossible to ignore that this place was a paradise, a sacred garden to which [they] had mercifully been granted the key.” At the close of her reading, the audience clapped wildly. Beaming, she departed the stage and said, “Long live the earth.”

Lee Stringer is a U.S. citizen who overcame a 12-year addiction to crack cocaine and a life in the streets to become a celebrated author. Before his reading, he spoke about his indecisiveness over what passage to select. Saying that he liked each piece of writing to be different, he had noted as he reviewed his past works that “Everything I had written seemed to be about our struggle, in an increasingly different world, to remain human. And then I thought about it some more and I thought – ‘Wait a minute, that’s at the bottom of *every* story.’ That is part of all literature and the basis of all art; it is the stuff of life.”

The other authors in the festival, who write of similar universal themes, would likely concur with Stringer.

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Author Anne Landsman, originally from South Africa, read this passage from her novel *The Rowing Lesson*.

Your light shines right at me, your ears listen for engine trouble, then you back away, start the boat again with a pull of the cord. You sit down, heading for home, the river spread wide in front of you, houses, boathouses clustering the edges. The sky is clearing and a rainbow stretches over the hills and into the sea. Tomorrow will be a good beach day. You want to wake me and tell me, but you can't. You want to tell me lots of things, but you can't. She won't understand, you think. She walks into walls and she laughs just like Maysie, your sister. And sometimes she's her own little animal, the way she is now, and it makes you sad and happy at the same time. Nothing happened, but you know this rainy afternoon will paste itself into your life as a special day. The day you taught me how to row, and you and I got stuck in a boat in the rain and I crawled into the front and made myself so small, you thought you could keep me forever.



COURTESY PEN AMERICAN CENTER

Author Monique Proulx of Quebec read this selection from her book *Wildlives*.

The next morning, she was on the dock, sprinkling herself with cool water when the sun surprised her. It was June 10 and the sun was a flaming arrow and the forest caught fire along with the lake and every living thing around. In the light of the blaze, it was impossible not to see. She saw yellow-tailed butterflies, symphonic birds, coupling fireflies, hovering dragonflies. She saw fresh spruce buds gleaming like jeweled rings, and so many colors, so much rustling in every direction; an orgy of triumphant lives. In the light of the blaze, it was impossible to ignore that this bush-choked elemental place was in fact a paradise, a sacred garden, to which she had been mercifully granted the key.



WIKIMEDIA COMMONS/TASHA FRENCH

U.S. author Lee Stringer, known for overcoming a cocaine addiction before becoming a published writer, read from his work *The Lady Next Door*.

I found myself saying that all social problems boiled down to one question. How are we — in an increasingly textured world — to reasonably exist? How are we to remain human to one another? And the answer to that question, I posited, is and always has been that we just keep at it. Get up each morning and give it another honest try. It's one of those times when you discover a potent idea just as it comes out of your mouth. I doubt if it was a response that would find a profitable place on any of the Columbia's audience's final law exam, but turning it over and over in my mind on the train ride home, I couldn't shake the basic truth of it. I felt gratified and humbled to have stumbled upon such a kernel of clarity.

