

OUR ESSAYS, OURSELVES

In defense of the Big Idea

By Cristina Nehring

Discussed in this essay:

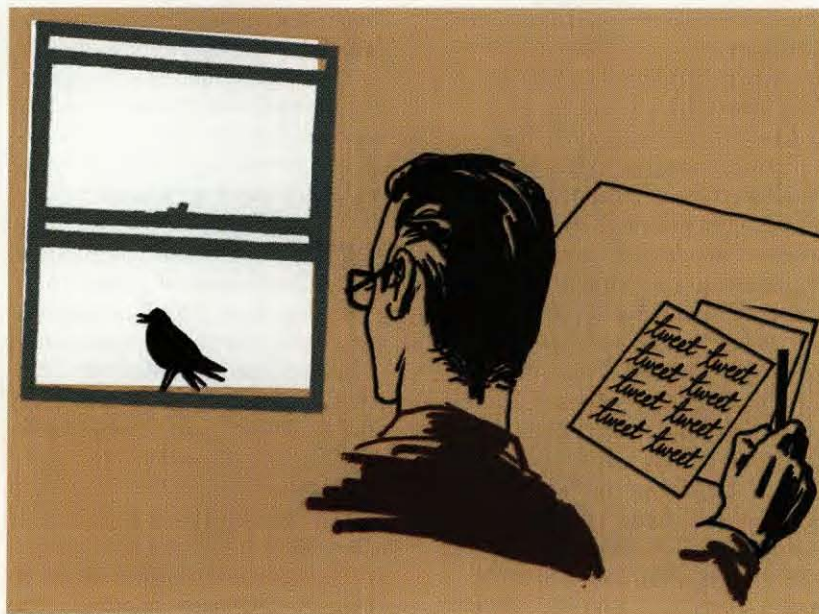
Five Shades of Shadow, by Tracy Daugherty. University of Nebraska Press, 2003. 296 pages. \$27.95.

The Fish's Eye: Essays About Angling and the Outdoors, by Ian Frazier. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. 176 pages. \$20.

The Nature of Home: A Lexicon and Essays, by Lisa Knopp. University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 256 pages. \$24.95.

Local Wonders: Sessions in the Bohemian Alps, by Ted Kooser. University of Nebraska Press, 2002. 168 pages. \$22.

The Founding Fish, by John McPhee. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002. 358 pages. \$25.



The essay, we sometimes hear, is "the freest form in all of literature." How is it, then, that the hot new essay collections on my desk look so damn similar? Published recently by writers both famous and obscure, they look uncannily interchangeable. For one thing, each sports a photograph of the Great Outdoors

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on the cover: a darkened road through the wilderness, an old American truck in the grasslands, sun-kissed trees, or, at the least, a close-up of some freshly slain fish. Indeed, the volume by Ian Frazier and the one by John McPhee seem (to my untutored eye) to have exactly the same unhappy fish flung in precisely the same fashion around their spine. Many of these books have bucolic titles like *The Nature of Home*, *Local Wonders*, *The Founding Fish*.

Open them up and the differences do not dramatically increase. Whether elaborating the illness occasioned by

their author's absence from her prairie home (Lisa Knopp), waxing lyrical about the Okies (Tracy Daugherty), painting the tranquil pleasures of shad fishing (John McPhee), reminiscing about bugs bothered as a boy (Ian Frazier), or recalling the pies of an Iowa grandmother (Ted Kooser), these books share a somewhat sleepy obsession with rural retreats, peaceable pastimes, and childhood memories. The name of a loved local landscape—"Oregon's Willamette Valley," "Nebraska"—appears in the first sentence of each one.

Extensive autobiographical detail attends them, too: three out of five narrate the author's medical experiences in lavish detail ("Could you look at the back of my tongue on the left side?" Kooser tells us he asked his doctor. "I've had a sore spot back there for a number of weeks." "One Sunday night Margie and I were making love. 'I'm sorry. I have to stop,'" Daugherty recalls saying as his heart trouble began). All of these writers deliver themselves to long and lingering backward glances at youthful pranks and pleasures (eating insects, walking in the woods). Many of them offer a level of precision about their CVs we never knew we wanted. Knopp actually ticks off the courses she taught during a brief stint at a university: "American Autobiography, Literary Journalism, American Travel Literature, Early American Literature." Indeed, lists appear to have become the literary device of choice in essays of this ilk. Some go on for a page or two, like the one Frazier makes, in *The Fish's Eye*, of the many-thousand kinds of bait contained in a cluttered old store. No detail strikes these writers as too small or too banal to include: if they noticed it, it's *important*. Thus Frazier relates every word of three consecutive telephone conversations he overheard in the store:

"Angler's Roost."

"....."

"We've got all kinds of hook hones."

"....."

"Fresh and salt, both."

"....."

"Yes, some of them are grooved."

"....."

"Each one comes in a plastic case."

"....."

"Different lengths. I think two-inch and three-inch."

That even writers as formidable as Frazier and McPhee have yielded to such pedestrian rehearsals is testimony to the pettily autobiographical frenzy that has lately seized American essayists—a frenzy for cozy, complacent, and oddly insular self-revelation that has swallowed them up in numbers. When it does not take the form of pastoral angling tales, this frenzy easily assumes the shape of urban microhistories such as Joseph Epstein's repeatedly anthologized "The Art of the Nap," in which he describes—with loving precision and evident satisfaction—his own slumbering tastes:

"Sleeping in some beds," he wagers,

is more pleasurable than sleeping in others. . . . As a boy, I would have been delighted to have slept in a bunk bed; I only did so later in the army. I have never slept in a hammock. . . . Sleeping in the cramped quarters of a submarine wouldn't be easy for me. Sleeping alone in a hotel in a king-size bed, on the other hand, gives me the willies.

As erstwhile editor of *The American Scholar*, compiler of *The Norton Book of Personal Essays*, and author of at least twelve books of essays, Epstein is probably one of the most prolific and mood-setting practitioners of the genre today. Indeed, his brand of "personal essay" has become, as the *Encyclopedia of the Essay* asserts, "what most people mean when they consider the essay as a genre." Highbrow anthologies abound with this kind of essay—essays on the author's memories of his first ice-cream cone or of her parents' drugstore, essays about catching trout with Uncle Elmer or watching the sunrise with Hubby, essays about the author's domestic peccadilloes or a visit to an old boarding school. At once backward-looking and navel-examining, these pieces lack *Sturm und Drang*; a consensus seems to have grown that the genre should be . . . a bit sedate. No panicked incest here, as we might find in modern autobiographical poetry—no, the essay now is a cooler form; emotion is "recollected in tranquility," if it is recollected at all. The essay is a "middle-aged" genre, according to Epstein—one's early thirties is "young" to dabble in it, he thinks; never mind that our nation's premier essayists,

Emerson and Thoreau, did their best work at just that age.

But essayists today are less hot-headed, imperative, dangerous, and presumptuous than their predecessors. Whatever their actual age, the likes of Emerson and Thoreau were young in their literature—they were exhortative, urgent—clutching after truths for their own improvement and for that of their fellow human beings. They felt, like Seneca, whose *Letters from a Stoic* are sometimes dubbed the first essays of Western literature, that as "philosophers" they were "called in to help the unhappy . . . the shipwrecked," the timid, the unself-realized, the blind, the bungling, and the weak, among whom—it goes without saying—they counted themselves. They were always preaching to themselves as much as to their readers, but preaching they were—not in the manner of a priestly, middle-aged know-it-all but in the manner of a young and ardent paramedic who knows, when he speaks, that life hangs in the balance.

Personal essayists today, however, insist upon their "modesty." The "essayist is most profound . . . when his intentions are modest," writes Epstein. "Common to the genre is a taste for littleness," adds Philip Lopate, editor of *The Art of the Personal Essay*. Littleness indeed, but also frivolity. Witness Cynthia Ozick's oft-reprinted "Portrait of the Essay as a Warm Body": A real essay, she tells us, quoting John Updike, is shaped like the "ideal female body," which "curves around the centers of repose." Of course, it also harbors a little bit of spirit, "as if it—or she—were a character in a novel . . . moody, fickle, given on a whim to changing her clothes or the subject; sometimes obstinate, with a mind of her own, or hazy and light." And even on those occasions, when this Woman-Essay has "a mind of her own," Ozick is at pains to reassure us that *we don't have to take it seriously!* It is "whimsical" and weightless, flitting and inconsequential like a butterfly. We need not feel threatened by it. Like a frivolous lady or a pet puppy, it's just playing. So even if, by some accident, "there is an opinion in it, you need not trust it for the long run."

Often, there isn't. To present an opinion is to risk being presumptuous,

pompous, and, as Epstein calls Emerson, "a gasbag." It is to assume a knowledge of one's neighbor one cannot or should not have. It is to sin against identity politics. It is to deny diversity. The more exclusive your attention to your own idiosyncratic tastes, to the unique particulars of your life (which you list or describe, just so long as you don't generalize on their basis), the more politically kosher and celebrated your essay.

Ultimately, this cult of personal detail, this hermetic attention to the self, is no less arrogant than the desire to tell people what's best for them. It too often presumes that the author is infinitely fascinating for his or her own sake, that we should read him not because he says something that bears upon our world but because he himself is so fetching, so enthralling, so quirky, "so singular in each particular." We should read essayists not for general insights but for personal tics—because, for example, we find it so intriguing that Joseph Epstein "found I could not listen to [Books on Tape]. . . . Let me go on to a further confession: I cannot read detective or spy fiction. . . ."

The essay in our day is ailing. Quintessential form of non-fiction since the Renaissance, it today delivers on only a small part of its heady old promise. Montaigne proposed to "boldly meddle with every kind of subject" in an attempt to discover "how to die well and live well." His essays rested on the assumption that self-examination was not merely a narcissistic but an altruistic endeavor, for every individual life "whether an emperor's or common man's, . . . is still a life subject to all human accidents." Thus Montaigne could say, in a single breath, that his essays deal exclusively with his private self (a comment routinely quoted by contemporary essayists) and that he is undertaking a "study, the subject of which is man" (a comment routinely ignored by contemporary essayists). He could examine his own reading and loving and cheating and hesitating, and deduce brave insights about the reading, loving, cheating, and hesitating of others. This makes his work, and that of essayists for centuries afterward, far more provocative than it would be if it

began and ended with self-description alone. Certainly the great essayists of the past attended to the particulars of their lives: Montaigne wrote of his taste in sauces and women, Thoreau of his taste in plants and carpentry, Emerson—albeit more obliquely—of his social inhibitions. But all three extrapolated from these particularities. They used personal experience as a wedge with which to pry open the door to general insight. Today's personal essayists regard it as metal to be hoarded for its own sake.

The best essays of the past generalize ambitiously; they prescribe as readily as they describe; they are on the lookout for Big Ideas with Vast Application. If they offend their audience, at least they *address* it. If they are sure to err, they are sure to awaken as well. Witness Montaigne's pronouncements on learning:

Just as a plant is drowned by too much moisture and a lamp by too much oil, so is the mind drowned by too much study and matter, for, being . . . clogged with a great variety of things, it must lose the power of freeing itself, and the weight of them must keep it bent and doubled up.

Or Emerson on action in the life of the intellectual:

I do not see how any man can afford, for the sake of his nerves and his nap, to spare any action in which he can partake. It is pearls and rubies to his discourse. Drudgery, calamity, exasperation, want, are instructors in eloquence and wisdom. The true scholar grudges every opportunity of action past by, as a loss of power.

Or Dr. Johnson on the misery of aspiring artists:

We do not indeed so often disappoint others as ourselves. We not only think more highly than others of our own abilities, but allow ourselves to form hopes which we never communicate, and please our thoughts with . . . elevations to which we are never expected to rise; and when our days and years have passed away . . . and we find at last that we have suffered our purposes to sleep till the time of action is past, we are reproached only by our own reflections; neither our friends nor our enemies wonder that we . . . live without notice and die without memorial; they knew not what task we

had proposed, and therefore cannot discern whether it is finished.

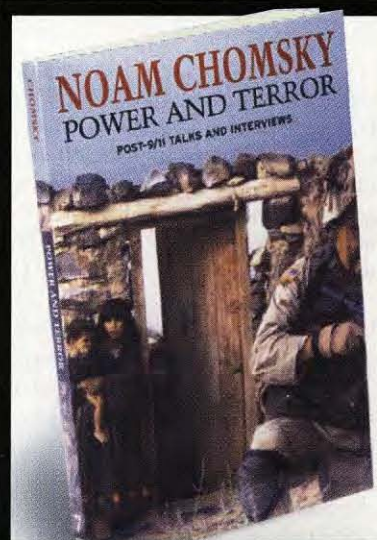
Or Thoreau on ambition:

If you have built castles in the air, your work need not be lost; that is where they should be. Now put the foundations under them.

What these passages share is not only strong and searching thought but gripping imagery, deliberate rhythms, epigrammatic point, and, perhaps most conspicuously for the modern reader, considerable presumption.

Such presumption is extremely rare today. To be sure, a feisty film critic like Pauline Kael was still defending her right to generalize in the 1960s—"Any of my generalizations are subject to . . . infinite qualifications; let's assume that I know this, and that I use [them] in order to be suggestive rather than definitive"—and exercising it elegantly. "Educated audiences," she declared, use art films for "cheap and easy congratulation on their sensitivities and their liberalism." And we can still find Christopher Hitchens willing to hypothesize, in a book review, that "the connection between stupidity and cruelty is a close one." But this is an exception. Today's public intellectuals more often than not shun broader pronouncements. In our age of fetishized pluralism and strident allegiance to "local knowledge," each person speaks only for him- or herself; no one speaks for his neighbor; no one speaks for her fellow Mensch. This is no doubt respectful; it also can be spectacularly dull. Essayists have cocooned. Where once they shared Emerson's creed that "what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men," they now count their experience irremediably divorced from the experience of their differently gendered, differently colored, and differently educated fellow human beings.

It is one sign of the low esteem into which the essay has fallen that the best-regarded essays are the ones that strain to be stories—the ones, in other words, that renounce the main privilege of the essayist over the storyteller: the right to think out loud, the right to draw conclusions from data rather than merely present it, the



Speak truth to power?

Q: You've said that we as citizens should not speak truth to power but, instead, to people. Shouldn't we do both? Could you speak more on this subject?

CHOMSKY: . . . First of all, power already knows the truth. They don't need to hear it from us. Secondly, it's a waste of time. Furthermore, it's the wrong audience. You have to speak truth to the people who will dismantle and overthrow and constrain power. I don't like the phrase "speak truth to." We don't know the truth. At least I don't.

We should join with the kind of people who are willing to commit themselves to overthrow power, and listen to them. They often know a lot more than we do. And join with them to carry out the right kinds of activities. Should you also speak truth to power? If you feel like it, but I don't see a lot of point. I'm not interested in telling the people around Bush what they already know.

—from *Power and Terror*

"succinct...illuminating"

—*Counterpunch*, Feb. 21, 2003

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right to offer interpretations and propose hypotheses. "There is more to be pondered in the grain and texture of life" than traditional fiction allows, argues Laurence Stapleton, one of the first modern scholars of the essay. The work of essayists is vital precisely because it "permits and encourages self-knowledge in a way that is less indirect than fiction, more open and speculative." Except, of course, when it fails to exploit its permissions, when it fails to seize its right to ponder openly and limits itself artificially to the tools of the fiction writer.

I do not mean to suggest that such essays are uniformly bad. There are sporadically self-absorbed narrative essays whose *raison d'être* is hard to fathom. But, at the same time, the very best tales are, often, non-fiction tales—witness George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" and "A Hanging." Witness Seymour Krim's or James Baldwin's autobiographical essays, Joan Didion's reportage, the journalism of Tom Wolfe, or much of John McPhee. Few fictions could be more riveting, more immediate, more replete with revelatory and significant detail, than these writers' non-fictions.

The same talents fuel, the same vices sink, fiction and narrative non-fiction alike. But the reason the essay is in crisis is that narrative essays—*story* essays—are virtually the only essays that may even grope after artistic recognition today. It is for this reason that they fill the literary anthologies and have become the object of a peculiarly slavish and at the same time self-important movement called "creative nonfiction." Its founder, Lee Gutkind, freely concedes that most non-fiction is "tedious and boring," and specifies:

Of course, I am a *creative* nonfiction writer, "creative" being indicative of a style in which the nonfiction is written so as to make it more dramatic and compelling. We embrace many of the techniques of the fiction writer, including dialogue, description, plot, intimacy of detail, characterization, point of view. . . .

Speaking broadly, non-fiction writers today are taken to be botched fiction writers. When it seems evident that they are not, when at no time in their careers have they betrayed a de-

sire to write "non-truths" (an apt companion-word for "non-fiction"), this is viewed, insidiously, not as commendable resolution but as lamentable decadence. As early as the 1950s, poets like Randall Jarrell opined that "intellectuals become critics before, and not after, they have failed as artists." Without defending the particular critics Jarrell had in mind, I believe that his dichotomy is false. "Critic" versus "artist"? When Montaigne wrote up the forgettable scribbler Raymond Sebond, was Sebond (whose thought is palatable to us today only in Montaigne's essay about him) the "artist" and Montaigne the hack? When H. L. Mencken reviewed a transitory novelist, was the latter the artist and Mencken his inferior?

The most cursory review of literary history exposes such assumptions as absurd. And yet it has been with us—along with a host of other unflattering myths about non-fiction writers—roughly since the end of the nineteenth century. Today, every writer both rash and dogged enough to toil in the groves of non-fiction has had a version of this conversation: "You're a writer!" says the smiling face. "What do you write?" Slight hesitation. "Novels?" comes the anticipated reply. "Stories?" "Screenplays?" (If you're in L.A.) "Poems?" (If you're female.) Only after this golden list has been tinkled off can you muster your reply: "Essays?" you offer. A cloud passes over the face before you. Chopped liver has been confused with foie gras. Luckily, the ingredients can occasionally be re-assembled. "Hey," says your kindly interlocutor, "I'll bet you could write a novel if you *tried*."

Not even essayists are especially eager to defend their craft—and when they do, it's in terms oddly demeaning. Take E. B. White, who blithely defined an essayist such as himself as "a recording secretary" and "a second-class citizen." No doubt this disclaimer is part of the charmingly humble, idiot-savant-ish persona White cultivated in his essays, but his followers took it at face value. In fact, they took it further. Ralph Ellison portrayed his own essays as trash cans: they "performed the grateful function," he wrote in *Shadow and Act*,

"of making it unnecessary to clutter up my fiction with half-formed or outrageously wrong-headed ideas." The good stuff goes into the novel; the refuse is chucked into the essays.

Is this really the case? Ellison's essays may indeed be weaker than his novels, but this is a matter of Ellison's particular literary propensities, not of any inherent imbalance between the genres. James Baldwin's essays are stronger than his fiction. William Gass's essays are often superior to his novels. Yet Gass looms large among non-fiction's contemporary detractors: essays, he declares in a polemic against Ralph Waldo Emerson, are the products of those who have "failed in the larger roles, the finer forms, and could not . . . populate a page with people, with passionate poetry."

Our age has produced a new literary breed: the self-hating essayist. We now have a whole class of non-fiction writers who, to all appearances, hate non-fiction and either beat themselves up for writing it, pretend they're doing something else (witness all the memoirs that pose as first novels), or linger in the lowly realm of personal trivia. This is particularly astonishing in light of the fact that historically non-fiction has more often been the public's favorite child and fiction the evil step-sister. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries a good prose narrative was a *true* prose narrative, and writers went to great lengths to persuade their readership that the account they were perusing of love or adventure, social climbing or moral collapse, was *history*, not fiction. From Daniel Defoe and Henry Fielding to Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne, even novelists twisted their prose into pretzels to make this point. A typical title page might have read: "The True and Historicall Tale of Ernestine Scrubb as told to X on the occasion of X's visit to Y." Imagination was a lesser god than observation; a lesser god, even, than philosophical reflection.

By the end of the nineteenth century, tastes had shifted and the novel was understood to be fiction—and better that way. But taste is hardly progressive, and the fact that for most of Western literary history "truth" was more highly esteemed than fiction should give us pause. The books that

stand at the fount of our tradition—from Homer's *Iliad* to the Bible—were understood as earnest accounts of actual events. Many of the most important writers in the Renaissance—Montaigne, whose autobiography transformed occidental literature; Francis Bacon, who imported the essay into English; John Donne, whose sermons stirred far more hearts than his poems—were, firstly and emphatically, writers of non-fiction. So secure was the preference for truth in the arts that Sir Philip Sidney had to fight valiantly in his famous sixteenth-century "Defense of Poesy" for the right to "lie" in literature at all.

Strictly speaking, even Shakespeare wrote predominantly "non-fiction." The majority of his dramatic plots hail from the history texts of his day: Plutarch's *Lives* and Holinshed's *Chronicles*. A much smaller number stem from existing fictional sources (for example, Thomas Lodge's *Rosalind*), but almost none of them did Shakespeare make up on his own. What he brought to his materials was not "invention" in the usual sense so much as form, style, sound, insight, irony, aphorism, color, and characterization—the same sorts of qualities, as it happens, that today's non-fiction writers attempt to bring to their work. If they are not for that reason Shakespeares, it is the nature of genius, not the nature of the task at hand, that creates the rift.

There is no such thing as a higher genre or a lower genre in literature; there is only good writing and bad writing, strong thinking and weak thinking. Stylistically, non-fiction has produced gems that glitter as brightly as the clearest stones of fiction. What novelist has penned words more bracing and eloquent than Thoreau's to the American writer: "Grow wild according to thy nature, like these sedges and brakes, which will never become English bay." What tale-teller can surpass James Baldwin's lyricism on the "sunlit prison of the American dream" or James Wolcott's evil imagination on the students of an "exciting growth industry": "You can almost see their hopeful little heads poking out of the soil." Where in fiction are metaphors more inventive than in Anthony

Lane's criticism of fiction? The prose of a certain spinsterly novelist, he says, is as "sad and tidy as a suitcase on a single bed." Where can we find descriptions more atmospheric than this, of Joan Didion's, from one of the essays in *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*?

October is the bad month for the wind, the month when breathing is difficult and the hills blaze up spontaneously. There has been no rain since April. Every voice seems a scream. It is the season of suicide and divorce and prickly dread, wherever the wind blows.

If there is nothing about non-fiction that keeps it from scaling the stylistic heights of the best fiction, neither is there anything inherently less imaginative about the argument of an essayist than about the plot of a novelist. All great plots, when it comes down to it, are old: "Girl Meets Boy," "Man Versus Nature," "Man Versus Society," "Coming of Age." We learned them in high school: they are limited, as are the number of Great Ideas. What we need imagination for is less to "create" a plot or an idea than to make the one that imposes itself on us relevant and resonant: to clothe it in living examples, ally it with suggestive characters, render it in tough or tender and textured prose. This is the real creative work, and here essayist and novelist are on equal turf.

Yet even the best lose their nerve. Take Annie Dillard, one of the essay's staunchest defenders. This is the woman who kicked off an essay collection, *Teaching a Stone to Talk*, with a defiant declaration: "This is not a collection of occasional pieces, such as a writer brings out to supplement his real work; instead this is my real work, such as it is." It is a terrific shame that an essayist feels she needs to preface her art with such words, but in our day she does, and it is jarring and good that Dillard did. And yet when she edited the 1988 collection of *Best American Essays*, she found herself bending to the very prejudices she had combated elsewhere. She privileged the pieces that resembled stories; she emphasized a kind of sub-genre, "the narrative essay." The contemporary public was used to plots and details, not thoughts or hypotheses, and that is what Dillard gave them. To do other-



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wise would have risked the ire of essentially idea-phobic readers, as Richard Rodriguez learned when he tried to write his autobiography as a series of engagements with issues. "You should write your book in stories—not as a series of essays," his editors urged him. "Let's have more Grandma." Let's have more cozy detail from your personal life, in other words, and less potentially troubling thought about matters such as bilingual education. People might actually get upset. Ideas enrage; they pique; they rattle; they move the furniture around in the reader's head. That is why they are so valuable and so dangerous. Stories you can interpret as you like, or not at all. Fiction—and, to a lesser degree, narrative non-fiction—is safer for readers and safer for writers. Readers need not question their assumptions and writers need not open themselves to attack.

When is the last time a cultural magazine published an enraged reader's letter about the fiction in the last issue? It must happen, but rarely. The only thing to attack, in such a case, is style and skill; you can hardly attack the writer's point or the writer's print persona. Any criticism is bound to be less urgent, less personal, and far less frequent than the criticism leveled at, say, the political columnist—the guy who makes claims, in his own voice, about issues on the reader's mind. Such essayists take far more risks, in this sense, than do fiction writers, and when they're attacked, it is not merely their literary skills but their entire personalities that bear the blow.

It is hard to hide a vice when writing an essay. If you are arrogant, it will emerge; if you are cranky and ungenerous, sentimental or clichéd, it will emerge. The essay, even in the most conservative of times, is a striptease. It is revealing, dangerous, and personal.

Today the essay has the peculiar disadvantage of being shortchanged not only by its detractors but also, and sometimes more damningly, by its defenders. One result is that we have not attained either the excellence or the dignity of which the essay is capable. We have some excellent writers, some of them underrated and working in the dark, but we have no Emerson or

Montaigne to show for our time. We have few writers disturbing us with big ideas, and we have become allergic to big ideas. We associate them not with great minds but with weak minds—with televangelists and pop psychologists. It is time we enfranchise our essayists again, so that they may take over the business of making us think—not only about themselves, or their particular areas of expertise but about the fundamental questions, the stuff of human life.

Boldness has been the inheritance of the essayist since Montaigne exulted, in the sixteenth century, that when he knew less about a subject, he tried his judgment on it the more happily. "He that studies wisely learns in a *compendium*, what others labour at in a divided piece and endlesse volume," wrote another Renaissance essayist, Sir Thomas Browne; "we carry with us the wonders wee seeke without us." We do, but to appreciate them we must bring them out and turn them in the light. And we must trust the rays they cast on our neighbors. We

are all much smarter than we let on, knowledgeable about our peers and able to speak to them usefully. Because for all the salutary talk of diversity in our day, the human soul shares a great deal across cultural and religious and racial and gender lines. And if the essayist is wrong, presumptuous, and offensive? What of it? Even a bad idea can prompt a good one. We think by refutation, and an idea we consider wrong is more likely than just about anything else to inspire an idea we consider right. "It is not instruction," said Emerson, "but provocation, that I can receive from another soul."

Provocation we must have, and fiction writers cannot provide enough of it. This is why we need bold, brash essayists. Ours today are too cute, too modest, and too afraid to presume. "If you have been put in your place long enough, you begin to act like the place," wrote Randall Jarrell. So it has been for our essayists. We have socked them down for so long that now they are crouched and timid. It is incumbent upon us to restore their power, to raise them, so that they may raise us. ■

MAN OF ALL QUALITIES

The enigma of Giangiacomo Feltrinelli

By Barbara Probst Solomon

Discussed in this essay:

Feltrinelli: A Story of Riches, Revolution, and Violent Death, by Carlo Feltrinelli. Harcourt, 2002. 352 pages. \$30.

In 1940, during the Second World War, Giannalisa Feltrinelli persuaded the Italian dictator, Benito Mussolini, to bestow the title marquis of Gargnano on her twelve-year-old son, Giangiacomo. Giannalisa was the richest widow in Italy, and to sweeten

the deal she gave Hitler's partner a large donation. Had Il Duce known the shape his young putative marquis's career would take, he might have refused no matter what the incentive: By 1944 the teenage Giangiacomo Feltrinelli had joined the Italian volunteer Legnano combat unit attached to the American Fifth Army. The following year he joined the Italian Communist Party and, precociously, became one of its leading figures.

Barbara Probst Solomon is the U.S. cultural correspondent for *El País*. Her books include *Smart Hearts in the City* and the essay collection *Horse-Trading and Ecstasy*.