Beacon Press

25 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts 02108-2892 TEL 617 948-6554 FAX 617 723-3097 www.beacon.org

OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR

March 20, 2007

To: UUA Board of Trustees
From: Helene Atwan, Director
Re: Beacon Press Board Report

BEACON 150

The press continues to show excellent financial results and to win accolades:

Meredith Hall's just-released debut memoir, ***Without a Map***, is already receiving great acclaim. In addition to being named a BookSense Pick for May (a very selective designation based on the opinions of independent bookstores), Francine Prose, the newly appointed President of PEN American Center, reviewed the book in April's *O Magazine*: "Meredith Hall's memoir is a sobering portrayal of how punitive her close-knit New Hampshire community was in 1965 when, at the age of 16, she became pregnant...Hall offers a testament to the importance of understanding and even forgiving the people who, however unconscious or unkind, have made us who we are."

Fred Pearce, author of *When the Rivers Run Dry*, has a new book out debunking the comfortable illusion that global warming will be a gradual process. ***With Speed and Violence*** has already won the publishing industry's Triple Crown, garnering three starred reviews from the advanced trade magazines. As Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute, urged, "If you can read only one book on climate change, this is it."

Dr. Beverly Daniel Tatum's bestselling *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?* engaged with a wide audience on the psychological dynamics of race relations in America; one of her readers, President Clinton, invited her to join him in his nationally televised dialogues on race. In her first book since that path-breaking success, the now-President of Spelman College keeps these crucial dialogues going with ***Can We Talk About Race?: And Other Conversations in an Era of School Resegregation***, the first book to come out of Beacon's new collaboration with Simmons College in the Race, Education and Democracy Lecture and Book series.

Shout, Sister, Shout! is the first biography of African-American trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe. In its March 18th issue, the *New York Times Book Review* praised the book and its author, George Washington University **Professor Gayle F. Wald:** "Tharpe's story, salvaged here by Wald...is very much a woman's story...[Tharpe's] picaresque journey from Pentecostal child prodigy in Cotton Plant, Ark., to preteen phenom on Chicago's church circuit to Cotton Club darling to one of gospel's first recording stars is constantly surprising." In telling Tharpe's story, Wald has preserved an important and little-known chapter in African-American women's history.

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet **Mary Oliver** also recently earned a citation in the *New York Times Book Review*, "At 71 [Oliver] is, far and away, this country's best selling poet. According to the list on poetryfoundation.org, the top fifteen bestselling poetry volumes

in America as of mid-January include no fewer than *five* Mary Oliver titles, all published by Beacon Press of Boston." ***Our World***, which will join text by Oliver with photographs by Molly Malone Cook, her partner of forty years who died in 2005, will be published in October. Beacon is proud to announce the recent acquisition of a collection of new poems by Oliver; ***Red Bird*** is slated for release in spring of 2008.

BEACON 150

Other newly acquired titles include:

Beacon is delighted to announce a new book by Professor Rashid Khalidi, who will be the 2007 Ware Lecturer at General Assembly in Portland. Khalidi's last two books, *The Iron Cage: The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood* and *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America's Perilous Path in the Middle East*, won him accolades from major national news outlets ranging from the *New York Times* to *The Charlie Rose Show*. His new book will explore the impact of the Cold War on the Middle East, and how this legacy shaped the realities that confront Western powers in the region today.

Thomas DeWolf's memoir, *Inheriting the Trade: A Northern Family Confronts Its Legacy as the Largest Slave Trading Dynasty in U.S. History*, will be published on the 200th anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade—January 1, 2008. In 2001, DeWolf was horrified to discover that he was related to the most successful slave trading family in U.S. history, responsible for enslaving at least 10,000 Africans. *Inheriting the Trade* reveals that virtually all slave trading was done by *northerners*. It is an urgent call for meaningful and honest dialogue—and a persuasive argument that the legacy of slavery is not simply a Southern issue but an enduring American one.

Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *Home of the Brave: An Indigenous History of the U.S.*, scheduled for publication in fall of 2008, will be the first book in a new series that re-examines U.S. history from underrepresented perspectives. Dunbar-Ortiz, the author or editor of seven books, has been active in the American Indian Movement and the International Indian Treaty Council, and is widely known for her writing on both national and international social justice issues.

Nature's Second Chance by restoration ecologist Steven Apfelbaum will tell the story of his dedication to Stone Prairie Farm, his land in Wisconsin which he has worked for over 30 years to restore. Apfelbaum will cover the history of this land as well as discuss his work as a renowned international restoration consultant. As we face environmental deterioration resulting from sprawl, global warming, and other dangers, restoration offers one of the few ways to fix our planet. Publication is expected in fall of 2008.

Craig Rennebohm is a UCC minister who has been working for over 20 years with people who are mentally ill and homeless—he founded an ecumenical Mental Health Chaplaincy in 1987, and has been Seattle's Mental Health Chaplain for 20 years. *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God* will tell stories of Rennebohm's experience helping those living with mental illness, emphasizing the combination of practical help and the interpersonal connections that a community should provide—with special focus on how to reach out to people and encourage faith communities to create mental health ministries.

Khalidi
New York Times Book Review
January 7, 2007

Stateless

Rashid Khalidi assesses Palestine's bleak prospects.

THE IRON CAGE
The Story of the Palestinian Struggle for Statehood.
By Rashid Khalidi.
281 pp. Beacon Press. $24.95.

By CLYDE HABERMAN

PERHAPS Rashid Khalidi would have done better calling his book "Cry, the Beloved Country That Never May Be." That title would have conveyed how glum he is about the likelihood of the Palestinians ever getting their own state. By some calculations, he says, they are worse off than they have been in decades.

"In spite of their vigorous sense of collective national identity," Khalidi writes, "the Palestinians have never succeeded in creating an independent state of their own, and have no sure prospect in the future of ever having a truly sovereign state or of possessing a contiguous, clearly demarcated territory on which to establish it."

How did the Palestinians sink into this sorry nonstate of affairs? Principally, in Khalidi's view, by landing on the wrong side of three Rs: repression, rapaciousness and racism. One power after another used one R or another — sometimes all three — to keep Palestinians in their place. The British did so when they were in charge of Palestine after World War I. The Israelis did so before and, far more aggressively, after they won control of the West Bank and Gaza Strip in the 1967 war. The Americans did so with their thorough support of Israel, more unblinking than ever under George W. Bush. For a sense of Khalidi's bleak assessment, you need go no further than the book's cover photo. In it, the tops of Palestinian houses are barely visible behind the hideous concrete barriers that Israel has built in the name of security across the West Bank.

Khalidi is the director of the Middle East Institute and the Edward Said professor of Arab studies at Columbia University. His description of the Palestinians as forever on the short end of history's stick is neither new nor surprising. But he makes this more than an exercise in self-pity by refusing to let the Palestinians themselves off the hook. If they indeed live in an iron cage, well, Khalidi says, they helped mold the bars themselves.

From their repeated failures at even the rudiments of state-building (in stark contrast to the Zionists) to their embrace of a terrorism "both morally indefensible and disastrously counterproductive strategically," Palestinians have often been their own worst enemy. Let's not even talk about woeful decisions by their leadership, from the Jerusalem grand mufti's support for the Nazis in World War II to Yasir Arafat's aligning with Saddam Hussein after Iraq grabbed Kuwait in 1990. "Where were Palestinian leaders when they were most needed?" Khalidi asks. "These are questions that have recurred in modern Palestinian history, in the late 1930s, the 1970s and 1980s, and now at the beginning of the 21st century."

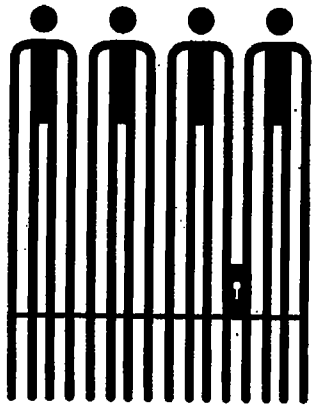
He might also have wondered where, far too often, were ordinary Palestinians. Images of West Bank celebrations after the 9/11 attacks hardly bolstered international confidence in the Palestinians' moral compass or political wisdom. The same may be said about their election last year of a government led by the radical Islamic group Hamas, which refuses to accept Israel's right to exist. However aggrieved Palestinians may have felt, no matter how much they may have merely wanted to end government corruption, and whatever one may say about respecting democratically made choices, where did they think that vote would get them? Khalidi says that an offer of a long-term truce by some Hamas leaders "probably did amount to a tacit and de facto acceptance of Israel." But "tacit and de facto" doesn't make it, not in this situation; actual words have to cross the lips.

Evaluating Khalidi's version of the past will be left to historians. This is, remember, a conflict in which each side presents itself as history's true orphan. While some Israeli scholars would agree with Khalidi's analysis, many more Israelis and their supporters are sure to challenge his assertion that most Arabs were forced from their homes and did not flee of their own volition when the state of Israel came into existence in 1948. When he talks about repressive Israeli measures having been "sometimes imposed on the pretext of security," critics are bound to ask: What pretext? How many suicide bombings of cafes and pizza shops does it take before a country has a right to end them by any method that seems to work?

Still, wherever responsibility for their plight may lie, Palestinians are undeniably in a bad way. They live under "a suffocating blanket of permanent restrictions," they are unable to move freely between their villages, they are poor (with the prospect of yet deeper poverty) and they are helpless as Israel's settlements — and those barriers — expand on West Bank land that, in theory, is to be the nucleus of a Palestinian state.

But then, Khalidi is unconvinced we will ever see such a state. He remains committed to the concept of a two-state solution: Israel and Palestine, side by side. Yet he also asks if Palestinians are "perhaps too obsessed with the very idea of a state." In that question lies the hint of a conjecture that maybe statehood need not be the ultimate goal after all. But he does not really explore this thought, or suggest what an acceptable alternative might be. We are left to wonder if anything might change the status quo of anger, violence and retribution, followed by more of the same, possibly for years and years to come. □

Clyde Haberman, who writes the NYC column for The Times, was the newspaper's Jerusalem bureau chief from 1991 to 1995.



Jennifer Daniel

Khalidi, *The Iron Cage*
The Boston Globe
2/13/07

H.D.S. GREENWAY

Keeping talks kosher

ALMOST 30 YEARS ago, after a reporting trip to Saudi Arabia, I visited Israel's statesman, Shimon Peres. It seemed to me, I said, that there were mutual concerns that might warrant a degree of quiet cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia: Both were enemies of the Soviet Union, both were close allies of the United States, both feared the militant Palestinians. . .

Peres looked at me closely and said in that deep, rumbling voice: "The Saudis are like shrimp. You may like them, but there is no way you can say they are kosher." He didn't think the climate in the Middle East at the time would permit even a backstage dialogue with Saudi Arabia, albeit from time to time there had been feelers.

Three decades later, the Saudis are turning out to be very much kosher. Israeli leaders and Saudis have held secret meetings about a Palestinian state and the dangers from Iran and the Shiite surge in Iraq.

Saudi Arabia, taking advantage of its status as the birthplace of Islam, brought the leaders of Hamas and Fateh together in Mecca in an attempt to restore Palestinian unity. The Saudis have spoken to the Iranians about trying to avoid a civil war in Lebanon, and King Abdullah actually met with leaders of the Hezbollah, considered to be Iran's cat's paw in the Levant.

The reason for all this Saudi hustle is the perceived need for the Sunni world to unite in the face of a Shia and Iranian threat. It is also because of a perception that the Americans have dissipated their power and influence in the Middle East.

Expected in the coming weeks will be a renewed effort to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict building on the Saudi king's 2002 effort, endorsed by the entire Arab League, to grant full diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for a Palestinian state based on the borders of 1967.

Ironically both Israel and Saudi Arabia see a possibility of constructive engagement with Syria, perhaps leading to a deal on the Golan Heights. But the hallmark of President Bush's foreign policy is still confrontation, and Washington is discouraging any rapprochement with Damascus.

Because Saudi Arabia is a kingdom doesn't mean there aren't warring factions among princes. This was illustrated most recently when Prince Turki, ambassador to the United States, abruptly resigned when he learned that his predecessor, Prince Bandar, had made a secret trip to Washington to undermine him. Prince Turki advocates a less confrontational approach to Iran, and doesn't want to alienate the Arab world's Shiite minority, many of whom live in the oil-producing region of his kingdom.

The Bush administration is reluctantly going along with this new push to at least be seen to be trying to solve the Israel-Palestinian problem as the price for an anti-Iran Arab coalition. And Bush can claim that he is the first American president to advocate a Palestinian state.

But as Columbia University's Rashid Khalidi has written in his book about the Palestinians, "The Iron Cage," President Bush has effectively repudiated one of the core principles of Security Council Resolution 242: the "inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war."

In a 2004 letter of understanding to then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, Bush reversed decades of American policy by saying the United States would recognize "new realities on the ground," which meant recognizing the legality of Jewish settlements on territories captured by Israel in the 1967 war. By bending of the principles of 242, "the bedrock of peacemaking in the Middle East since the 1960s," Khalidi argues, Bush has diminished the possibility of a viable Palestinian state on contiguous territory.

Thus, as Sharon said just before suffering a stroke last year, his unilateral withdrawal from Gaza would mean there would be no Palestinian state for the foreseeable future on the West Bank. The concept had been put into "formaldehyde," as Sharon's advisor, Dov Weisglass, put it.

The Bush-Sharon understanding meant that the United States endorsed not just "one or two settlements, but several vast settlement blocs, including in particular those that choke off East Jerusalem from its West Bank hinterland," which would reduce the remaining Palestinian territory to a "patchwork of open-air prison camps," according to Khalidi.

Clearly, any new Arab initiative will have to offer Israel more territory than a retreat to 1967 borders, but it is unlikely that either the newly kosher Saudis, or the Palestinians, could accept the iron cage that the Bush-Sharon understanding would create.

H.D.S. Greenway's *column appears regularly in the Globe.*

Can I Get an Amen?

Sister Rosetta Tharpe influenced Little Richard, Johnny Cash and more.

SHOUT, SISTER, SHOUT!
The Untold Story of Rock-and-Roll Trailblazer Sister Rosetta Tharpe.
By Gayle F. Wald.
Illustrated. 252 pp. Beacon Press. $25.95.

By LAURA SINAGRA

IN 1950, as the gospel singer and guitarist Sister Rosetta Tharpe was preparing for a guest performance on Perry Como's television show, "The Chesterfield Supper Club," she was instructed to climb into a horse-drawn wagon and sing "White Christmas" while simulating a country hayride. The Rosettes, her backing group, were told to wear bandannas. Tharpe objected to this latter indignity — not an easy thing to do for a veteran singer hungering for a large audience — and the Rosettes eventually performed without the demeaning bandannas. As Gayle F. Wald demonstrates in "Shout, Sister, Shout!," a short, absorbing biography, this was just one of many instances in which the expectations of the entertainment industry and the aspirations of this genre-defying artist were painfully out of sync.

Though the success Rosetta Tharpe attained during her four-decade career was largely in gospel music, she is most admired for her feisty R&B guitar playing. Listen to a few piquant licks from her 1938 Decca recordings, and the sonic vernacular of rock 'n' roll is sharply apparent. Yet, though her upbeat music and charismatic performance style attracted adherents like Little Richard, Jerry Lee Lewis and Johnny Cash, Tharpe is only lately being accorded her rightful place in rock history.

The R&B charts of the 1940s attest to her popularity, and songs like the rollicking "Strange Things Happening Every Day" (1945) provide evidence of her show-stealing talent. But Tharpe's career, which shuttled between sacred and secular modes, never settled into a niche that would have made her an avatar of any one musical moment. The music press could never quite place her either, inventing descriptions that complemented her honorific, like "holy roller singer" and "hymnswinger."

In the 1940s, when big bands were hiring pretty girls with sweet voices to bob over their beats, Tharpe fronted Lucky Millinder's raucous swing outfit with gutsy force. In the late 1950s, when blues revivalists prized rootsy growls and acoustic guitar twangs, she happily shouted praises over electric riffs. And when early rock historians reached back to trace the form's lineage, this middle-aged lady cheerily shouting and soloing in front of robed choirs didn't quite fit their secular, guitar-as-phallus ideal.

Rosetta Tharpe's story, salvaged here by Wald, a professor of English at George Washington University, is very much a woman's story, refreshingly free of Svengalis and impresarios. Her picaresque journey from Pentecostal child prodigy in Cotton Plant, Ark., to preteen phenom on Chicago's church circuit to Cotton Club darling to one of gospel's first recording stars is constantly surprising.

In Wald's previous book, "Crossing the Line: Racial Passing in Twentieth-Century U.S. Literature and Culture," an academic examination of racial construction, she showed a taste for the messiness and necessary creativity at the margins of American cultural life. This interest helps her parse Tharpe's musical contradictions and sensitively explore touchy issues like the hymnswinger's rumored bisexuality, which some in her circle deny. The author finds humor and pathos in the tale of Tharpe's third marriage — a publicity stunt worthy of reality TV, staged on the field of Griffith Stadium in Washington and followed by a concert performed by Tharpe in her wedding dress.

Absent the personal recollections of Tharpe, who died in 1973 at the age of 58, the book relies on intimates and musical heavyweights, from her singing partner Marie Knight to the gospel singer Willa Ward-Royster of the Ward Singers to Isaac Hayes. Count Basie's trumpeter Sweets Edison recounts her scorching performance for "From Spirituals to Swing," a groundbreaking 1938 concert at Carnegie Hall. And of Tharpe's guitar prowess, Jeannette Eason, the wife of the steel guitarist Willie Eason, offers the assessment, "Rosetta got her man in her hand," an elucidation that beats any cultural-studies jargon outright.

Of course, fellow musicians also give more sobering accounts of the obstacles confronted by this resourceful woman, whose livelihood depended on wowing affluent whites at the Cotton Club and touring the Jim Crow South in a cramped bus that doubled as diner and hotel. But the hard-earned joy of Tharpe's ascent, which comes through in her music, regularly drowns out the heartbreak. Archival clips on YouTube support anecdotes like the one told by her fellow Apollo performer Inez Andrews, who remembers Sam Cooke chiding guitarists after they shared a stage with Tharpe: "Man, I wouldn't let a woman outplay me!" Maybe not, but now they'll all have to move over a step or two to make room for the good Sister's big break into the canon of rock and soul legends. □

Sam Cooke chided guitarists after they shared a stage with Tharpe: 'Man, I wouldn't let a woman outplay me!'

Charles Peterson/Hulton Archive — Getty Images

Sister Rosetta Tharpe at Cafe Society Downtown in New York, 1940.

Laura Sinagra writes about pop music and film for a variety of publications.

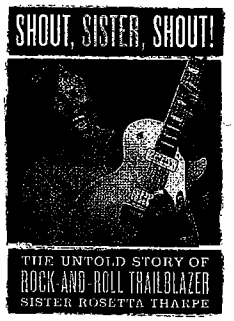
LCD SOUNDSYSTEM — ***SOUND OF SILVER***

DFA/CAPITOL

When James Murphy popped his bedhead out of his hoodie in the early 2000s as half of production team DFA, he made it his obsessive mission to give hidebound indie rock a rhythmic pulse (see: The Rapture) and to inject dance music with a punkish wit. He did just that. Now, on *Sound of Silver*, his second solo project as LCD Soundsystem, Murphy pushes further, crafting his own iconic persona: the cheeky New York crate-digger as a vulnerable, big-city romantic.

LCD's 2005 debut was a party-hopping bug-out bursting with handclaps, gurgly basslines, cowbells, timbales, guitars, live drums, and percolating synths. Here, Murphy edits all that into taut, bittersweet songs, singing on every track. "Get Innocuous" and "Someone Great" shade bubbling tech-house with detached Human League vocals and wistful melodic traces. Punk stormer "North American Scum" is the hilarious mea culpa of a guilty hedonist, while "All My Friends" builds a repeating Steve Reich piano figure into an aching modern-rock anthem. The mood peaks on the wobbly piano-lounge power ballad "New York I Love You But You're Bringing Me Down," Murphy's wry elegy for his sanitized city. He's winking, sure, but this time it's through real tears.

Charles Aaron



>BOOK — ***SHOUT, SISTER, SHOUT!: THE UNTOLD STORY OF ROCK-AND-ROLL TRAILBLAZER SISTER ROSETTA THARPE*** BY GAYLE F. WALD

BEACON PRESS

Rosetta Tharpe sang like Mahalia Jackson, played the holy hell out of her guitar, and was a key player in the mid-century birth of rock and R&B. Despite all this, Gayle F. Wald writes in her new biography, Tharpe was critically misunderstood, ostracized by the gospel community that nurtured her, and slighted by mainstream musical history. Mixing tireless reporting with nuanced musical and cultural insights, Wald's *Shout, Sister, Shout!* is about as good as musical reparations get.

Unlike the legendary Jackson, who refused to sing anything but gospel, Tharpe was a maverick. Her demolition of gender and stylistic barriers was decades ahead of her time, and is one of the book's running themes. What emerges is a portrait of an artist whose eclectic muse was fueled by often conflicting inner urges, like her desire to spread the gospel sound posed against a longing to be accepted by her own community. As thorough as Wald's work is, she cautions against reading Tharpe as a historical artifact, especially considering that black female artists still face many of the same obstacles she did. Tharpe is an "enduring voice," Wald writes, "whose influence cannot be calculated if only because it will persist into the future."

Tony Green

THE ETERNALS — ***HEAVY INTERNATIONAL***

AESTHETICS

"Am I moving forward?" Eternals singer Damon Locks asks in a lilting voice on the lovely "Astra 3B" — not a bad question for a young band. Since their days in '90s rock outfit, Trenchmouth, Locks, and Wayne Montana have been exploring the sounds of post-hard-core, mingling with reggae's rhythmic styles. This dialogue is as old as punk, but instead of copping reggae's swing, they attack dub's fondness for wide-screen experiments. Meandering like this can be dangerous, but when contagious hooks anchor their grooves ("Patch of Blue"), or that rock action rears its head ("The Mix is So Bizarre"), it feels and sounds like the Eternals could go on forever.

Joe Gross

BUNNY RABBIT — ***LOVERS AND CRYPTS***

VOODOO-EROS

As the album title implies, Brooklyn sex-rapper Bunny Rabbit and her producer, Black Cracker, fearlessly explore the pathos between love and death — emphasis on death. While they say they're aiming for the dance floor, their Tim Burton-style hip hop is no party: BC's creepy beats give bass and snap a gothic pallor, and BR's bell synths would be terrifying, even without her punany-popping, psychosexual lesbian lyric sheet. But when Bunny Rabbit sings her own hooks, she sounds like a scary doll brought to life, seeking vengeance, especially on the dark "It Ain't Easy," which explores the ugly effects of too much balling. Yet, more proof that art school corrupts young minds.

Julianne Shepherd

VUSI MAHLASELA — ***GUIDING STAR***

ATO

For his seventh album, Vusi Mahlasela, the South African troubadour with an undeniably peaceful voice, writes stirring songs of struggle: A young boy realizes his dream to play in the World Cup, despite his poverty-stricken upbringing; Thandi Modise is imprisoned, but later becomes a national leader; a people are displaced, but their lands are restored. Mahlasela seasons these tales of Bantu, Zulu, and Basarwa with jazzy vigor, but his meandering guitar solos tend to halt his momentum. And while he can be versatile (see his lively cover of Miriam Makeba's "Pata Pata"), *Guiding Star* sometimes sounds like source material for *The Lion King* — harmless and pat.

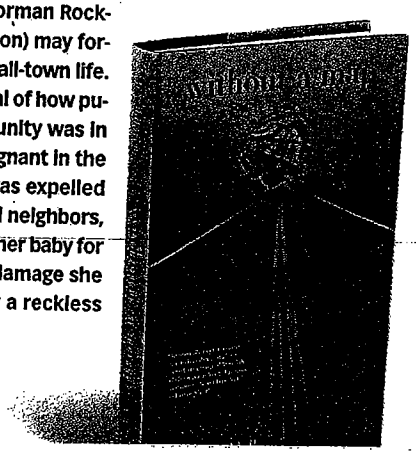
Makkada B. Selah

LCD SOUNDSYSTEM: JAKE WALTERS; ETERNALS: DAMON LOCKS; BUNNY RABBIT: KIM REIRSON; MAHLASELA: AARON FARRINGTON

Hall / *Without a Map*
Oprah Magazine
April 2007
1/1

Disgraced A pregnant teenager, sent packing in 1965, finds her way home.

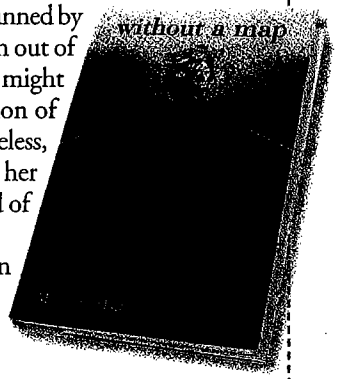
Nostalgic for the good old days of Norman Rockwell America? Without a Map (Beacon) may forever change the way you look at small-town life. Meredith Hall's memoir is a sobering portrayal of how punitive her close-knit New Hampshire community was in 1965 when, at the age of 16, she became pregnant in the course of a casual summer romance. Hall was expelled from high school, shunned by her friends and neighbors, cut loose by her parents, and forced to put up her baby for adoption. Unsurprisingly, the psychological damage she sustained was serious and persistent. After a reckless backpacking tour of Europe and the Middle East, Hall returned to her native state, married, had two sons, divorced, and was finally found by Paul, the son she'd been compelled to give away. Raised in New Hampshire, Paul had suffered through a childhood even more problematic than his (biological) mother's adolescence. As she documents her attempts to make sense of her parents' behavior and the cruelty of her son's adoptive father, Hall offers a testament to the importance of understanding and even forgiving the people who, however unconscious or unkind, have made us who we are. —FRANCINE PROSE *[READING ROOM>190]*



THE "ELLE'S LETTRES" READERS' PRIZE 2007

Over the years, we have frequently needed tiebreaking votes, but the three-way photo finish of this trio of memoirs about fraught early lives is unprecedented. Writing instructor Meredith Hall's debut won by the barest of margins, just ahead of a dead heat between two of ELLE's favorite writers—novelist A.M. Homes (*The End of Alice, This Book Will Save Your Life*), who was profiled in these pages a year ago, and feature writer extraordinaire Kevin Sessums, who has never mentioned in the course of our journalistic dealings that in his misspent youth he used to hang out with the legendary writer Eudora Welty.

1. MEREDITH HALL WITHOUT A MAP (Beacon Press)

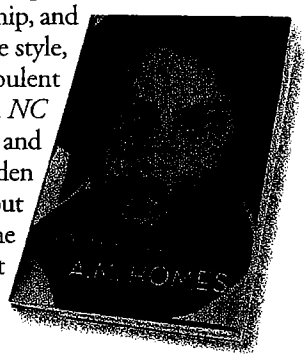


In this stark, stunning, and devastating account of being shunned by her family and New England community after giving birth out of wedlock in the '60s, Hall writes about what was and what might have been. Particularly moving is her haunting description of wandering in Europe and the Middle East, ultimately shoeless, penniless, and utterly alone. Refreshingly, she tells about her life via a collection of beautifully rendered sketches instead of a linear narrative.—*Sheila McClear, New York City*

Hall's story is well told but jumps between periods in her life with little or no warning, which can be confusing; the segments seem choppy and unfinished and left me wanting more.—*Elizabeth Collins, Charleston, SC*

2. A.M. HOMES THE MISTRESS'S DAUGHTER (Viking)

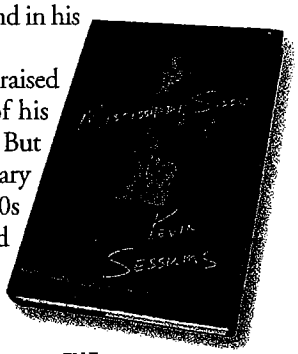
The Mistress's Daughter is an unflinching exploration of the complex emotions surrounding Homes' brief contacts with her birth parents. We struggle along with her, sitting through awkward meetings with her father and intense phone conversations with her mother as she tries to decipher them, their relationship, and how she fits into their equation. She writes in a clean, spare style, and I admire her ability and willingness to expose her turbulent feelings with brutal honesty.—*Laura McGahan, Chapel Hill, NC*



Homes' birth parents seek her out when she's in her thirties, and she is by turns curious, bitter, and resentful about their sudden intrusion into her life. She feels stalked when she is sought out by her mother and is held at arm's length by her father, so she doesn't form a successful relationship with either. I did not find Homes to be a very sympathetic narrator; in her harsh behavior toward her birth parents, she is more like them than she realizes.—*Susan Michael, San Francisco*

3. KEVIN SESSUMS MISSISSIPPI SISSY (St. Martin's Press)

Sessums re-creates a colorful cast of characters from his youth, not least himself, a "sissy" and budding liberal in the '60s and '70s. Sessums' unique sensibility shines through in descriptions of his tragic childhood (his parents died within a year of each other before he was 10), in his wonderful ear for language, and in his eye for Southern foibles.—*Lauren Hughes, Bergenfield, NJ*



Sessums offers a loving tribute to the grandparents who raised him, and I was moved by his compassionate portrayal of his father's difficulties in accepting him while deeply loving him. But the dialogue is strained by overuse of dialect, and commentary on the literature, media personalities, and politics of the '60s crowds the narrative. I found it difficult to believe that a child could form such sophisticated and comprehensive thoughts on these subjects.—*Laura McGahan, Chapel Hill, NC*

To apply to become one of our readers, visit the "Readers' Corner" page at ELLE.com.

Oliver, General Review
New York Times Book Review
February 18, 2007

OLIVER'S ARMY: Mary Oliver's first book of poems, "No Voyage" (1965), was reviewed in this publication by James Dickey, who dumped all over it. ("She is good, but predictably good; one could have foretold her from reading anthologies and the poetry magazines of the day. She never seems quite to be *in* her poems, as adroit as some of them are, but is always outside them, putting them together from the available literary elements.") The last laugh has been Oliver's; she went on to win a Pulitzer Prize in 1984 and a National Book Award in 1992. First editions of "No Voyage" are selling on used-book sites for as much as $900 (unsigned!). Forty-two years after Dickey's review, Oliver's epiphanic nature poems still divide critics. But at 71 she is, far and away, this country's best-selling poet. According to the list on poetryfoundation.org, the top 15 best-selling poetry volumes in America as of mid-January included no fewer than *five* Mary Oliver titles, all published by Beacon Press of Boston.

DWIGHT GARNER

washingtonpost.com

After 9/11, Suddenly Suspect

By Carolyn See,
who may be reached at www.carolynsee.com
Friday, February 2, 2007; C04

ONCE IN A PROMISED LAND

By Laila Halaby

Beacon. 338 pp. $23.95

Sometimes you run out of adjectives. Or the adjectives lose their luster. What if I say that "Once in a Promised Land" is brilliant, insightful, heartbreaking, enchanting -- what does that even mean anymore? But this novel is brilliant because the prose glows, sends off heat. Insightful because it allows us to see into a place that most of us don't know about. Heartbreaking because you can feel the situation that these characters are trapped in. And enchanting because it's told in the form of a fairy tale that lets us believe that, somehow, these poor souls may be able to rescue themselves.

This is a post-9/11 narrative, and if, as our president has stated, you're either for us or against us, the star-crossed couple here may at first appear to be on the "against" side. But the author asks us to put aside all notions of "terrorists, veils, oil . . . billionaires, bombers, and belly-dancers . . . turbans, burqas, or violent culture." This is a story about an ordinary couple living in Albuquerque who happen to have come to this country some years ago from Jordan. The husband, Jassim, has a PhD in water management; his only passion is the love of water and how it moves. Although he's well-to-do and seemingly safe and well-liked, he's anxious in America. He relies on routine, particularly early morning swims, to keep himself calm. He's cautious and wants nothing more than a peaceful life.

His wife, Salwa, is also well-educated (in fact, she met Jassim back in Jordan by attending one of his lectures when she was a student). But someone who didn't like Salwa might describe her as a piece of work. By one of those coincidences that happen in life and in novels, Salwa was born in America and spent a sliver of her baby-life here before her family went home to Jordan. Maybe it's that American birth that makes her just a little bit mindless and a little bit materialistic, a little bit unable to see anything beyond the end of her own nose.

The people who know Salwa love her, put up with her. They register the fact that she leaves the air-conditioning on when she leaves the house, that she buys stacks of silk pajamas because of the luxurious look and feel of them, that she stays in the shower too long and wastes hot water. She's self-centered, sure, but she's harmless. And if it turns out

that she married Jassim partly to get out of Jordan and come to the United States, well, what's wrong with that?

Salwa and Jassim are civil and affectionate with each other. They love each other. But there's no denying that even in this American promised land, they're out of their element. They're making lots of money -- besides Jassim's job as a hydro-engineer, Salwa works at a bank and has just earned her Realtor's license -- but they're shrouded in terrible loneliness. Maybe that's why Salwa wants a child, someone to keep her company, and why Jassim doesn't; he needs to keep things as simple and uncomplicated as possible in this still-foreign country.

When the towers fall in New York, these people are as stunned and appalled as everyone else, but at first they don't think that the terrible event has much to do with them. Then, when a Sikh gas station attendant in Phoenix is killed " *in retaliation*," they get scared. "People are stupid," Salwa says, " *Stupid and macho*. . . . throwing their weight around if something happens that they don't like. Only it doesn't matter to them if they get the people who did whatever it is that they are angry about, just as long as they've done something large and loud." Add to that the fact that rational societies are only as rational as their craziest citizen, and the news for this couple isn't good.

Jassim, as he goes swimming before dawn, is chatted up by a stranger, a guy with a buzz cut, who seems to know a lot about him already. A couple of secretaries at work seem to be gossiping about him, giving him dirty looks. Is he just imagining things? At the bank where Salwa works, a college boy begins flirting with her in an inappropriate way. But Jassim and Salwa can't -- or won't -- talk to each other about these things. Salwa gets pregnant on purpose, then miscarries. She never gets around to telling Jassim anything about it because he never wanted children anyway. Jassim (by far the more intelligent of the two) is involved in a deadly car accident. He just can't bring himself to tell his wife.

And, of course, if you're out in Arizona and have Middle Eastern features and a Middle Eastern name and work around the municipal water supply, the government will have to investigate you. My God, they'd better! What about those men who went to flying school and nobody noticed it until it was too late? What about those talking heads on television telling all of us to be vigilant, all the time?

Neither Jassim nor Salwa is innocent. Both of them have flaws, but those flaws are personal. The tragedy that sweeps them up is personal, too, but fanned by flames of national rage and paranoia. Laila Halaby has captured the human condition perfectly here, but my God, it's a horrid condition.