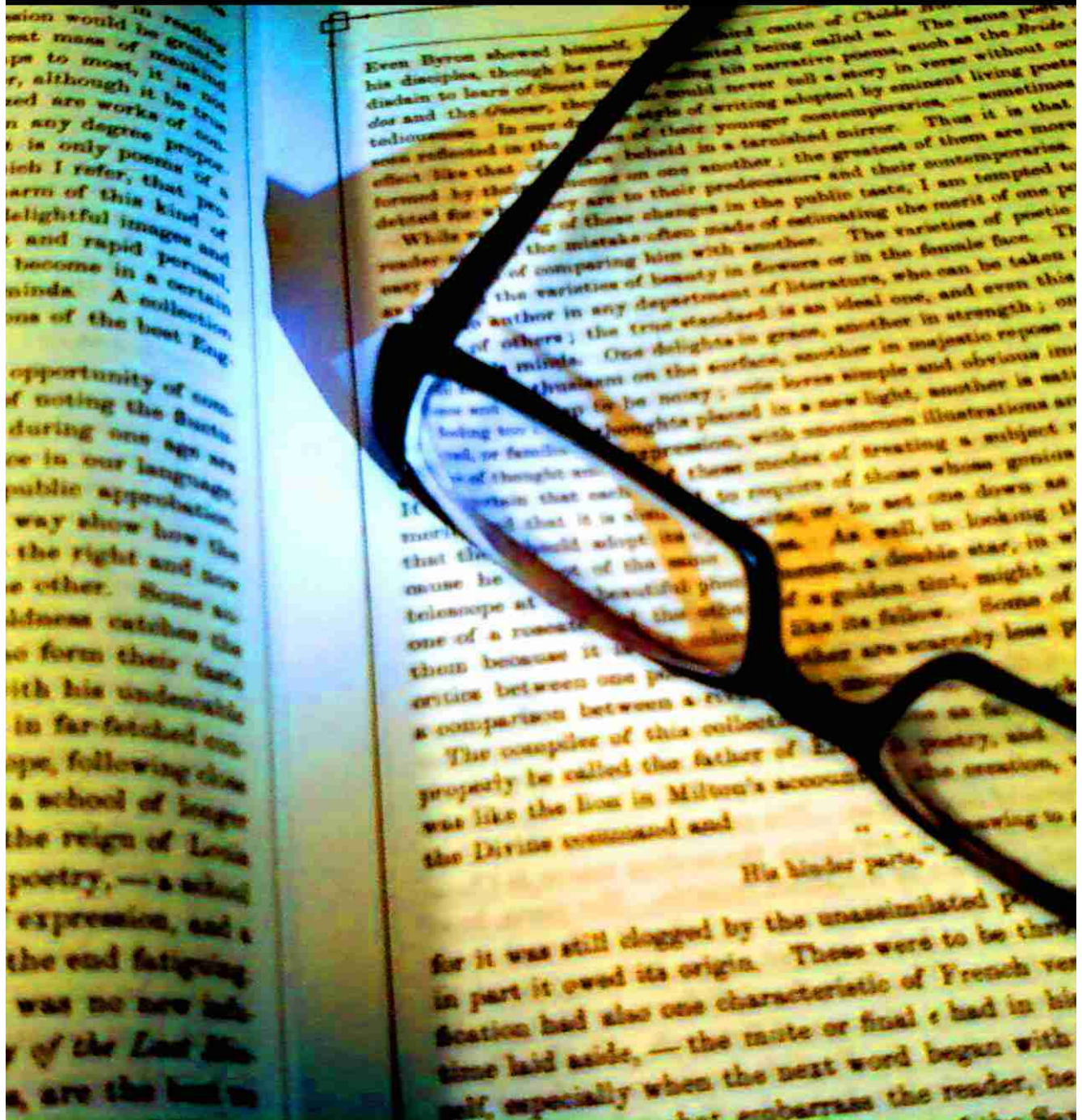


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IMPACT TIMES

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AMERICAN LITERATURE: DE NATURIS RERUM—Alexander Neckham, a Paris educated English theologian and teacher, was born on the same evening as Richard the Lionheart and his mother was the young prince's wet nurse. In *De naturis rerum*, or *On the Nature of Things*, he discussed matters of natural phenomena such as the sun, the moon, fire and air. More importantly, he observed and wrote of the long existing concept of the uncertainty of riches. Money matters and the rise and fall of a nation hinges on the depth of its reserved wealth. The economic well that holds America's monetary wealth is being drained to near empty given our collapsing economy. The intellectual well that holds America's dream is also being drained near empty.

We have become a nation of intellectual mediocrity and convenience. Like everything else today, the creation and production of literary works have become a quick fix solution. Simply put it, the writing and production processes have become calculated formulas. The publishing houses, book manufacturers and retailers, and consumers have integrated into an efficient industrialized machine that value bottom line assets and expediency over literary merit. Today, we have writers' conferences, workshops, and literary gatherings and retreats that teach novice and experienced writers how to write books that sell. Whether through word of mouth, classroom teaching, or seminar and print, those "how-to-write" and "how-to-get-published" strategies are drilled into the heads of millions. Thus, the seeds of standard literary production are implanted into the rich soil of our mind. What sprout from these genetically engineered seeds are the "national best sellers," a byproduct of an industrialized effort based on a mass production effort to satisfy our capitalistic demands.

Let's face the truth and get our facts straight. Good writing takes much time, effort, and thought. Writing is not like driving a racecar. It's not how fast we can write or how many books we can get published, but how great a piece of work we can produce. Simply put, bestsellers do not necessarily equate to good writing. Sadly, most publishing houses today publish books not to inspire but to sell. Inspiration, like arts, has become a luxury item that is being shoved aside to make room for profit. We have become a nation of bloggers, twitterers, and readers of instance best sellers, books that litter the shelves of bookstores and retail shops like apples and oranges in grocery stores. A bite of one apple and we can tell the flavor for all.

Like the colossal downfall of our fractured financial system, the quality of our literature has also taken a major punch to the gut. It is a vicious cycle. Authors will write what they think publishers will accept for publication and publishers will accept only books that they think will sell. In turn, readers will read what is being published. Each group, the writers, the readers, and the publishers, must step up to the plate and take literary responsibility. It takes a reader demanding a higher quality product, a publisher soliciting higher quality submissions, and an author writing a higher quality book to spread that tiny ripple from a quiet tributary to a roaring ocean. Until each group takes specific action to shift this disturbing trend, we will continue to have, not literary merit, but literary mediocrity. We don't need another best seller book on the shelf that will go straight to the recycling bin after a quick read, but we do need one that goes with the leather bound collections that belongs in the classics section.

The next time you find yourself browsing at your local bookstore, ask yourself three questions: First, how long do you think those authors spent writing their book? Second, how many of those books on the shelves are prominently displayed not because of the writing quality but the publicity, the controversial nature of their content, or the notoriety that their authors received? Finally, will any of those freshly minted books be remembered a hundred years from now?

Richard Quan
Managing Editor, Impact Times

BESTSELLER DOES NOT ALWAYS EQUATE TO BEST LITERATURE— It's true: the first display I bypass whenever I walk into a brick and mortar bookstore is the best seller table. For the last thirty years the books I've enjoyed most are those I've stumbled across by chance or that someone has recommended to me, and rarely have those been best sellers. Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* may be the world's all-time best seller, but it wasn't because of the writing. Brown, a mediocre writer at best, merely took a fascinating concept — that Jesus married and subsequently fathered a child — and wrote a story around it.

I read recently that more books are in print today than there are readers. We have the print on demand, or self publishing, industry, together with digital technology, to thank for that. And while they offer a way for talented writers to get their work into print, writers who might not be offered a contract by a traditional publishing house, they also offer a way into print for writers who perhaps shouldn't see their work in print— those writers who haven't put in the time to learn their craft. Today, anyone with a valid credit card can see their work in print — work that, even fifteen years ago, would've prompted a rejection letter from an agent or a publisher.

Mark Twain, John Grisham, Walt Whitman, T.S. Elliot, George Bernard Shaw, Tom Clancy, among others, got started by self-publishing, but today's unscrupulous publishers, such as AuthorHouse, promise the world to unsuspecting authors who take the shortcut to publication, often without learning their craft. These new model publishers invest nothing in an emerging author and make their money upfront, off the author, charging up to \$1,500 to format text and a cover, and a listing on their site. From there the author can expect to pay hundreds if not thousands more dollars for marketing schemes the publisher claims are designed to get their book into the hands of an eagerly awaiting public but only succeed in lining the pockets of the publisher. All of which means the author will rarely break even, and results in a dilution of the gene pool of good literature.

While it may be true that today's reader has much more from which to choose, it's also true that today's traditional publisher — those half-dozen giants run by bean counters — are concerned with the bottom line. They look for a text that has broad audience appeal, a text often written at a ninth-grade level, with little care toward literary quality. My own personal experience with agents and publishers alike has taught me that my texts are too dense for today's reader. As a result, profits for the entire industry are now driven by a handful of authors, which makes it very difficult for an emerging author to break into the industry.

I won't argue that best sellers are created, the result of word of mouth, the product of a publisher's investment in marketing, any more than I'd argue that the publishing industry is a business. But until they commit to investing in an emerging writer rather than viewing them as a risk, look for the book industry to lose money, and look for best sellers to be of substandard literary quality.

J. Conrad Guest
Contributing Editor, Impact Times

EVERYTHING IS LOCKED UP in his own mind like a steel trap. A vault designed specifically to seal in what is there and to relentlessly keep everything else out. This is the mind of a quiet individual, often misunderstood as proud, elitist, stubborn, self-centered, or a host of other assumptions by those that don't understand the complexities of the person.

Interesting how the vanities of others work, the accusers who are so out of touch, seem to know all the answers.

The lines are forming in the back of his neck, the sun going down. A final chapter is closing, daylight slipping away. The final wrap, a curtain slowly closes.

Clues are everywhere, but no one can see them.

Feelings of worthlessness, unworthy of existence, a deadly spiral, quickly escalates. No realistic goals, at least realistic in his mind. You don't believe anything you hear when in this state of mind.

Strong desire to go crawl under a rock and hide from all, including from himself. No mirrors to see his worthless reflection. No one around to point out the obvious deficiencies.

No one understands and they don't want to.

Death will come swiftly and without warning.

"Leave me alone," he says, and he means it.

Sinister voices are talking, compelling, drawing.

No one can help, it seems. Nothing matters.

They think you're selfish and in yourself a small package, but you're planning. You think different, and they just don't understand.

Pro's and cons flash before your eyes. No tears, only hardness of soul.

Make the setbacks permanent; death is the great forgiver of debt.

The curious gather, wondering why such desperation. Where were the signs? Why didn't he care about his family and friends? Didn't he understand he would affect generations to come?

No desire to take another, horrified at the thought. Wants to quietly go away and be forgotten. He isn't helping them anyway, they'll be better off without him.

Maybe they'll think it was an accident. Chest hurts, keep taking the cold medicine. As long as it does the job.

On a better day, he will think better of it, if given the chance.

All compelling reason and compassion is overruled. A brief window of opportunity to stop him.

Doesn't really want to, but doesn't know how to ask.

Despair. With nothing to look forward to, it's over. Good days probably coming, but he may not see it.

In a deadly spiral that he may pull out of this time. Then again, he may not.

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**I'LL TAKE A DOSE OF REALITY TO COMBAT
THIS WEIRD WORLD** by Lauren Marie Huish

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my skin shakes with
 anxious anticipation.
for a moment my mind
 retreats to reality.
pulling me from the crowded room...

i sink below them...
my body parallel to the floor.
slowly slinking toward the
 empty exit across the room.
just as i approach my escape
 it vanishes.
 and again...
 i'm trapped.

their voices fade to
 foreign mumbles.
my gaze becoming more
 glazed and stagnant.
as i observe the
 phony camaraderie.
only to be chased by sarcastic whispers.

outside the window...
 trees sway from fresh air.
 [ENVY]
 their branches forming snide smirks.
 their leaves cackling at my captivity.
the wind taps the window.
to assure me of my
 solid glassy confines.
 and again i know...
 i'm trapped.

bringing my eyes back to the hazy room.
 inhale.
 exhale.
 cope...
 i am trapped.
 with only reality as escape.

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IT TAKES MUCH MORE THAN JUST ONE VILLAGE

by Zinta Aistars

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This world's anguish is no different from the love we insist on holding back.

— From *The Homeless*: Psalm 85:10, Aberjhani

ABERJHANI DESCRIBES AN ARTIST who gathers the homeless to record the rumblings of their empty stomachs—the rumbling of unfed emptiness is just the sound the artist craves for his symphony. He pays the hungry a dime and pushes them back out into the street.

What Aberjhani captures in his poem echoes the commentaries about our economy that I've heard on National Public Radio during my daily commutes. The stimulus package, the inconceivable billions, now underway in an effort to nudge our ailing economy back into the black—is it wise? Rise, Lazarus! We have all heard it, and many of us join in the heated debate: To whom do we give? From whom withhold? Yes, who is deserving and who deserves punishment?

This sad state of affairs was caused by unbridled greed. The rich ached to get ever richer. The poor ached for an end to their misery. With that combination, the wealthy tapped into the dreams of the less wealthy and promised them manna from heaven, and sure, it was almost, just about, free. Well, not really. The loans for big dreams rolled out shiny and tempting, but the price to pay was there, and it is that hidden price we are all paying now.

Should the many pay for the greed and weakness and foolishness of the few? Those of us who bought homes within our means, paid cash for our groceries, drove sensible cars, made the payments on our bills on time, and generally lived our lives responsibly—why should we now bail out those who did not?

I have lived much of my adult life as a single parent. I had dreams, too, but I understood frugality. Yet here I am, with modest shelter, stocked pantry, debt nearly paid off, and a reasonable mortgage payment. So, why should I pay for those who drove up their bills and lusted for five-bathroom houses on cul-de-sacs in gated communities?

I listened to the NPR wise folk. Now, a poem echoes those thoughts and it rings true to me. Why should we care about bailing out others? Who are we to pass moral judgment on those who reached for too much? While some may have been greedy, others may simply have been big dreamers. A moral failing is a conscious choice, but what of an act of foolishness? The important factor is that we remember what got us into this mess: greed. Caring too much about our own comfort, not enough for that of others. Are we to be greedy now and ignore our foolish neighbor?

These economic commentators point out that property values fall in a domino effect when one house, two, three, foreclose. We cannot save the deserving without including in the net the undeserving. We cannot save an ailing economy for an entire country, indeed, an entire globe, if we pick and choose who gets what and why. We are none of us free if one of us is yet a slave to debt. A nation of self-absorbed, narcissistic citizens cannot thrive. Can we learn from our own recent history? What got us into this mess—always putting our own desires first—will never get us out.

Or, as one commentator, an ethicist, pointed out—if we all got what we deserved, we would all be in hell. How about a little heavenly bailing out? The water is flooding into one and the same ship, carrying us all.

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IF PINOCCHIO HAD GOTTEN A NOSE JOB instead of telling the truth, it would have changed his whole life story. Some current memoirists and their publishers have taken this thought to heart. Their revised version of what constitutes truth is as plain as the nose jobs on their faces. Their dubious memoirs are artificially pumped up from A cups to double-D's, the life struggles they describe tightened here, fattened there, all done in order to appear more shocking, more attractive, more titillating to the reader.

Literary makeovers work. Many of these "memoirs" are bombshell best-sellers.

And why not? Current culture lauds makeovers. We can't get enough of "The Swan," "Queer Eye," "What Not to Wear," and "Tim Gunn's Guide to Style." We don't applaud the homely soul who remains true to their less-than-ideal appearance. We demand total, extreme transformation; the bigger the changes we see in the "afters" the more astounded and entertained we are by them, even if the people no longer resemble themselves, or any normal human being.

Oprah has hosted more than her fair share of makeover shows, and the afters always garner robust applause from her devoted audience. So why should this same audience be outraged when James Frey's Oprah-endorsed *A Million Little Pieces* or Herman Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence* turn out to be literary afters? If Oprah and her devotees laud changing people's outward appearances, why such outrage over the altered, or even invented, personal memoir?

Enter Augusten Xon Burroughs, born Christopher Richter Robison, who still maintains his best selling *Running with Scissors* is all true, despite the undisclosed amounts of money he paid to quiet the lawsuits filed by members of the psychiatrist's family featured in his book, who accused him of exaggeration and fabrication. More recently, his account of events in *A Wolf at the Table: A Memoir of My Father* are at odds with his own brother John's earlier memoir. But, is anyone really surprised? And, should we finger-wag or applaud?

"You know, memoir is not court stenography," Augusten argued to CBS's Erin Moriarty. "Memoir is not a video on YouTube. Memoir has a narrative. Memoirs, a good memoir, is a person's experience, their memory, and how that experience mattered to them, emotionally and psychologically."

Herman Rosenblat goes even further. "It wasn't a lie," he explained, on ABC's *Good Morning America*, "It was my imagination. And in my imagination, in my mind, I believed it."

Perhaps he did, but the difference lost on Rosenblat, Burroughs, and their ilk is that in literature, there already exists a perfectly suitable genre for what they wrote: fiction. Sure, we wouldn't tell someone who has had rhinoplasty that they now have a "fictional" nose. Although it is not the nose they were born with, it is still their real nose. But altering one's memoir is more akin to wearing a rubber one. It doesn't change its author's actual history; it merely hides it behind a fabricated version. Their true past still remains, unaltered and unalterable, waiting for someone to expose it. And just as honesty earned a puppet the right to be a real boy, so it must also be for writers who call themselves memoirists.

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Please help me!
I don't know where I am and I can't find my way home.
I am wandering in the dark,
I am all alone.
I cannot figure out how I got here,
I do not know how to leave,
If you do not mind listening
I would like you to help me. Please?
I would like to go back and see
my mom and dad once more,
If I could just tell them why I chose the life I did,
if I explain why I walked out that door.
I never meant to hurt them,
I never meant to let them down,
I wish that I could get back to see them,
but to this place I am bound.
I keep wandering in the dark asking myself,
"Why did I choose this way of life? Why did I give in?"
I know now that God Himself could not save me
for the decisions that led me down this path of sin.
While I sit here I can't help to wonder
what made me think I needed this life,
I did not realize I was out of control
until I dropped the knife.
What was running through my mind,
I will never know,
I would give anything
for the chance to save my hopeless soul.
If you could tell my parents I am sorry
for making them feel like they were under attack,
I wish that I could do it myself,
but I am now and forever in Hell, and there is no coming back!

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