

## Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

By Jefferson Scholar-in-Residence  
Dr. Andrew Roth

### 'It Happens': John Lennon Said it Best

From “sex, drugs, and rock ‘n’ roll” to PTA meetings, from rockin’ in the streets to rockin’ in assisted living, from “wanting to change the world” to, well, “wanting to change the world” and, whether a rightist or a leftist, wondering why it has taken so long, Baby boomers, their Generation X children, and now their millennial grandchildren dominate American culture.

In several earlier *Book Notes*, we mused upon “boomers” and their various permutations. Bruce Cannon Gibney’s *Generation of Sociopaths* laid most of the nation’s ills at their feet. Almost 50 years ago, Joan Didion’s *White Album* exposed their contradictions and paradoxes, the solipsism barely concealed beneath the patina of their selflessness. In “Years of Horrors,” riffing on a James Fallows’ article from *The Atlantic*, I viewed 1968 as a sort of 2020 prequel.

Although I didn’t do a *Book Notes* about it, when looking into [Generation of Sociopaths](#), I recalled that David Brooks’ *BoBos in Paradise* traced the counterculture’s arc from bohemian to bourgeois, from the outrageous, from the flamboyant and culturally brazen to the conspicuously inconspicuous exurban cultural mainstream – from Woodstock to Whole Foods, from Hare Krishna to yoga pants.



And, now 20 years into the next century, in several **Book Notes** I've remarked upon *The Greatest Generation's* children's journey from SDS to AARP.

How did that happen?

Well, age will do that to you, but it began much earlier; in fact, it began during "the '60s." Synonymous as that bizarre decade became with youthful rebellion, it also spawned Young Republicans who, too, wanted to change the world, but not in the same direction as their gaudier peers. They wanted a sprint back to their great-grandparents' Gilded Age, a monochromatic, white saturated world where "them who got" got, and the hell with all those mottled others.

Something else, not nearly so melodramatic, also happened. It is called adulthood with all its attendant responsibilities that, like barnacles, slowly grow on you. Then one day you wake up and you are your parents.

Hey, it happens.

Understanding how that happens is the work of poets. Didion got most of it, but she moved on to other topics. Brooks is too University of Chicago rational, too much the social scientist and incipient theologian to really, finally, "get it." He comes close, but then the soul of the matter eludes his imagination's prosaic bent. Others a cut or two below Brooks' keen intellect come close, but they, too, fall short. Their surveying minds miss the telling detail as they either scan from too high a perch, too broad a scene, or, asking questions in Likert-scale fashion, slowly sink in a sea of "more-or-less."

It takes a poet to see past the fog of opinions in a survey questionnaire; it takes a poet to see amidst a whirling kaleidoscope of detail the key – the focal point – that, like in a pointillist painting, it melds them into an insight, a glimpse into the heart of the heart of the matter.

Working on an update of my ***America in 1968: The Far Side of the Moon and the Birth of the Culture Wars*** for WQLN radio, I came upon Sharon Olds' poem, ***May 1968***. A major figure in contemporary American poetry, Olds is a recipient of multiple awards, including a Pulitzer Prize and a National Book Critics Circle Award. In a previous **[Book Notes](#)** we read an excerpt from her "*First Boyfriend (for D.R.)*." As the Poetry Foundation's biographical note remarks, "Olds is known for writing intensely personal, emotionally scathing poetry that graphically depicts family life as well as global political events. ...(Her) work is often built out of intimate details concerning her children, her fraught relationship with her parents and, most controversially, her sex life." [1]

As I remarked in that earlier **Book Notes**, Olds can unnerve most men and set many women's teeth on edge, but no one has ever said she does not know what she's talking about. Originally from California, Olds, in 1968, was a graduate student at Columbia University during the May student insurrection against both the War in Vietnam and the university's plan to build a gym encroaching on the adjoining neighborhood. Copiously documented in other sources, it is not the student protests' political overtones that are of interest here. It is Olds' commingling the very public political with the intensely personal providing us "a glimpse into the heart of the heart of the matter." In doing so, she proffers a clue about the boomers' journey from "days of rage" to "days of age" – *life happens*.

I'll let Olds speak for herself, taking the liberty to share the poem in its entirety:

### **May 1968**

Sharon Olds

The Dean of the University said  
the neighborhood people could not cross campus  
until the students gave up the buildings  
so we lay down in the street,  
we said The cops will enter this gate  
over our bodies. Spine-down on the cobbles –  
hard bed, like a carton of eggs –  
I saw the buildings of New York City  
from dirt level, they soared up and stopped,  
chopped off cleanly – beyond them the sky  
black and neither sour nor sweet, the  
night air over the island.  
The mounted police moved near us  
delicately. Flat out on our backs  
we sang, and then I began to count  
12, 13, 14, 15, I  
counted again, 15, 16, one  
month since the day on that deserted beach when we  
used nothing, 17, 18, my  
mouth fell open, my hair in the soil,  
if my period did not come tonight  
I was pregnant. I looked up at the sole of the  
cop's shoe, I looked up at the  
horse's belly, its genitals – if they  
took me to Women's Detention and did the  
exam on me, jammed the unwashed

speculum high inside me, the guard's  
three fingers – supine on Broadway, I looked  
up into the horse's tail like a  
dark filthed comet. All week, I had  
wanted to get arrested, longed to  
give myself away. I lay in the  
tar, one brain in my head and another  
tiny brain at the base of my tail and I  
stared at the world, good-luck iron  
arc of the gelding's shoe, the cop's  
baton, the deep curve of the animal's  
belly, the buildings streaming up  
away from earth. I knew I should get up and  
leave, stand up to muzzle level, to the  
height of the soft velvet nostrils and  
walk away, turn my back on my  
friends and danger, but I was a coward so I  
lay there looking up at the sky,  
black vault arched above us, I  
lay there gazing up at God, at his  
underbelly, till it turned deep blue and then  
silvery, colorless. *Give me this one  
night*, I said, *and I'll give this child  
the rest of my life*, the horses' heads  
drooping, dipping, until they slept in a  
dark circle around my body and my daughter. [2]

I don't know much about Richard Speakes. He is (or was) a professor of English at Santa Rosa Junior College in Santa Rosa, California with the usual mixed bag of student evaluations on [ratemyprofessors.com](http://ratemyprofessors.com). Although in his case, there is apparently no middle ground. He is either a fabulous or terrible teacher, which tells me that he is at least authentic, or wants to be seen as such. [3] He uses a stylized caricature of Tom Waits as his avatar on the college's faculty website, thereby immediately contradicting my comment about Speakes' authenticity. [4] Whatever. I've ordered a copy of his *Hannah's Travel (Poetry of the West)*. In any event, noodling around the Poetry Foundation website, amidst four or five of his poems, I found his "*Mama Loves Janis Joplin*." In it Speakes brings to vivid life what John Lennon meant when he said, "life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans." For many a boomer – for many of any generation – it could be their anthem.

Although he is not in Olds' league, I will, too, let Speakes speak for himself showing, not telling, how "*life happens*":

## **Mama Loves Janis Joplin**

Richard Speakes

It turns out you can have a daughter selling  
Girl Scout cookies at the mall, own a freezer  
closing in on what's left of tater tots,  
watch soaps, and still roll joints  
matter of fact as a stoned stare at the yearbook.  
Maybe it wasn't supposed to be like this,  
the magenta Indian bedspread over the years fading  
to a pink without pattern, so methodical  
you could graph it,

the long swoon and slouch  
that shows how you got from brown rice  
to Bunny Bread, from getting busted to getting  
appointed chairperson of a PTA committee.  
But that's how it goes, or that's how it  
gathered then sprawled, as if life's a wave  
you catch and ride, the sort of Beach Boys fantasy  
Hendrix meant to kill.

One day it sloshed  
onto a beach where you watched the kids scatter gulls,  
your kids, their play with their good father.  
Behind them the horizon said not to worry,  
keep going and you come all the way back to yourself.  
Today there is no then to now, no there to here,  
but everywhere an edge, and from the other side  
Janis shouts, screams, whispers, soothes then pounds.  
Hope is the door you can kick down one day and  
ease through the next, like raising a dime store slip  
past your hips, slick so maybe you don't notice  
it comes off easy with practice.

You lift it  
as if it were his spirits, that one man the songs  
always promise themselves, as we promise children  
whatever it takes to keep them quiet. Maybe,  
maybe, maybe, Janis sings with doubt's small prop,  
so she can pretend she's being honest.  
Play it loud, the horn section blasting us all

out of this mess of need, and sing the thrilling lie,  
that one good man could put a stop to it.

Near the end,

    you could hear her knowing  
what nonsense it was, that she had only her memories  
of the songs' making sense. You could hear her  
going into that room, settling instead for good dope.  
But what can you say, knowing these things?  
Making dinner, fussing a child's hurt, nights  
when you wrap your legs around your man...  
like a back-up chorus of do-wah do-wah beauties,  
you find the harmonies, and you sing along. [5]

Decidedly not a boomer, born in 1895, Louise Bogan was the first female **Poet Laureate to the Library of Congress**, the regular poetry reviewer for **The New Yorker**, and an accomplished poet herself. Although she and Theodore Roethke were lovers and she was a contemporary of Marianne Moore and William Carlos Williams, among others, she herself was a formalist. [6] Being biased, as I am, against the clotted neurasthenia of much contemporary poetry, Bogan, who is considered one of the finest American lyric poets, has always been a personal favorite. Although in a more "urban fashion" than Gary Snyder, who I shared with you in a previous **Book Notes**, Bogan was counter-cultural before there was a counterculture.

Joplin and many another boomer-dreamer might have benefited from reading Bogan's "*Exhortation*." I first read it in 1969. With life's usual mixed results, I have done my best to avoid her last stanza's prophecy.

### **Exhortation**

Louise Bogan

Give over seeking bastard joy  
Nor cast for fortune's side-long look.  
Indifference can be your toy;  
The bitter heart can be your book.  
(Its lesson torment never shook.)

In the cold heart, as on a page,  
Spell out the gentle syllable  
That puts short limit to your rage  
And curdles the straight fire of hell,  
Compassing all, so all is well.



Read how, though passion sets in storm  
And grief's a comfort, and the young  
Touch at the flint when it is warm,  
It is the dead we live among,  
The dead given motion, and a tongue.

The dead, long trained to cruel sport  
And the crude gossip of the grave;  
The dead, who pass in motley sort,  
Whom sun nor sufferance can save.  
Face them. They sneer. Do not be brave.

Know once for all: their snare is set  
Even now; be sure their trap is laid;  
And you will see your lifetime yet  
Come to their terms, your plans unmade, --  
And be belied, and be betrayed. [7]

So, in their very different ways, these three poets provide a glimpse into the heart-of-the-heart-of-the-matter, how the “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” generation became their parents. To crystallize John Lennon – “*It happens.*”

-- Andrew Roth, Ph.D.  
*Scholar-in-Residence*  
The Jefferson Educational Society  
[roth@jeserie.org](mailto:roth@jeserie.org)

#### **End Notes**

1. “Sharon Olds,” **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=150&issue=2&page=23> accessed July 22, 2020.
2. Olds, Sharon. “May 1968,” in **The Wellspring**. (New York: Knopf, 1996), pp. 39-40.
3. “Richard Speakes,” **ratemyprofessors.com** available at <https://www.ratemyprofessors.com/ShowRatings.jsp?tid=309365> accessed July 25, 2020.
4. “Richard Speakes,” English Department, Santa Rosa Junior College available at <https://english.santarosa.edu/staff/richard-speakes> accessed July 25, 2020.
5. Speakes, Richard. “Mama Loves Janis Joplin,” **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?volume=150&issue=2&page=29> accessed July 22, 2020.
6. “Louise Bogan,” **Wikipedia** available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise\\_Bogan](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louise_Bogan) accessed July 25, 2020.
7. Bogan, Louise. “Exhortation,” **The Blue Estuaries: Poems 1923-1968**. (New York: The Ecco Press, 1977), p. 67.