

## Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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### *‘Rocky Dies Yellow’ & Other Readings in Contemporary American Poetry*

This week in *Book Notes* I had originally intended to discuss Kurt Andersen’s *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire: A Five-Hundred Year History*, but after three or four weeks of fairly intense political and history slanted *Book Notes*, not to mention two weeks of political theater at the Democratic and Republican conventions culminating in a proto-authoritarian spectacle, I thought it time to come up for air and breathe.

Breathe what? The clean air of clear thinking; to pause, not as the cliché has it “to smell the roses,” but to pause and look past the moment, to let the mind idle and idling see what there is to see.

After last Thursday’s spectacle on the White House lawn, for some reason I thought of Michael Lally’s collection *Rocky Dies Yellow*, in which in *Some Times for Anne Lefevre Waldman*, he reminds us that often a thing is exactly what it seems to be:



Some Times for Anne Lefevre Waldman

my life has been different  
from yours  
but when I read your poems  
I know it hasn't been  
that different

\*

sometimes when you look into  
somebody's eyes you think  
you know what they're going to say  
then they say something else

\*

sometimes appearances  
speak louder than words [1]

Frequently considered a member of the New York School – a group of poets active in New York City in the 1950s and 1960s of whom Frank O'Hara is probably the most well-known, Lally has published more than 30 books of poetry . You probably know him , however, for his acting. He played Captain Bubb in *Deadwood* (2004), Walter Hoyt on *NYPD Blue* (1995-1997) and other roles. [2]



The collection ***Rocky Dies Yellow*** takes its title from one of the great *noir* films of all-time – ***Angels with Dirty Faces*** starring James Cagney, Pat O'Brien, the Dead End Kids, Humphrey Bogart and Ann Sheridan. Cagney plays Rocky, a tough guy killer idolized by the Dead End kids whom Pat O'Brien, Fr. Jerry, is trying to save from a life of crime. The plot takes some all too obvious turns, but ends with tough guy Rocky , trying to help his pal Fr. Jerry, screaming in terror before his execution as

he attempts to save the Kids from thinking him a hero. A colorized version of the Death Row scene can be found [here](#).

“Sometimes appearances/speak louder than words” ... Sometimes a thing is exactly what it seems to be, which might be a very good rule to keep in mind as we watch this autumn’s political shenanigans.

A moment ago, I said Frank O’Hara was probably the most famous of the New York School. Actually, you can scratch the adverb. O’Hara was not only the most famous but almost certainly the most accomplished of that tribe.

He wrote *realistic* poetry, whatever that is supposed to mean, but I take it to mean he used the stuff of daily life from which to craft his art. His most famous poem is *The Day Lady Died* about the death of Billie Holiday. It is a meditation on parallel time without ever using that tendentious phrase. It reminded me of William Styron’s character in *Sophie’s Choice* who reflects upon whatever it was he was doing that day safely at school at Duke while at that same time on the railroad landing at Auschwitz Sophie made her choice.

### *The Day Lady Died*

It is 12:20 in New York a Friday  
three days after Bastille day, yes  
it is 1959 and I go get a shoeshine  
because I will get off the 4:19 in Easthampton  
at 7:15 and then go straight to dinner  
and I don’t know the people who will feed me

I walk up the muggy street beginning to sun  
and have a hamburger and a malted and buy  
an ugly NEW WORLD WRITING to see what the poets  
in Ghana are doing these days

I go on to the bank

and Miss Stillwagon (first name Linda I once heard)  
doesn’t even look up my balance for once in her life  
and in the GOLDEN GRIFFIN I get a little Verlaine  
for Patsy with drawings by Bonnard although I do  
think of Hesoid, trans. Richard Lattimore or  
Brendan Behan’s new play or *Le Balcon* or *Les Negres*  
of Genet, but I don’t, I stick with Verlaine  
after practically going to sleep with quandariness

and for Mike I just stroll into the PARK LANE  
Liquor Store and ask for a bottle of Strega and  
then I go back where I came from to 6th Avenue  
and the tobacconist in the Ziegfeld Theatre and  
casually ask for a carton of Gauloises and a carton  
of Picayunes, and a NEW YORK POST with her face on it

and I am sweating a lot by now and thinking of  
leaning on the john door in the 5 SPOT  
while she whispered a song along the keyboard  
to Mal Waldron and everyone and I stopped breathing [3]

Those of you who have been reading these ***Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus*** since we embarked on the project back in March have probably noticed that my interests are, hmmm, what one might call catholic, as in universal. I am interested in just about everything – history, art, literature, pop culture, music, baseball (one week in October if there is a World Series in 2020, we'll take a stroll through what I think the two best baseball books ever written – Lawrence S. Ritter's ***The Glory of Their Times*** and Roger Kahn's ***The Boys of Summer***) and, of course, poetry.

In poetry, it should now be apparent, my taste runs to those who find the magical in the ordinary, the beautiful in the banal.

A contemporary master of finding “the magical in the ordinary, the beautiful in the banal” is Norman Dubie. Quoting the ***New York Review of Books***' Vernon Shetley, the *Poetry Foundation* says Dubie “seeks to evoke emotion through a highly particularized rendering of a world of objects.” [4] As in:

*New England, Compline*

A dark, thick branch in the last light is like  
The hand of your grandmother  
Dropping linen napkins on the shrubs to dry  
Hopelessly in the few hours before night.  
Across the garden  
In the back a girl strikes a piano key just once  
And then there is the sound of crickets. The evening

Itself seems slow with the oldest feelings:  
A boy walks up the hill  
With a glass jar; inside he has, perhaps, a snake,

A firefly or minnows. Three houses away  
A man standing on his roof passes a short ladder  
Down to his wife.

The stone nude beside the garden is bathing  
In deep shade while inside the mouth  
Of the nude in a copper dish a sparrow washes  
Both its wings.

In the dark there's a last sound, it is  
A large jar breaking in the street, and up into the night  
Almost heavy  
Go fireflies striking their soft, yellow lights. [5]

A *compline* is the final prayer in the Liturgy of the Hours (Divine Office, canonical hours, Breviary) marking the hours of the day: Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers and Compline. [6] Dubie wondrously evokes the “magical” peace of the moment at which day slides into night by wistfully describing a scene right out of the childhood of any number of you reading these **Notes**. But there is an undertone of regret, not in Dubie, but in thinking about the scene he evokes, for who now collects fireflies in a jar? For the question immediately arises, not to evoke Pete Seeger, but where have all the fireflies gone?

Dubie is a romantic, although I think he might object to that characterization. Perhaps he is an anti-romantic? His *To A Young Woman Dying at Weir* contradicts George Eliot's (Mary Ann Evans') admonition in *Middlemarch*, which has now become an aging boomer tee-shirt cliché, “you're never too old to become what you might have been”:

*To A Young Woman Dying at Weir*

She hears a hermit laughing  
Like a great scapegrace of waxwings and crows.  
He is laughing about the burdock seed

That's in the horse manure  
That is in the Sheriff's compost.  
Last night, unable to sleep,  
She recalled the catbird  
Wheezing out in the chinaberry tree.  
Soon frost would splatter  
Iodine all over the hydrangeas

And the deer would no longer graze  
Under the blood maples along the hill.

Sometimes her spirit grows and she remembers  
A mountain dulcimer being played  
While a woman sews. When the fear is largest  
She remembers the old hermit poling his boat  
Back along the cooling pond, he's taken burlap bags  
Of the whitest sand from the cove  
For plastering the walls of his autumn shack:  
This comforts her,

errand and prospect,

A freshened sense of snow  
Feathering over the frozen pond. She says,  
  in a hush,  
That she loves something she has not found. [7]

Juliana Gray may or may not have found what she loves, but she knows how to put it in perspective. "Object" she will not be. Her *The Lady Responds* is a rejoinder to Sir Thomas Wyatt the Elder's poem *Whoso List to Hunt, I Know where is an Hind*. Wyatt, a courtier in the court of Henry VIII, had an affair with Anne Boleyn. It cost the Queen her head Wyatt, after a scare in the Tower, kept his. An old example of women paying for men's sins.

First, however, a brief excursion into English-teacher-land explaining Wyatt's 16th century language. "List" in this context means "pleases," "chooses to," or "wants to hunt"; "hind" is a female deer, particularly a red deer or a deer of striking appearance; "*helas*" is French for *alas* (the courtier showing off his learning); "sithens" is an obsolete English word for *since* or *since that time*; and *noli me tangere* is a Latin warning or prohibition against meddling meaning touch-me-not.

With the language clarified, the poem is about courtly seduction in the Age of Courtly Love and the dangers of seeking ("hunting") those forbidden to you. The implicit metaphor is that of the poacher being warned off. Alternatively, to modern ears, it sounds not so much like seduction as sexual predation, which is Juliana Gray's point of view.

First, however, Wyatt, who in the midst of Henry VIII's chaos, wrote:



Whoso List to Hunt, I Know where is an Hind

Whoso list to hunt, I know where is an hind,  
But as for me, *hélas*, I may no more.  
The vain travail hath wearied me so sore,  
I am of them that farthest cometh behind.  
Yet may I by no means my wearied mind  
Draw from the deer, but as she fleeth afore  
Fainting I follow. I leave off therefore,  
Sithens in a net I seek to hold the wind.  
Who list her hunt, I put him out of doubt,  
As well as I may spend his time in vain.  
And graven with diamonds in letters plain  
There is written, her fair neck round about:  
*Noli me tangere*, for Caesar's I am,  
And wild for to hold, though I seem tame. [8]

The Lady Responds

after Sir Thomas Wyatt

Whoso list to hunt will need a hound,  
a dog to lead the horses, chase the hare  
and hind, dig the foxes from their lair.  
How pretty their paws, tearing up the ground,  
their white and crimson jaws when the prize is found!  
But a mistress of hounds must take special care  
not to treat one as a pet, to share  
a morsel from her plate or let one hound  
onto her bed. A dog must know its place,  
at the mistress's feet rather than her lap.  
A beast who misbehaves deserves a rap  
across his nose, a kick till he's abased.  
A cur that won't be muzzled or made to sit  
must bait the unchained bears in the fighting pit. [9]

Working the same vein, but a bit too strong for a Jefferson Society **Book Notes** is Erin Hoover's *Girls* recounting her misadventures servicing a rock band drummer, for as she says "Our kind of f\_\_\_\_\_ up is Y,/less Millennial, more perpetual, because/we too called ourselves journalists,/wrote for weeklies nobody read..." [10] More about Erin Hoover can be found [here](#).

These days it's hard to escape the political, so paging through Stephen Dunn's *New and Selected Poems, 1974-1994* when I came across this, I thought I had to share it. As for partisanship, for whichever party, as Len Kholos used to say in the old *Erie Daily Times*, "If the Shoe Fits":

*From the Manifesto of the Selfish*

Because altruists are the least sexy  
people on earth, unable  
to say "I want" without embarrassment,

we need to take from them everything  
they give,  
then ask for more,

this is how to excite them, and because  
it's exciting  
to see them the least bit excited

once again we'll be doing something  
for ourselves,  
who have no problem taking pleasure,

always desirous and so pleased to be  
pleased, we who above all  
can be trusted to keep our balance. [11]

It's not possible to share a sampling of poems without including something from Mary Oliver. Her rootedness, her simple sanity in these fractious times, is a balm. Somehow in the condo association in which I live, I have become the "pond nerd" – the guy looking after the pond – "water view," I believe realtors call it – in our back garden. So, this afternoon Oliver's *At Round Pond* snagged my notice.

*At Round Pond*

owl  
make your little appearance now

owl dark bird bird of gloom  
messenger reminder

of death



that can't be stopped

argued with leashed put out  
like a red fire but

burns as it will  
owl

I have not seen you now for  
too long a time don't

hide away but come flowing and clacking  
the slap of your wings

your death's head oh rise  
out of the thick and shaggy pines when you  
look down with your  
golden eyes how everything

trembles  
then settles

from mere incidence into  
the lush of meaning. [12]

Next week in ***Book Notes*** we'll return to the jumble-scramble of contemporary American culture, its fascination with delusion, imagery, and unreality corroding and corrupting our politics, short-circuiting our ability, as Machiavelli warned, to manage our differences.

But this week I'll close on a more hopeful, or if not hopeful, benign note – when “unreality” did not mean a post-truth, post-factual world of political assertion, but instead an encounter with “the magical in the ordinary, the beautiful in the banal.”

Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who is still going strong at 101, is one of the original *Beats*, friend of Kerouac, patron of Ginsberg and Snyder. Working out of his San Francisco North Beach City Lights Book Store, Ferlinghetti is a poet, painter, and social activist. His ***A Coney Island of the Mind*** is one of the most popular books of poetry of all time – translated into nine languages with more than a million copies sold. It might not be too great a stretch to say he invented the '60s, or at least the best part – the part that wanted to cut through the detritus and find “the magical in the ordinary, the beautiful

in the banal.” In the poem below, “the El” refers to the elevated railway that used to run above Third Avenue in Manhattan.

Here is Ferlinghetti’s take on his first encounter with “unreality”:

#20

The pennycandystore beyond the El  
is where I first  
    fell in love  
        with unreality  
Jellybeans glowed in the semi-gloom  
of that September afternoon  
A cat upon the counter moved among  
                            the licorice sticks  
        and tootsie rolls  
    and Oh Boy Gum

Outside the leaves were falling as they died

A wind had blown away the sun

A girl ran in  
Her hair was rainy  
Her breasts were breathless in the little room

Outside the leaves were falling  
    and they cried  
                    Too soon! too soon! [13]

A celebration of Ferlinghetti’s 100th birthday can be found [here](#).

Next week in **Book Notes**, another kind of unreality, not nearly so benign but every bit as magical, even if the magic is *noir* – Kurt Andersen’s *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire: A 500 Year History*.

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## End Notes

1. "Some Times for Anne Lefevre Waldman," in **Rocky Dies Yellow**. (Berkeley, CA: Blue Wind Press, 1975), p. 13.
  2. "Michael Lally (poet)," in **Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia** available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael\\_Lally\\_\(poet\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Lally_(poet)) accessed August 29, 2020.
  3. O'Hara, Frank. "The Day Lady Died," in **Frank O'Hara, Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42657/the-day-lady-died> accessed August 29, 2020.
  4. "Norman Dubie," **Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/norman-dubie> accessed August 29, 2020.
  5. Dubie, Norman. "New England, Compline," in **Selected and New Poems**. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1983), p. 4.
  6. "Liturgy of the Hours," in **Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia** available at [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgy\\_of\\_the\\_Hours](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liturgy_of_the_Hours) accessed August 29, 2020.
  7. Dubie, Norman. "To A Young Woman Dying at Weir," in **The Mercy Seat: Collected and New Poems 1967-2001**. (Port Townshend, WA: Copper Canyon Press, 2001), p. 170.
  8. Wyatt, Sir Thomas. "Whoso List to Hunt, I Know where is an Hind," **Sir Thomas Wyatt, Poetry Foundation** available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45593/whoso-list-to-hunt-i-know-where-is-an-hind> accessed August 29, 2020.
  9. Gray, Juliana. "The Lady Responds," in **The Best American Poetry 2016**, ed. Edward Hirsch. (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2016), p. 46.
  10. Hoover, Erin. "Girls," in **The Best American Poetry 2016**, ed. Edward Hirsch. (New York: Scribner Poetry, 2016), pp. 61-62.
  11. Dunn, Stephen. "From the Manifesto of the Selfish," in **New and Selected Poems 1974-1994**. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1994), p. 258.
  12. Oliver, Mary. "At Round Pond," in **West Wind: Poems and Prose Poems**. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997), p. 4.
  13. Ferlinghetti, Lawrence. "#20," in **A Coney Island of the Mind**. (New York: New Directions, 1958), p. 35.
- Photo: Rocky Dies Yellow:  
<https://www.briancassidy.net/advSearchResults.php?authorField=Michael+LALLY&action=search>

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