

PICK OF THE SYLLABUS

Teaching and Learning in China

Ellen Widmer, Professor of Asian Languages and Literatures, selects *River Town: Two Years on the Yangtze* (Perennial, 2002) by Peter Hessler



A volunteer in the third year of the Peace Corps program in China, Peter Hessler arrived in 1996 in Fuling, Sichuan, where he spent two years teaching English to future teachers in a local college. Fuling is a small city (population 200,000) downriver from Chongqing on the Yangtze River, but travel in and out of the city is difficult. Paired with a fellow American, as is Peace Corps practice, he learned Mandarin and its local variants, acquainting himself with the lay of the land, and writing this memoir—all in addition to his job.

It is not difficult to understand why *River Town* became a *New York Times* best-seller. Graceful writing and wry humor win the reader over, as does the book's thoughtful organization, which intersperses longer, descriptive chapters cast in the past tense with shorter, more lyrical moments set in present time. As a “river town,” the city was then readying itself for the moment that the vast Yangtze River hydroelectric dam project would put part of Fuling under water. In other respects, too, Fuling comes across as isolated, a place few Westerners have ever visited, let

alone resided in for years. Hessler's vision of Fuling is nevertheless compelling, in part as a microcosm of the new China, in part for the insight into how an uncertain future can loom large.


What most draws the reader forward are the residents' voices: first those of Hessler's students through their English compositions, students with remarkable names such as Soddy, Mo Money, William Jefferson Foster—and even a young man named Rebecca. As Hessler's Chinese improves, he starts to read signs and understand conversations heard on the streets. He introduces the voices of peasants and becomes better attuned to local color. He learns how to insult a person: (“you are so ‘tooth-brush’” means “useless” in Sichuan dialect). Unexpected links turn up alongside contrasts. His visiting father, who knows no Chinese, makes linguistic contact with a local Catholic priest, who knows Latin but no English. The two recite parts of the Latin mass side by side. Hessler's sharp eye for the ubiquitous beepers and cell phones captures a China on the move, even as crops run through time-honored cycles and temples crumble unobserved.

The book also traces Hessler's non-linguistic acculturation. At first, Fuling's noise, dirt, and air pollution (not to mention the locals' obtrusive staring) are almost overwhelming, and he is relieved to retreat with Adam, his fellow Peace Corps volunteer. From the safety of their air-conditioned quarters, they observe Fuling at arm's length, on a balcony. Later, Hessler learns to joke about his peculiarities as a foreigner—his long nose and funny pronunciation—and begins to make Chinese friends. His jogging becomes another point of distinction. He is the only seri-

ous distance runner in town. This wins him a certain local fame.

Too modestly, Hessler contends that his book is not about China but about one modest community during a blink in time. Now, nearly 10 years after his stay, I've considered how the book might enhance a syllabus for a course on traditional Chinese literature. Like other vestiges of the past, literature is easy to detach from lived reality. *River Town* is well versed in China's history and literature, at least in the sense that Hessler knows his dynasties and famous writers. At the same time, it provides a rich sense of contemporary priorities. Fuling's White Crane Ridge with its calligraphic inscriptions from the Song Dynasty (11–12th centuries) and its famous pair of stone fish (they once served to measure the depth of the river) will soon be buried under 30 feet of water. Does it make sense, as Tianjin University proposes, to create an underwater museum, complete with a tunnel-link to shore, so that the fish markers can entertain even after they no longer fulfill their primary function? Fuling's citizenry is largely uneducated and there is little tourism, so it is probably easier just to let the markers go.

Yet the legacy of the past is not unimportant in this city. China's most famous poet, Du Fu, lived in the eighth century. He was from Sichuan, rather near Fuling, and his poems on the river are preserved, not just in print but in local memory. Du Fu is one of several Tang poets whose works are recited by Hessler's students, meaning that they serve something more than antiquarian interests. And when Hessler notes that “everything in this landscape has been shaped by the steady power of the Yangtze,” he provides a second benchmark for Du Fu's river poems.

For those who already follow China, *River Town* illuminates it from a new perspective. For beginners, the book provides a vivid account of what motivated one small Chinese city and its residents of the late '90s. Readers will also enjoy its keen sense of cultural difference and of how that difference can be bridged through empathetic understanding. 

MOVIES

DVD Highlights

Our selection of noteworthy DVDs from Wesleyan alumni.

In Good Company

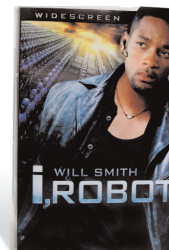
(Universal)

Paul Weitz '88 (*American Pie*, *About a Boy*) wrote and directed this delightful comedy-drama about an experienced ad salesman for a leading sports magazine who is demoted thanks to corporate ruthlessness and forced to work for a business school prodigy half his age. Complications unfold when his new boss starts dating his daughter. Weitz orchestrates a marvelous cast that includes Dennis Quaid, Topher Grace (*That '70s Show*), and Scarlett Johansson (*Lost in Translation*). The film was scored by Stephen Trask '89.

***I, Robot***

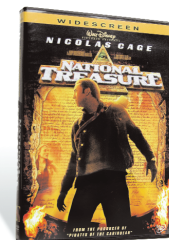
(Twentieth Century Fox)

Akiva Goldsman '83 (*A Beautiful Mind*) wrote the screenplay (with Jeff Vintar) for this sleek sci-fi thriller directed by Alex Proyas (*The Crow*) and suggested by Isaac Asimov's book of short stories. Will Smith stars as a homicide detective who suspects that a kindly old scientist has been murdered by a robot. The film deservedly received an Oscar nomination for its impressive visual effects. Goldsman also wrote the screenplay for the critically acclaimed *Cinderella Man*, which was released in theaters in June 2005.

***National Treasure***

(Walt Disney)

Jon Turteltaub '85 (*Phenomenon*, *While You Were Sleeping*) directed and produced (with Jerry Bruckheimer) this entertaining action-adventure that became one of Walt Disney Pictures' most successful live-action films when it was released in 2004.



Nicolas Cage plays Benjamin Franklin Gates, who searches for a vast ancient treasure and believes that clues to its location are written in invisible ink on the back of the Declaration of Independence. Turteltaub received a Distinguished Alumnus Award during this year's Reunion and Commencement.

—David Low '76

BOOKS

Beyond Suburbia

Alexander Parsons '91 writes about his second novel, *In the Shadows of the Sun* (Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2005), which delves into the brutality of war, both on the front lines and at home.

The other week I was interviewed about my new novel, *In the Shadows of the Sun*. The book is broadly about the birth of the atomic age and centers on a family of ranchers fighting to hold on to their land during World War II while their son endures the Bataan Death March and four horrific years in Japanese POW camps. The interviewer looked me over and knew that, a) I slouched too much to be a vet of any war, b) the only marching I did was to the kitchen for potato chips, and, c) if I ranched anything it was likely small domesticated animals, maybe schnauzers. Why, he asked, were you drawn to this topic?

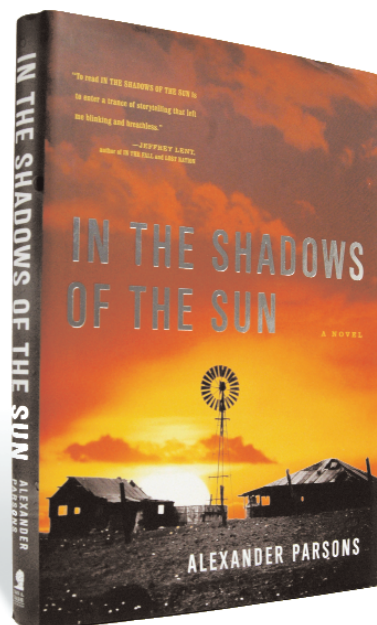
The answer is simple: My life bores me. There are writers who can evoke the day-to-day of suburban existence in entrancing detail and with amazing insight. Through the eyes of Updike or Cheever, the pick-up scene at Home Depot takes on Shakespearian overtones; the battle with squirrels in the ceiling becomes classic Man vs. Nature. I am not such a writer.

While I am a suburban guy—I watered the lawn, rode dirt bikes, got in rock fights, etc.—I have little interest in recalling this personal history and no ability to weave the quotidian into the thread of narrative. I probably shouldn't have become a writer. But human nature is perverse. You step into a dark forest and keep telling yourself you'll get your bearings in a minute, just a few more steps. Soon you're in Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell, encased to your neck in ice, your head a bumper for Satan's Zamboni.

Which brings me to graduate school, the atomic bomb, and the

Iowa winter of 1996. Homesick and freezing, I was working on a short story that involved big game hunting in New Mexico. In the late 1960s, a New Mexico game commissioner who over-identified with Hemingway-the-Mighty-Hunter transplanted an exotic trophy animal, the oryx, from the Kalahari Desert to central New Mexico. Oryx are the only hooved animal that can kill lions; 40-inch horns jut like swords from their skulls and they weigh upwards of 500 pounds. So naturally people like to shoot them and mount their heads above fireplaces.

He loosed the oryx on the highly restricted White Sands Missile Range (WSMR), which encompasses Trinity Site, the scrubby flatland where the first atomic bomb was detonated. As I read about the WSMR and the introduction of the oryx (and other, less successful transplants: witness Jefferson Davis's anti-Apache cavalry camels in



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the 1850s), I found an article about an elderly rancher, Dave McDonald, who'd slipped onto the WSMR to reoccupy his home, which had lain empty for 40 years. In his armed standoff with the military police, he said the government had robbed him of his land and he meant to have it back. In his words: “Sometimes I feel that I should have been born a wild jackass or worthless inbred mustang—for by all accounts they have more rights than any of us ranchers have got.”


His whole life had gone terribly awry because he was forced from his home. I wanted the story behind this: What could compel an 80-plus-year-old, avowed patriotic American—a man with a pacemaker, no less—to take on the military?

The short story: In the wake of Pearl Harbor, the U.S. War Department needed space for a bombing and gunnery range. Western ranches consist largely of leased federal land, and so the government repo'd hundreds of thousands of acres in New Mexico, telling the ranchers they'd get to return postwar and be reimbursed for their trouble. This didn't exactly happen. By the close of the war we had the atom bomb,

shiny new German V-2 rocket technology, and a useful missile range the size of Rhode Island set in New Mexico's high desert. Ranchers like McDonald were out of luck; the world had moved on. It was now ICBMs over cattle.

The research for the book grew more fascinating and compelling. When a character disappeared to fight in the Philippines, I looked into what happened to the New Mexicans stationed there. This led me to the Bataan Death March, Japanese POW camps, and the bombings of Tokyo, Hiroshima, and Nagasaki. I visited Trinity Site and found the remains of Jumbo, a 214-ton lead bottle built to contain the first atomic blast in case the detonation failed—the physicists didn't want all that plutonium scattering to the winds. I remember staring at this rusting hulk and wondering if anyone had contemplated it during the countdown on that rainy, predawn morning and thinking, Uh oh, maybe this is a bad omen. (Pandora's Box, genie's bottle, etc.) I found a chunk of Trinitite, the glaucous, fused sand from the detonation, and ate oryx (it doesn't taste like chicken).

Sifting through unpublished memoirs of veterans of the Pacific Theater of War or archival photos of 1940s-era ranching revealed an endlessly rich story that organized itself on the page. Six years later, I completed *In the Shadows of the Sun* and came to understand that my suburban history was even more boring than I had ever imagined. Happily, no one will have to read about this because, let's face it, there are better stories out there. Lots of them.

Alexander Parsons teaches fiction writing at the University of New Hampshire. He was awarded a 2004 National Endowment for the Arts literary fellowship. His first novel, Leaving Disneyland, won an Associated Writing Programs Novel Award. To read more about his books, visit www.alexanderparsons.com. 

Just Published

Our selection of noteworthy books by Wesleyan alumni, faculty members, and parents.



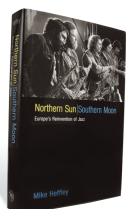
CHARLES BARBER '85
Songs from the Black Chair: A Memoir of Mental Interiors
(University of Nebraska Press, 2005)

In his intricate and moving memoir, Barber, an associate of the Yale Program for Recovery and Community Health, writes eloquently about a friend's suicide, his own struggles with obsessive-compulsive disorder, and his clients at Bellevue in New York City and other mental health shelters where he was employed. Sensitive readers will appreciate his compassion for the madness suffered by others and his honest observations of family relationships.



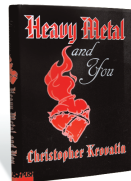
GAYATRI GOPINATH '91
Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures
(Duke University Press, 2005)

In her original new study, Gopinath examines how queer identities and desires have often been excluded in diaspora studies that have stressed a national affinity for the homeland. She focuses on South Asian diasporic literature, film, and music to suggest alternative ways to conduct diaspora studies by expanding notions of community.



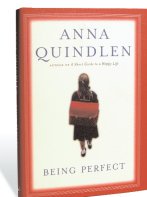
MIKE HEFFLEY '00
Northern Sun/Southern Moon: Europe's Reinvention of Jazz
(Yale University Press, 2005)

Until the 1960s, both American and European jazz remained entrenched in formal Western musical conventions originating in ancient Greece and early Christian plainchant. The creators of so-called "free jazz"—Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, John Coltrane, Albert Ayler, Sun Ra, Anthony Braxton, and others—freed American jazz from its Western connections, inspiring European musicians to discover their own voices and to create an innovative and independent jazz culture. Writer and composer Heffley traces this jazz revolution as it evolved throughout Europe and situates European jazz in its historical, social, political, and cultural contexts.



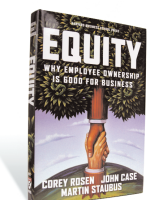
CHRISTOPHER KROVATIN '07
Heavy Metal and You
(PUSH/Scholastic, 2005)

In this heartfelt and often funny young adult novel, teenager Samuel Marcus finds solace for his confused emotions in the world of heavy metal music and falls in love with Melissa, a prep "goddess" who is both intrigued and repulsed by his rebellious personality and his musical tastes. Krovatin expertly captures the highs and lows of high school love and friendship.



ANNA QUINDLEN P'07
Being Perfect
(Random House, 2005)

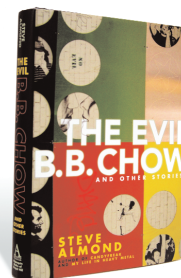
Best-selling author and admired *Newsweek* columnist Quindlen writes wisely in her short gem of a book about the importance of "giving up on being perfect and beginning the work of becoming yourself." She urges readers to stop trying to attain perfection in an effort to please others and encourages finding fulfillment by nurturing one's uniqueness.



COREY ROSEN '70
JOHN CASE, AND MARTIN STAUBUS, ***Equity: Why Employee Ownership is Good for Business***
(Harvard Business School Press, 2005)

In this helpful and practical guide, authors Rosen, Case, and Staubus present compelling evidence that employee ownership, when practiced correctly, can be the cornerstone for a new and more effective model of management—and much more than just a good benefits program. The writers employ historical analysis, original research, and firsthand studies of dozens of companies from large corporations to local retailers to reveal how the "equity model" enables firms to grow faster and more profitably than conventionally run competitors.

— David Low '76



FICTION AND POETRY:

STEVE ALMOND '88
The Evil B .B. Chow and Other Stories
(Algonquin, 2005)

YASUNARI KAWABATA (author)
ALISA FREEDMAN '91 (translator)
The Scarlet Gang of Asakusa
(University of California Press, 2005)

MAGGIE NELSON '94
Visiting Assistant Professor of English
Jane: A Murder
(Soft Skull Press, 2005)

CHILDREN'S BOOKS:

ANNA DEWDNEY '87
Llama, Llama, Red Pajama
(Viking, 2005)

SUZANNA HENSHON '93
Mildew on the Wall
(Royal Fireworks Press, 2004)

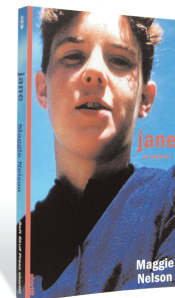
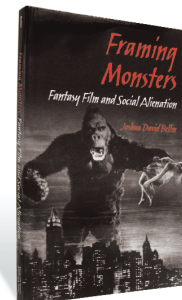
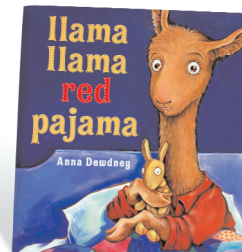
ALAN MADISON '81
ANNALaura CANTONE (illustrator)
Pecorino's First Concert
(Atheneum, 2005)

NONFICTION:

JOSHUA DAVID BELLIN '87
Framing Monsters: Fantasy Film and Social Alienation
(Southern Illinois University Press, 2005)

DANIEL J. BRUGIONI '78, MD and JEFF FALKEL
Total Knee Replacement and Rehabilitation: The Knee Owner's Manual
(Hunter House, 2004)

JOHN COLLINS '90
Occupied by Memory: The Intifada Generation and the Palestinian State of Emergency
(New York University Press, 2004)



RABBI NANCY FUCHS-KREIMER '73 and RABBI NANCY H. WIENER
Judaism for Two: A Spiritual Guide for Strengthening and Celebrating Your Loving Relationship
(Jewish Lights Publishing, 2005)

RON GOLDMAN '74 and RICHARD P. GABRIEL
Innovation Happens Elsewhere: Open Source as Business Strategy
(Morgan Kaufmann, 2005)

NOAH KRAVITZ '95
Teaching and Learning with Technology: Learning Where to Look
(Scarecrow Education/Rowman & Littlefield, 2004)

SID RAY '88 and MARTHA W. DRIVER (editors)
The Medieval Hero on Screen: Representations from Beowulf to Buffy
(McFarland, 2004)

DANIEL ROSENBERG '88 and SUSAN HARDING (editors)
Histories of the Future
(Duke University Press, 2005)

ARTHUR UPGREN
John Monroe Van Vleck Professor of Astronomy, Emeritus
Many Skies: Alternative Histories of the Sun, Moon, Planets, and Stars
(Rutgers University Press, 2005)

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