"Baby Woojums passed suddenly today." She signed herself, "Your loving Mama Woojums."

The Rite of Spring premiere, as Cohen describes it, was as colorful a cultural episode as the arrival, as an entry in a New York exhibition of modern art in 1917, of a porcelain urinal bought at a showroom of plumbing fixtures on lower Fifth Avenue. "A lovely form has been revealed, freed from its functional purposes," said a spokesman for Marcel Duchamp. "Therefore a man has clearly made an aesthetic contribution." Titled *Fountain*, the famous urinal joined company with others of Duchamp's "readymades," including a shovel, *In Advance of the Broken Arm*, and an empty, sealed glass ampoule supposedly containing, as its title announced, *Paris Air*. Now vanished, Duchamp's urinal, a humble object transformed by "a new thought," survives in a photograph by Alfred Stieglitz.

At one point in Cohen's narratives we see Richard Avedon's mother punching out the elevator man in her East Side apartment house because he had made James Baldwin use the service stairs. Wearing a sort of sailor blouse with a little dark tie, Willa Cather arrives at the Beaux Arts Studio at 80 West Fortieth Street to sit for a portrait by Edward Steichen. It will appear in *Vogue* and become her best-known image. There are many other such encounters in *A Chance Meeting*.

To my mind one of the tenderest and most delicious of them begins with a nervous young poet, Elizabeth Bishop, riding into Manhattan on the train from Vassar to meet her idol, Marianne Moore, for the first time. The place is the hall outside the main reading room of the New York Public Library on Fifth Avenue. After a while, with Moore doing almost all the talking, Bishop "was visited by an inspiration," Cohen writes, "and asked Moore if she'd like to go to the circus, not knowing that Marianne Moore never missed the circus." To which Moore said yes, and next time they were together she "arrived with two large paper bags containing brown bread to feed the elephants; they were fond of brown bread, she explained.... Her plan was that Bishop would give some of the bread to the adult elephants, while Moore went to feed the babies and got them to bend over so that she could cut a few hairs off their heads" to mend her elephant-hair bracelet. For years the two women addressed each other as "Miss Moore" and "Miss Bishop." Moore became Bishop's "earliest advocate and one of the most staunch," Cohen writes, "placing nearly all her early poems for publication in magazines and writing an introduction for her work, one of remarkable understanding." Over the years, separated at first by the river between Manhattan and Brooklyn, and then by the miles between Brooklyn and Florida, and finally the many more miles between Brooklyn and Brazil, where Bishop had settled with her lover, they exchanged hundreds of letters: about poems, articles, and books, art shows, movies and landscapes, places and animals, and they tried to include something special in each one. "I had a letter from Elizabeth a day or two ago," Moore told a friend, "which I am thinking of having tattooed on me."

Justin Kaplan '45, G '47, is the author of Mr. Clemens and Mark Twain, *winner of the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for biography,* Walt Whitman: A Life, *and* Lincoln Steffens: A Biography. *He edited the most recent edition of* Bartlett's Familiar Quotations. *He and his wife, novelist Anne Bernays, collaborated on a memoir,* Back Then: Two Lives in 1950s New York.

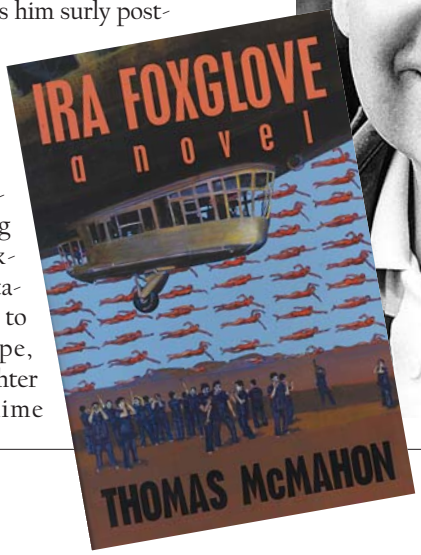
Engineer of Fictions

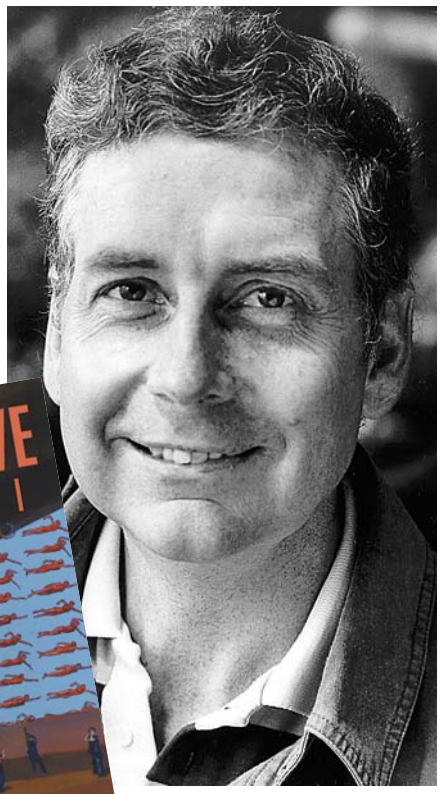
A posthumous McMahon novel

When Thomas McMahon, McKay professor of applied mechanics and professor of biology, died unexpectedly of heart failure on Valentine's Day, 1999, the 55-year-old faculty member left behind an unusually bifurcated oeuvre. On the one hand were three patents and more than 60 scientific publications marking a precocious academic career: by the time the University granted him tenure in 1977, he had helped to found the entirely new field of biomechanics. On the other were the three critically acclaimed works of fiction that built and sustained his reputation as an adroit and whimsical novelist.

Following McMahon's death, relatives discovered among his papers the 30-year-old manuscript of a novel composed while he was a graduate student at MIT. Now, after collaboration among his family, his agent, and a new publishing house, McMahon's posthumous novel *Ira Foxglove* is on shelves for the first time.

The title character of McMahon's early foray into extended fiction is an inventor immured in a dark Cambridge house after a heart attack (a conceit some close readers have adduced as evidence that the author secretly anticipated his own heart problem). Ira's wife, finding his new lifestyle unbearably dour, has walked out on him; she sends him surly postcards from London, which he diligently affixes to a bulletin board in his kitchen. Eventually emerging from his cockroach-ridden catacomb, he decides to travel to Europe, visiting his daughter (at Parisian mime





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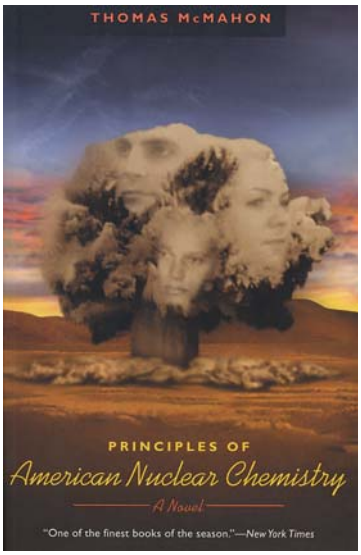
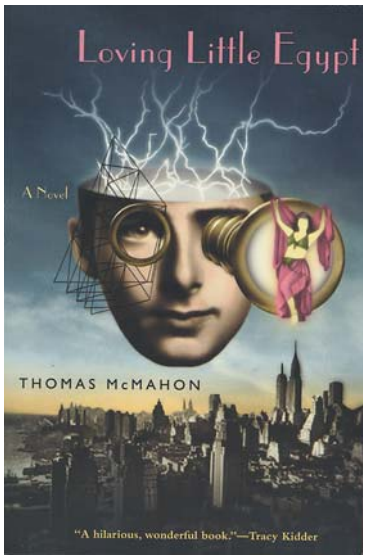
BOOKS

school), his wife, and her new paramour. And, perhaps because this is a McMahon novel, a jet into Heathrow isn't the transportation at hand. Ira proceeds to England via Iceland in a Goodyear blimp piloted by a crackpot businessman named Neptune. In Paris, he invents an artificial heart made from a tomato, finding a solution to his own health problems and ultimately reuniting his family.

It's the sort of eccentric plot McMahon fans have come to expect. *Principles of American Nuclear Chemistry: A Novel*, published in 1970, the year McMahon finished graduate school, intertwines its narrator's high-school coming-of-age story with the tense interpersonal dynamics of the wartime Los Alamos laboratory. *McKay's Bees*, a comic novel published nine years later, gives an entirely fictional account of Gordon McKay, the benefactor of McMahon's Harvard chair, as a West-bound New Englander working to earn a fortune through beekeeping. In McMahon's 1987 *Loving Little Egypt*, which won the American Academy of Arts and Letters' Rosenthal Award, a semi-blind physics student in the early 1920s discovers how to rig free long-distance telephone connections and uses the technology to form a network of blind people. William Randolph Hearst, fearing subversion, enlists the help of Thomas Edison to track down the blind vandal. At one point in the novel, McMahon describes Edison's conception of memory as particles: "Arcing through the air, they would find a brain to alight upon and lived there for as long as harmony remained in that brain. They would join the swarms of memory particles already present, some of which might be very old, having been transmitted to the brain before birth by the parents. The man capable of great inventions owed his ideas to memory swarms of the highest quality and greatest vigor."





McMahon's prose is filled with similar blends of fanciful improvisation and scrupulously explained processes. His narratives delight so fully in the minutiae of their imagined worlds, it's somehow no surprise that, according to his daughter Elizabeth, he was able to charm his young children to bed with off-the-cuff absurdist stories.

This imaginative reflex bridged the gap between his career as a novelist and his work as a scientist. Like many of his characters, he was an inventor. The field of study he helped to create, biomechanics, analyzes biological motion through an engineer's mechanical understanding, and it enabled him to take on an eclectic series of projects. In the scientific context, he's best known today for co-designing Harvard's optimized indoor track, since replicated at three other sites, and for his published research on the "Jesus Christ lizard," which can sprint upright over the surface of water. Within the last five years of his life, he garnered patents for an athletic traction shoe and a garment designed to help prevent hip injuries among the frail elderly by redirecting impact energy from exposed bone to the flesh that surrounds it.

Still, McMahon's colleagues, whether literary or scientific, say they knew him best as a self-effacing man with a strong sense of humor. More than one alluded to the "simple farmer" image he cultivated—often confusing new acquaintances, who soon realized it masked incredible perspicacity and a sometimes impish independence. Professor Frederick H. Abernathy, who occupied the office opposite McMahon's, said his colleague, who would arrive at the Division of Engineering and Applied Sciences after a morning of writing, always had a particularly clear desktop. "I asked him, 'How do you keep such a clean desk?'" Abernathy remembered, "and he said, 'I will show you.'" McMahon sifted through the day's mail, one item at a time. A laboratory equipment catalog went straight into the wastepaper basket. So did an unopened envelope from University Hall. "I said, 'Tom, that's University Hall!'" According to Abernathy, McMahon was unconcerned. "I have no business with them," the writer explained. "If they really have business with me, they will phone later."

In Paris, Ira Foxglove invents an artificial heart made from a tomato—and so solves his health problems.

Ira Foxglove, when rediscovered, was a combination of typed pages and handwritten notes. It had two endings. Harriet Wasserman, McMahon's agent for *Loving Little Egypt*, enlisted Corlies M. Smith—who has edited Muriel Spark and Thomas Pynchon, among others—to touch up the manuscript. Initially leery, Smith agreed once he realized the novel would require only light editing. Debra Hudak, the novel's project manager at Brook Street Press, wondered why McMahon had abandoned it at all.

"It was so complete," she said, "and yet he wasn't finished with it."

It's been a big year for McMahon's work. Last fall, the University of Chicago Press reissued his previously published novels in paperback, cementing his reputation. He never topped the bestseller lists, but his fiction has assembled a devoted cadre of readers and, in some cases, writers. "When I hit a wall," the novelist Sue Miller said, "Tom is one of the people whose prose I turn to."

Such praise is impressive for a scientist who spent every afternoon working with students and every evening in his lab, dining on a candy bar in between. But according to his sister Jean Humez, herself a writer, the orientation toward science and fiction was in his blood: his father was a physical chemist, while his mother was interested in literature. "I think she conveyed to the kids how exciting words were," Humez said. "[Tom] was always interested in creative writing." Even so, she never expected her scientific brother to publish a novel. "I was surprised," she explained. "He played his cards very close to his chest."

—NATHAN HELLER

CHAPTER & VERSE

A correspondence corner for not-so-famous lost words

Winthrop Drake Thies seeks the legal citation for a British Admiralty case "which supported the necessity of the foreign tribunal having had personal—or at least *in rem*—jurisdiction for a foreign judgment to be respected by asking rhetorically: 'Shall the writs of Antigua bind the whole world?'"

Virginia Wetherbee would like information about the origin of her Southern mother-in-law's expression "snatching [someone] skywest and crooked." A variant is traced to the mid 1800s in Robert Chapman's *New Dictionary of American Slang* (1986).

"shaves the victim's cane" (May-June). Paul Hendrick identified Marc Connelly's O. Henry Award-winning story "Coroner's Inquest," a tale of rivalry between two dwarfs, first published in *Collier's Weekly* (February 1930). Michael Bell noted that the same idea appears in the song "Did You Do That, Sid?," sung by Jackie Gleason in *Take Me Along,* the 1959 musical comedy by Bob Merrill based on Eugene O'Neill's *Ah, Wilderness!*

"young detectives" (May-June). Charles Shurcliff, who "grew up with *The Secret of Dead Man's Cove,*" sends word that the Mackie family detective stories were written in the 1930s by R. J. McGregor.

Correction: We thank Judith Robbins for pointing out our misstating of poet Edwin Arlington Robinson's first name in the May-June issue and hope that someone can provide an attribution for "It's not what you don't know that hurts you, it's what you do know that ain't so!"

Send inquiries and answers to "Chapter and Verse," Harvard Magazine, 7 Ware Street, Cambridge 02138.

Friends of Harvard Magazine

Students of Art and Lovers of Beauty

On May 13th, *Harvard Magazine* welcomed loyal and generous donors to the magazine to a private viewing of *To Students of Art and Lovers of Beauty,* highlights from the collection of Grenville L. Winthrop. This extraordinary collection has now returned to the Fogg Art Museum after being exhibited at the National Gallery in London and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

For more information about becoming a member of the Friends of Harvard Magazine group and about making a donation to the magazine, please call Felecia Carter at 617-495-5746.

At left, Carol Austell and Rhett Austell, M.B.A. '50. Above, clockwise from left, John Tudor, M.D. '64, and Dodie Tudor with Sue Fleming, M.Ed. '60, and Donald Fleming '55; Benita Burch and Renato Tagiuri, Ph.D. '51; and Margaret Gunness with Maud Wilcox, A.M. '45.