

stream sports now practically requires expensive outlays for equipment, coaching, or private academies. Looking beyond the scope of this book, Golden doesn't wade into the murky waters surrounding state merit-scholarship programs for students who attend their public colleges (like those in Georgia and Massachusetts): the "merit" appeal is politically winning, but the potential diversion of funds from needy applicants to middle- and upper-class suburbanites may be terrible socioeconomic policy. Americans' enthusiasm for merit *and* support for those in need may, in other

words, depend on where the cash flows.

That larger problem remains undressed. "Legacy" children are often excellent college candidates because they come from families who have already benefited from excellent higher education—and who have the means to provide enriching college-preparatory experiences. None of the reforms Golden suggests, beginning with abolishing legacy preference, will fill the pipeline with future applicants whose elementary and secondary schooling leaves them ill-equipped for a demanding higher education.

Bowen argued for a less sweeping measure: he would retain the legacy preference—private institutions create resources and incur costs assuming the flow of gifts from alumni—but put an equal "thumb on the scale" for lower-income applicants. Whatever policy you prefer, *The Price of Admission* is a powerful reminder that the public will increasingly require selective colleges to defend their preferences; that not all are prepared to make their complex case well; and that some of their practices, finally, seem indefensible today. ~JOHN S. ROSENBERG

Grolier Reincarnated

A venerable poetry bookshop makes a fresh start.

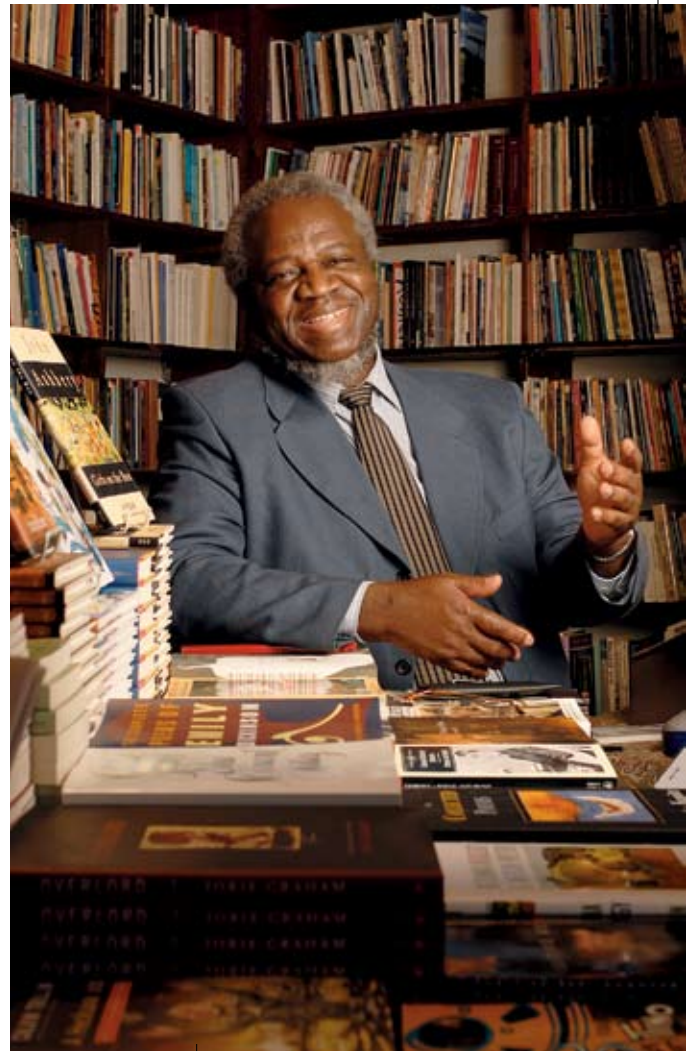
by NATHAN HELLER

TUCKED INTO a single room behind a window in Harvard Square, the Grolier Poetry Book Shop is to the world of book-selling what La Sainte Chapelle is to Gothic architecture: small, unusual, and, to those who know to track it down, a jewel box. The shop, which saw only two managements from its founding in 1927 to this past spring, has managed to stay afloat for the last three decades with the unorthodox business plan of selling only poetry. Today, it's one of only two all-poetry bookstores in the United States (the other is in Seattle) and a meeting point for literary neophytes and regulars alike. Rarity doesn't make for profit, though. The Grolier was teetering on the verge of bankruptcy when poet Ifeanyi Menkiti, Ph.D. '74, a philosophy professor at Wellesley College, bought the store in March to keep it from going under.

Named after sixteenth-century French bibliophile and collector Jean Grolier de Servières, the shop has been dubbed a "poetry landmark" by the Academy of American Poets and offers a literary home for both poets and readers. Not that there's much difference. The Grolier has served contributors to many of the anthologies it carries, with past patrons ranging from T. S. Eliot '10, E. E. Cummings '15, and Robert Lowell '39 to John

Ashbery '50 and Adrienne Rich '51. Under the ownership of Louisa Solano, who took over in 1974, it has offered a reading series, an annual poetry prize, and a yearly reading of undergraduate poetry from several universities. Now, even as some professors direct their students to the Grolier rather than the Coop, many of the store's most enthusiastic supporters come from outside academia.

Menkiti, a longtime Cantabrigian, has taught moral philosophy at Wellesley since 1973. The general imperatives he feels as a college professor—broadening his students' perspectives and taking advantage of cultural proximity—shape his priorities for the Grolier, too. Although his professorial responsibilities keep him from managing the store's day-to-day business, he plans to build up its collection of international poetry with as much intermingling as possible. "I wasn't thinking of, 'Let's say today we'll have our little Indian enclave or little Chi-



Poet and Wellesley philosophy professor Ifeanyi Menkiti, a native Nigerian, holds court in his new bookstore.

nese enclave, tomorrow our little African enclave," he explains. "I think there's something wonderful about it all happening together." He hopes to extend the shop's outreach programs by this same standard. "It would be nice to see the poets of the

GALLERY

High Art

Since its founding, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) has commissioned artists to depict explorations of the upper atmosphere and of space. Norman Rockwell, Robert Rauschenberg, Andy Warhol, and Annie Leibovitz are among those who've done so. Another is Barbara Ernst Prey, M.Div. '86, who has painted four watercolors for NASA since 2003.

An art-history graduate of Williams, Prey did line drawings for the *New York Times* to help pay her way through the Divinity School, where she also cross-registered for fine-arts courses. At the time, she was considering an academic career in church history, and also "looking for a context for my art work," she says. Regarding her later NASA paintings, Prey notes that "having a theology background gives you a different perspective when you're looking at the cosmos."

Prey (www.barbaraprey.com) has been painting for nearly 40 years and doing watercolors for 35 of them. "I'm mostly a landscape painter," she says. Much of her non-NASA work depicts rural landscapes in Maine; the artist herself lives in Oyster Bay, Long Island, New York. "I try to push the medium and colors as far as they can go," Prey says. For example, witness the deeply saturated blues—a tricky achievement in watercolor—which light up the skies of her NASA pictures.

For these paintings, Prey can spend months on research, talking with scientists, meeting

astronauts. She flew to Edwards Air Force Base in California to study the X-43 (below), a tiny unmanned aircraft only a few feet long that can fly at mach 10. Her *Columbia Tribute* (right) celebrated the successful launch of the space shuttle that disintegrated during re-entry in 2003. NASA gave prints of Prey's image to the families of the astronauts who perished, and also used it on the cover of the brochure for the memorial service at Arlington National Cemetery. "I wanted to make something positive for a very sad event," Prey says. ~C.L.



Columbia Tribute, above, portrays the successful 2003 launch of the ill-fated space shuttle Columbia. **The X-43** (left) depicts a small unmanned aircraft whose top speed far exceeds the sound barrier.



world joining hands to do some things," he says—like multinational readings or evenings of poetry with related ethnic food.

A large man with a rumbling voice and a quick laugh, Menkiti seems to find friends everywhere. His conversation is brisk and errant, and he likes to fill silences by reading or reciting a poem from memory. ("I have to show you this," he says at one point, scrawling out a couple of lines from Ezra Pound's *Pisan Cantos*. "I get excited like a little kid.") Menkiti, a native Nigerian, came to the United States to attend Pomona College, where he wrote a prizewinning senior thesis on Pound. ("That has always intimidated me," Solano says, laughing.) Hoping to become a magazine journalist, Menkiti graduated from Columbia's journalism school and then changed course, earning a master's degree in philosophy at New York University before heading to Harvard to study with John Rawls. In 1971, he published *Affirmations*, his first book of poetry;


Of Altair, the Bright Light, his third collection, appeared last year. Poetry and political philosophy, both reaching toward aesthetic harmony of some sort, have never seemed contradictory, he says.

When Menkiti first walked into the Grolier as a graduate student in 1969, it was owned and run by Gordon Cairnie, a Canadian by birth, whose name overshadows the shop's first half-century. Yet the Grolier wasn't his brainchild. Initially a sort of fine-edition bookstore, it was launched by Adrien Gambet '25, an avid and wealthy book collector; Cairnie soon joined to share in its management. Their partnership lasted only one awkward year, however: Gambet was something of a playboy, according to Solano, and liked to use the store for trysts, while Cairnie was a monogamous married Cantabrigian. When Gambet threw in the towel, Cairnie stayed on. And it was his conception that both future owners of the shop fell in love with.

"There were books all around and there was an old couch," Menkiti remembers. (T. S. Eliot reportedly had a penchant for dozing on its cushions.) "It was very laid-back in the old days, and it wasn't as organized." It wasn't financially stable, either. Cairnie ran the store more as a public service than as a business venture, sustaining it with his own funds as necessary. Over time, he changed the flavor of its stock as well. Moving away from fine editions, the Grolier began to offer both avant-garde literature—it was reportedly the first bookstore in Cambridge to carry James Joyce's *Ulysses*—and the poetry selection for which it slowly became famous. By the middle of the century, the shop was an oasis of literary bohemianism in Harvard Square, often attracting customers more interested in hanging out than buying books. "It was very much the place where poets met," says Frank Bidart, A.M. '67, one of Robert Lowell's students. According to the new U.S. poet laureate, Donald Hall '51,

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JF '57, its ambiance suited the creatively inclined. "The Grolier provides the best elements of a literary café," he wrote in a 1971 *Antioch Review* tribute to Cairnie, "a place where writers can hang around, talk, or be silent, and remain unharassed."

Louisa Solano, a local resident who had fallen in love with the Grolier as a young customer, took over the shop when Cairnie died, in 1974, and ran it for the next three decades. Unable to subsidize an unprofitable store, she tried to turn the tiny venue into a commercially viable business. She kept better track of its stock, which eventually encompassed 15,000 titles, and made the decision to devote its shelves exclusively to poetry. She also worked to attract a broader range of clientele. "I had customers coming in who were from different classes—and I don't mean academic ones. There were poor people, people who had no education,"

these days, fewer buying. "There's more interest in hearing a poet read than in actually reading the book," Solano says. This is especially a problem for an all-poetry shop, which, unlike conventional bookstores, cannot count on bestselling novels or how-to guides to keep revenue flowing. "Unsaleable inventory is exactly that," she explains.

An ever-thinning stream of visitors—sometimes only 20 a day—and a mail-order business trumped by websites like Amazon.com finally caught up with the Grolier about two years ago. Solano, who suffers from epilepsy, also found that her health forced her to cut back the shop's business hours. After announcing her intention to sell, she waded through 19 buy-out offers but couldn't take any in good conscience. Some prospective owners backed off as soon as they saw the store's financial history. Others planned to

The potential is huge: if Menkiti successfully harnesses his knowledge of world poetry, he could create a "revolution in taste."


she says. "It was gratifying when somebody came in who didn't know anything about poetry....By talking with them, we could come up with something, and they really enjoyed it. They came back. That was the major success, as far as I was concerned."

Solano describes her halcyon years as the mid 1970s, when an assortment of small presses flooded her shelves with exciting new poets. Meanwhile, she says, the local literary community blossomed. Yet that energy was short-lived. A simultaneous proliferation of M.F.A. programs, she says, soon caused a sea change in the culture of American poetry. The M.F.A. curricula, based mainly on workshop courses, served as training grounds for many of the most prominent poets who followed. Solano thinks a spark of authenticity was lost along the way. "Suddenly, everybody seemed to be writing like their instructor," she says. "It made it quite clear that a poet has to have really good connections to get somewhere. It started getting kind of ugly, as people's ambitions turned more toward—ambition."

This changed sensibility affected the Grolier's customers, with more people seeking the same short list of poets and,

change the name or mission of the shop—an unattractive possibility to both Solano and Harvard Real Estate Services, which has set the Grolier's rent below market rate. Only days before her lease expired, she says, she was planning to declare both personal and business bankruptcy. That was when Menkiti phoned with an offer. "My reaction was, 'Oh God, you are the perfect person,'" Solano says. "If there's any man who knows anything about international poetry—and not just the kind that's the flavor of the year—it's Professor Menkiti." The potential, she says, is huge; if Menkiti successfully harnesses his knowledge of world poetry, he could create "a revolution in taste."


Revolution or not, the tiny shop was packed with well-wishers at the Grolier's reopening party in May. Readings by both unpublished and well-known poets carried forward the day, which Menkiti emceed in a flowing African-print shirt. Bidart, now his Wellesley colleague, read a few new poems before Menkiti himself intoned some work by the Nigerian poet Christopher Okigbo. And the cash register, recently moved against the wall to make for a roomier browsing space, rang throughout the afternoon. ♡



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