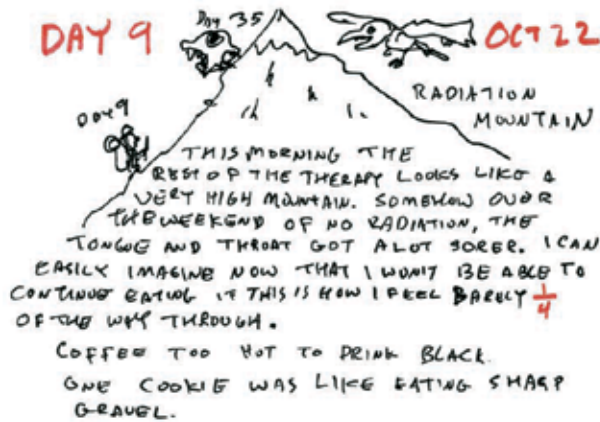


OPEN BOOK

Cancer Chronicle



in my tongue. I will also get protons to fight the tumors in my lymph nodes in my neck. There will also be chemotherapy to sensitize the cancer cells. They hope they will get a “two-fer” out of the chemo and it will also attack the tumors in my lungs.

It's October 3 and I've known for about two months that I have adenoid cystic carcinoma, a rare cancer that is “slow and indolent.” It moves slowly but is hard to stop.

No one knows how long the cancer has been in me. It could have been years. I've had a bad earache for years. For most of that time I thought it was caused by nighttime tooth grinding. I had mouth guards made that sort of worked, but not really, and not for long. And besides, the dog ate them every time it could.

I'm very sloppy and I let things go when I shouldn't. Maybe that was the root of all the trouble.

“This book,” writes Matt Freedman '78, “reproduces a journal I kept in the fall of 2012 while I was undergoing care at Massachusetts General Hospital.” Friends gave Freedman, an artist and writer who lives in New York, a sketch book before he went to Boston, and “I decided I would gradually fill the thing up with whatever came into my head during the course of my treatment.” The result, hand-lettered and illustrated, is *Relatively Indolent but Relentless* (Seven Stories Press, \$23.95), an unfiltered record as matter-of-fact as its subtitle, *A Cancer Treatment Journal*. The following is the first day's entry, with some of the subsequent drawings.

Yesterday my colleagues and students gave me this sketch book to fill up over the next two months while I undergo radiation and chemotherapy. I'm going to get proton radiation to fight the tumor in my



tended photo essay named for the streets (Avenues A, B, C, and D) on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. That neighborhood was home to a largely Puerto Rican community then plagued with street violence and heroin addiction. The project, which eventually appeared as a book in 1992, helped teach Biddle the power of integrating textual and visual elements. “With a photo on its own, you can go anywhere,” he observes. “Text gives you direction. When you have a story to tell, text is important.” One model was the 1941 classic, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, by Walker Evans and James Agee '32. Other influences on his family work are contemporaries Nicholas Nixon and Lee Friedlander.

For Biddle, taking photographs seems to be not only a way of recording family life, but also a means of participating in it. “This is part of the family soup,” he says. “Seeing the family relationship—and flinching from it.”

“Chorus of Soloists”

The Chinese people's individual acts of self-transformation

by EDWARD STEINFELD

RECENT MONTHS have brought so many reasons to worry about China's rise: rapidly expanding military capabilities, an increasingly assertive foreign policy, deepening tensions with regional neighbors, and a new leadership that as one of its first acts pledged to fight the “perils” of constitutionalism, civil society, and “universal values”—the favored official euphemism for human rights. The list goes on and on. In the current climate, even the most ostensibly benign aspects of China's rise—the phoenix-like rebirth of cities like Shanghai and Beijing, the dazzlingly futuristic public infrastructure, the lifting out of poverty of tens or even hundreds of

millions of people—take on an almost overwhelming, intimidating feel.

Perhaps it has something to do with the scale of it all, or maybe even the tempo. But for most observers, the real problem lies in the politics. Beijing's official line is that the “Chinese Dream” is first and foremost about national “rejuvenation” (中国大复兴) and the development of “comprehensive national power” (综合国力). Upon hearing this, one could be forgiven for treating all of China's recent achievements as merely vehicles for

Evan Osnos '98, *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$27)

enhanced Communist Party power, and evidence of the ongoing subordination of the citizen to the state.

But in his beautifully written *Age of Ambition: Chasing Fortune, Truth, and Faith in the New China*, Evan Osnos '98 provides a strikingly different and decidedly more nuanced account. Osnos, a Beijing-based journalist from 2005 to 2013, and a staff writer for *The New Yorker* since 2008, is anything but naïve about Chinese authoritarianism. Over the years he has reported eloquently on individuals who, wittingly or not, found themselves on the receiving end of the most brutal and crude forms of Chinese state oppression: people like currently jailed Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo and the previously imprisoned blind human-rights activist Chen Guangcheng (now living in de facto exile in the United States).

Even in relating these most heart-wrenching accounts, Osnos argues that China's contemporary narrative entails something far more complex than just the crushing of the individual by the state. For Osnos, the situation is in some ways almost the opposite. In his telling, hyperbolic growth has created a sort of national canvas upon which millions of Chinese citizens are feverishly defining their own destinies, and doing so in ways at once wildly diverse and jarringly discordant. From this perspective, the country's "rejuvenation"

The party may control the symphonic melody, but Chinese society follows its own beat.

becomes less about national power and unity of mission than about personal self-transformation, and self-transformation in as many variants as there are Chinese citizens. "The Party," Osnos writes, "had always prided itself on articulating the 'central melody' of Chinese life, but as the years passed, the Party's rendition of that melody seemed increasingly out of tune with the cacophony and improvisation striking up all around it." China, in his words, is now a "chorus of soloists," a vessel not for a single collective dream, but for many different individual dreams—few of which fit neatly into a single box, and many of which are in tension with one another. Indeed, as he argues, perhaps the only thing unifying them is the raw, absolutely unbridled ambition with which they are pursued.

Followers of the contemporary Chinese scene will meet some familiar characters in *Age of Ambition*: world-renowned dissident artist Ai Weiwei, former World Bank chief economist Justin Lin, Internet blogger-cum-race-car-driver Han Han, journalist Hu Shuli, and the aforementioned Liu Xiaobo and Chen Guangcheng. Public figures one and all, some achieved fame by resisting the Chinese state, others by accommodating it.

But the most compelling accounts in *Age of Ambition* involve neither politics nor fame, but instead the extraordinary experiences of absolutely ordinary citizens. One, appearing early in the book, involves "Michael" Zhang, a coal-miner's son determined to realize a fortune by inventing a new approach to English study. "Inventing" is perhaps too strong a word, for what Michael really was doing was copying (and hoping to one-up) the "Crazy English" model made famous in China by Li Yang, a hugely successful businessman who used language training as a platform for Oprah-like self-help sessions (for paying participants) and bountiful wealth generation (for himself). Whether Michael can prove successful with his own version is anybody's guess. That he still lives in his parents' ramshackle apartment, and appears armed only with an endless stream of aphorisms ("The past does not equal the future." "Believe in yourself." "Create Miracles.") does not bode well. But it is the sheer ambition of it all—the unwavering determination to strive for the seemingly unachievable, and the continual bouncing back despite failure after failure—that is at once mind-boggling and

familiar to anybody who has spent time in contemporary China.

An equally compelling account of Beijing street sweeper Qi Xiangfu appears at the very end of the book. In urban China, few jobs rank lower than his. Dressed in his orange overalls and speaking the Southern-inflected Mandarin that instantly marks him as an outsider, Qi is on one level indistinguishable from any number of migrants who perform this lousiest of jobs in the nation's capital. To the average Beijing resident, he

China—both a Communist Party state and a consumer society (as in this holiday street scene in Guangzhou)—is also the setting for a billion-plus citizens' pursuit of their own dreams.



would hardly be worth a moment's attention. Yet, as it turns out, this lowly street sweeper happens also to be a poet—not just the self-described kind, but one who has attained widespread renown as host of an online poetry forum and winner of various poetry competitions. Street sweeper by day, “Super King of Chinese Couplets” by night, Qi has achieved self-actualization in the very domain that outsiders tend to associate only with state suppression and censorship, the Chinese internet.

In *Age of Ambition*, Evan Osnos is careful to let people like Qi carry the narrative. Rather than forcing a single interpretation upon the reader, he offers many different possibilities, acknowledging just how hard it is even for the Chinese themselves to understand what's going on in their contemporary environment.

But among the many themes and insights that make *Age of Ambition* such an absolute must-read, one in particular gives pause for thought. As so many of Osnos's profiles underscore, there is so much more to China today than the politics. Of course, the Chinese government, as it strives to drown out discordant voices with political hokum and its own official orthodoxy, would have us think otherwise. And foreign observers, too (albeit in a very different manner), would have us think otherwise as they project onto these discordant voices political motivations having more to do with the yearnings of the West than anything actually going on in China.

What Osnos relates with such clarity, however, is that among the myriad acts of self-transformation unfolding in China today, many—including those of Qi Xiangfu or Michael Zhang—display utter indifference toward the state, the Communist Party, and every other official articulator of the “Chinese Dream.” The party state may control the symphonic melody, but Chinese society is grooving to a decidedly different beat. Today's China is less martial music than Miles Davis. And that, in a sense, is why the possibilities for China's rise truly are bound only by the limits of human imagination...or ambition. ▢

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Rhode Island Blues

Fiction that paints a regional subculture with “merciless realism.”

by CRAIG LAMBERT

FURTIVENESS, denial, and pugnacious, abrasive families permeate the dark stories of Jean McGarry '70. The Providence, Rhode Island, native has set down an unblinking account of the blue-collar Irish of that state. “It’s a clannish culture,” she says—and one that likes to turn inward on itself, not outward. After reading her first short-story collection, *Airs of Providence* (1985), her parents were furious. “You know, Jean, *we keep our secrets*,” raged her father, Frank.

Indeed they do. “When we turned the lights on in our house, we would rush to pull down the blinds so people couldn’t see in,” McGarry says. “There was a terror of being observed. Whatever was inside the house was supposed to be perfect—though actually it was a shambles. The houses were a mess, physically and otherwise. One thing I’ve written about is what goes on inside the house.”

For example, this, from “And the Little One Said,” published last year in *The Yale Review*: “Dad died of the usual causes: drinking, heart trouble, diabetes, cancer, and the war, where—although a supply sergeant—he lost an eye and his left thumb. He wouldn’t talk about it, so there had to be a story and no glory, as we liked to say about anything that went wrong. Not that we said it to his

face. He had a bad temper, and kept the strap looped over the kitchen door, and we learned to run like rabbits...the one who really pulled his chain was Mom, but she was a sprinter in school, and first up the stairs and into the bathroom, door locked.”

Soon: “Dad was dead one week, and his old mother living with us, as she’d always wanted to.... She’d left the cemetery early, jumped into a cab and whipped past the Y to get her bag. When we got home, eyes dripping and snotty noses, she was installed, and stirring Ritz crackers into a cup of warm milk.... It was one bully taking over for another in a single day.”

Six of McGarry’s eight books—which include three novels and five short-story collections—have rendered this Rhode Island subculture with merciless realism. (Nearly all the books come from the press at Johns Hopkins, where McGarry is a longtime professor and co-chair of the Writing Seminars.) Though other authors (like John Casey ’61, LL.B. ’65, in his 1989 novel *Spartina*, winner of the National Book Award) have depicted Rhode Island culture in pitch-perfect detail, McGarry may have painted the most evocative portrait of how the common people live in the

Federal Hill in Providence, Rhode Island, today, with its Roman Catholic churches