

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

Jean McGarry



nation's smallest state.

"Even in 1966, at Regis College, a Catholic school [from which McGarry transferred to Harvard], my past felt like I had lived in the Middle Ages," she says. "At Harvard in the late '60s, it became the Dark Ages. Nothing I've encountered later in life was anything like it, nor would anyone believe such a *shtetl*-like world existed in the United States as late as mid century."

In that world, "natives find no need, for the most part, to leave the state—even to go to Cape Cod," she explains. "The population, largely Irish and Italian Catholic, dominate everything in a uniquely ward-heeling and who-do-you-know-in-city-hall kind of way. The first five major industries from the early Industrial Age—like Brown & Sharpe, New England Butt—were still there in my lifetime, and my extended family worked in all of them. Generations attended the same Catholic schools, were waked at the same funeral homes, and interred in the same cemeteries."

The Irish proletariat of McGarry's tales often feels "demeaned and worthless, yet somewhat proud," she says. "They are always scanning for the insult." She recalls that as a child, "I heard so much abuse, it became a kind of music. It's a really lively language." There's abundant drinking in her stories, though it mostly happens offstage, in references to bottles hidden around the house, or the six-pack an older man's wife brings him each day; the reader can imagine the effects on daily life. Ironclad hierarchies, like those of the church—"Jesuits on top of the heap, Franciscans and Dominicans a few

steps below"—organize everything. Even crockery was stratified, with Belleek porcelain from Ireland representing "the Holy Grail, the great prize." It's all "a gift for a fiction writer," the author says. "Fiction needs organized worlds."

Though so firmly rooted in place, many of McGarry's characters seem adrift in every

other way—in their intimate and family relationships, their emotions, their values and habits, and even, despite the looming presence of the Catholic church, in their spiritual lives. They appear condemned to their rigid, beaten-down patterns, and seem to lack the imagination to conceive an alternative. Even so, their love for each other seeps out through cracks in their souls, expressed indirectly in actions like lovingly tending a gravesite.

Take the quiet story "Providence, 1954: Watch," which tracks the last hours of a dying man who looks out the window from his bed on a wet Halloween day, still absorbed in dramas like a poignant moment when the rain causes a child's trick-or-treat bag to give way, dumping his candy on the ground. Around 4:30 in the afternoon he breathes his last, his wife sitting nearby in a rocking chair. The story ends with her thoughts as she watches him in his bed: "There was no room in there for her, but more than she expected, or would ever say or think about again, she wanted to climb in there with him. That was the doorbell, but in an hour or so when it would be so dark you didn't know who or what you were getting, she was just going to sit and let it ring."

Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Robert Rosenberg hopes for an original source for a story about two patients so frustrated by their psychiatrist's silence in response to whatever they said that they conspired to get a rise out of him. They made up an elaborate dream full of bizarre details and memorized it word for word. The first patient recounted the dream to the psychiatrist on Monday and, as expected, received no response. The second patient reported the dream on Wednesday, again eliciting no response—until the very end of the hour, when the psychiatrist said offhandedly, "Funny thing about that dream of yours: it's the third time I've heard it this week."

Ransford Pyle wants to learn who said (as best he recalls it), "I'll pretend I'm teaching if you'll pretend you're learning."

"fighting cancer with telepathy" (May-June). Paul Bickart proposed Norman

Spinrad's "Carcinoma Angels," and Lark-Aeryn Speyer suggested "Night Win," by Nancy Kress, but the story sought has not yet been identified.

"This machine surrounds hate" (May-June). Ed Levin and David Feurzeig were the first to point out Pete Seeger's debt to Woody Guthrie, whose guitar face carried the message "This Machine Kills Fascists" as he performed at bond drives during World War II. Elizabeth Segal found a January 29, 2010, *New York Times* article about Seeger's short-lived plan to auction off his banjo head for charity; it stated that the "well-worn face of Mr. Seeger's banjo had been with him for more than 30 years."

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