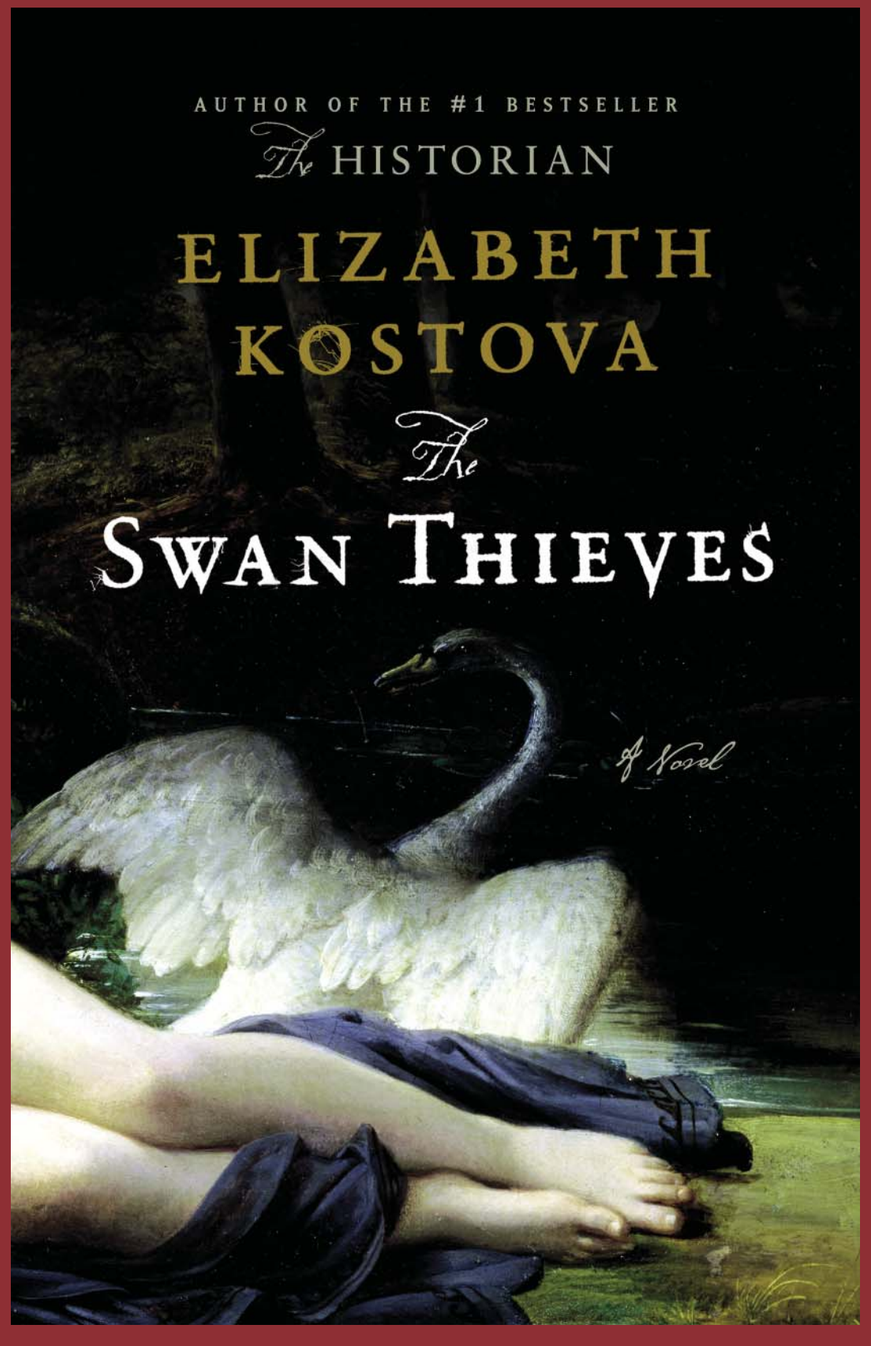
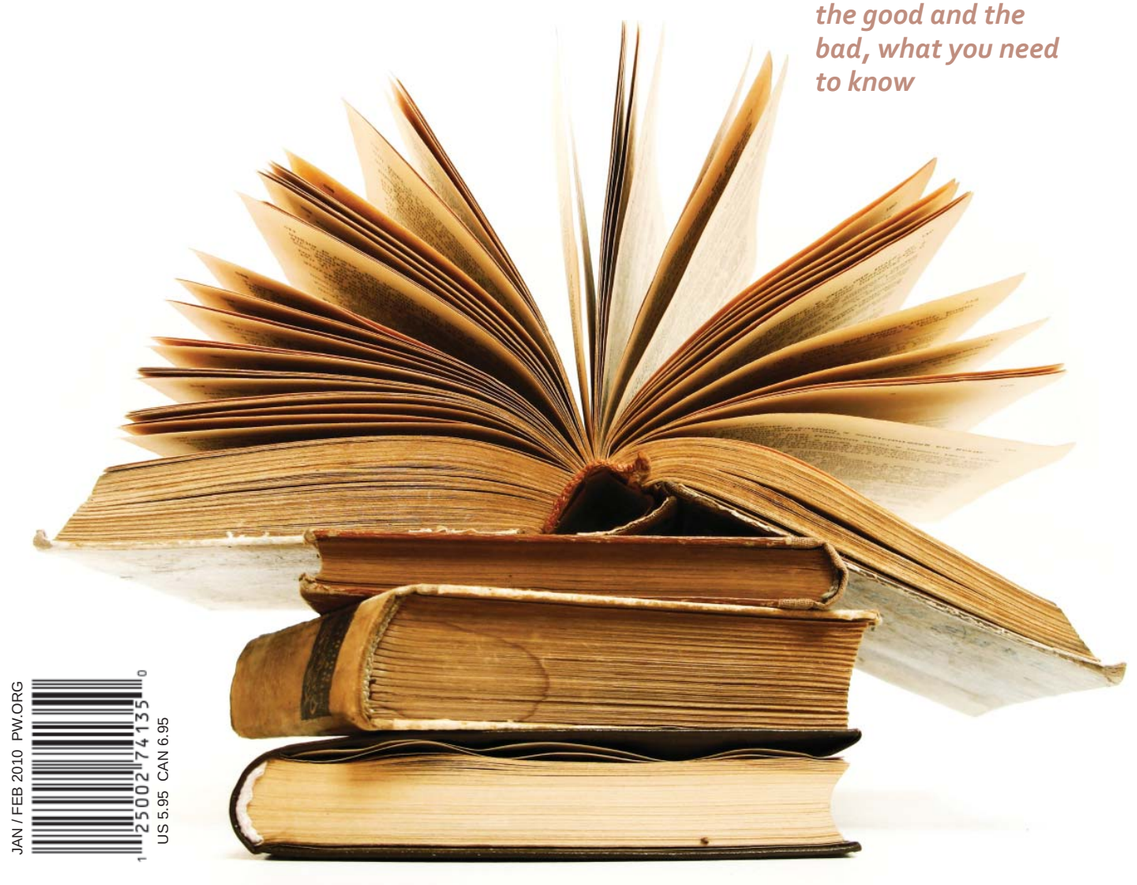


poets & writers
from inspiration to publication

LITERARY AGENTS

the good and the bad, what you need to know



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25 **MOST INSPIRING Authors in the World**

INSIDE Indie Books

THE WORLD WIDE WEB

poets & writers

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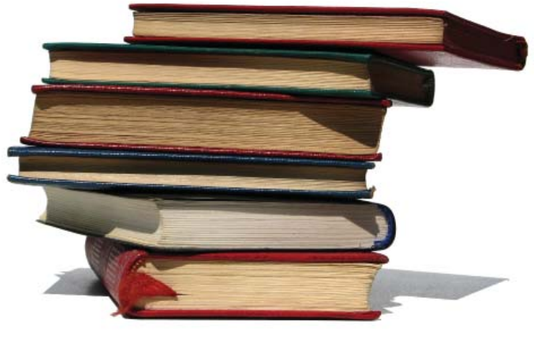


Dave Eggers
From A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius to McSweeney's to 826 National to Where the Wild Things Are. He might just be the hardest-working writer in publishing.

Lawrence Ferlinghetti
The last Bohemian. A cofounder of City Lights Bookstore. Publisher of Allen Ginsberg's Howl—and defendant in the obscenity trial that ensued. Author of A Coney Island of the Mind. His audience treats him like a rock star. Because he is one.

Donald Hall
The image of the eighty-one-year-old on the cover of Unpacking the Boxes: A Memoir of a Life in Poetry pretty much says it all.

Brenda Hillman
Reminds us that the language we use when ordering a sandwich is also the language we use to make art. Her environmental concerns prove writers can offer more than just aesthetic pleasure.

Duong Thu Huong
A former member of the Vietnamese Communist Party, Duong, especially in No Man's Land, reassures us that beauty tends to be oblivious to the threats of thugs.

Philip Levine
He conveys and memorializes the struggles of the American working class in a way that is authentic, heartfelt, and all too rare in contemporary poetry.

Jill Magi
Her grassroots efforts to build community through a micropublishing model prove that you don't need a lot of money to make an impact.

Gabriel García Márquez
He makes the most magical of circumstances believable. And this nonsense that he's finished with writing? Don't believe it.

Pat Mora
The feminist poet and founder of Día de los Niños/Día de los Libros is also an energetic advocate in the bilingual community.

Toni Morrison
A portrait of strength and beauty, the 1993 Nobel laureate writes utterly compelling novels about the whole arc of American experience.

Barack Obama
Let's never forget that our first African American president is also a best-selling author.

Reynolds Price
The Southern poet, novelist, and memoirist has done some of his best work after becoming a paraplegic following surgery in the 1980s to remove a spinal cord tumor.

Marilynne Robinson
She proves that great art takes time. With the publication of Gilead, we were reminded that twenty-four years isn't too long to wait for a novel.

Benjamin Alire Sáenz
His novels contain heartbreakingly honest and unsentimental portraits of people struggling with such traumas as alcoholism and sexual molestation.

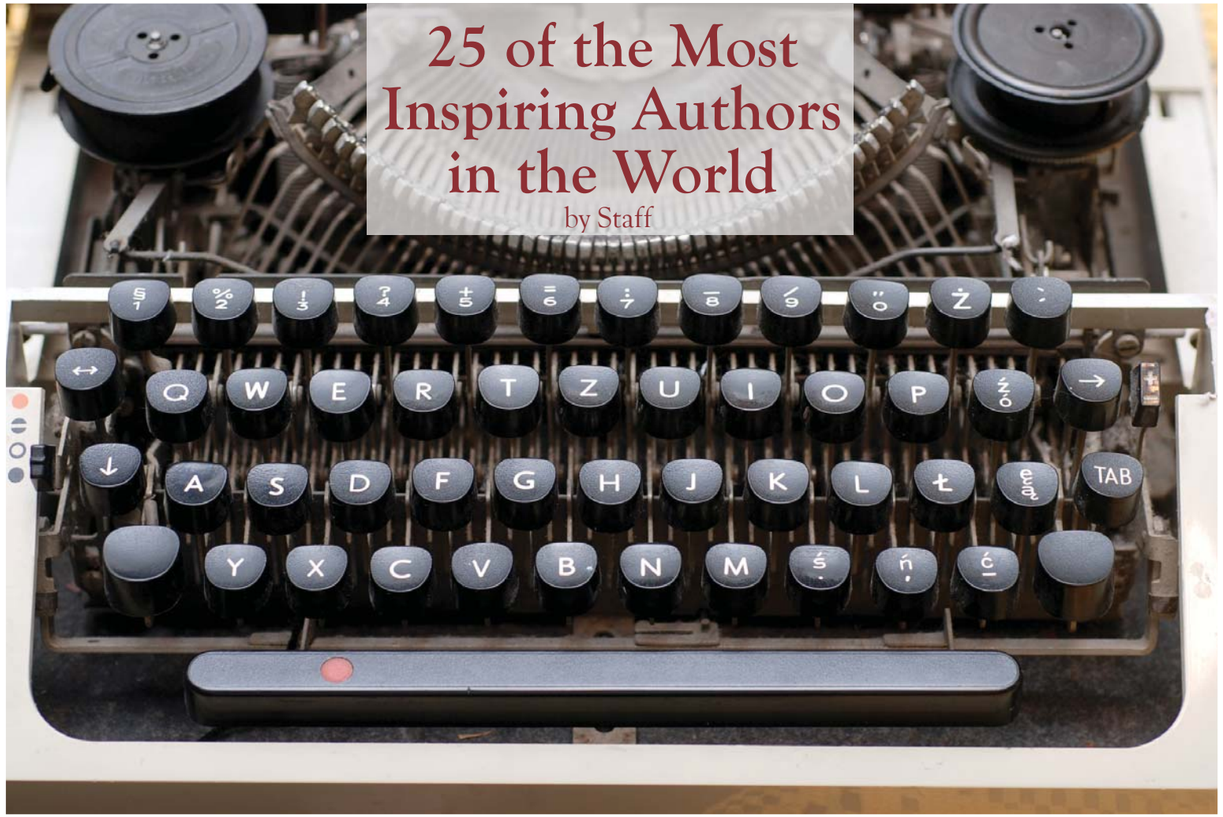
Wisława Szymborska
The most famous living poet in Poland proves that quality is more important than quantity. The eighty-six-year-old Nobel laureate has published no more than 250 poems.

Elie Wiesel
"I was the accuser, God the accused. My eyes were open and I was alone—terribly alone in a world without God and without man." —from the Nobel Peace Prize winner's memoir Night.

C. D. Wright
She's a true original, who manages to be odd, beautiful, tough as nails, and wonderfully inventive all in the same poetic line.

Authors who would have made the list had we compiled it a little over a year ago:

Jim Carroll, Frank McCourt, Reginald Shepherd, John Updike, David Foster Wallace.



25 of the Most Inspiring Authors in the World

by Staff

Fearless, inventive, persistent, beautiful, or just plain badass—here are some of the living authors who shake us awake, challenge our ideas of who we are, embolden our actions, and, above all,inspire us to live life more fully and creatively.

Chinua Achebe
The best-selling Nigerian novelist sets universal tales of personal and moral struggle in the context of the tragic drama of colonization.

Uwem Akpan
His is the perfect story line: Jesuit priest from Nigeria becomes a best-selling, Oprah-chosen author. "I was inspired to write by the people who sit around my village church to share palm wine after Sunday Mass, by the Bible, and by the humor and endurance of the poor," he writes on his Web site.

Aharon Appelfeld
As William Giraldi wrote, he is "a man for whom language is dangerous, a man who measures every word because every word is sacred."

John Ashbery
One of the best and most enduring poets that this country is lucky enough to have. Period.

T. C. Boyle
He's like Santa Claus, only thinner. You can count on a damn good book of fiction under the tree every year.

Anne Carson
She was bending genres like silly straws long before it was fashionable or commercially successful to do so. Plus, she's probably the smartest author we know.

Katherine Dunn
It's been more than twenty years since she introduced us to Arturo the Aquaboy, Ephy and Elly the twins, and Oly the albino hunchback, but we'll gladly wait another twenty for anything approaching the genius of Geek Love.

Cornelius Eady and Toi Derricotte
Two poets, two words: Cave Canem. The fact that they have eleven poetry collections between them is icing on the cake.

poets & writers

POETS & WRITERS MAGAZINE
VOLUME 38 ISSUE 1
JANUARY/ FEBUARY 2010

departments

features

THE WORLD WIDE WEB

By Alex Dimitrov

Before it was possible to read a novel on a Kindle, before there were text messages and Twitter, Gertrude Stein said, "I like the feeling of words doing as they want to do and as they have to do. As innovative as Stein was, it might have been hard for her to imagine today's digital landscape of language where words are invented, reinvented, sometimes recovered or fragmented, and made alive to the culture—and the growing number of online dictionary and language sites, such as Urban Dictionary, Save the Words, and the recently launched Wordnik.

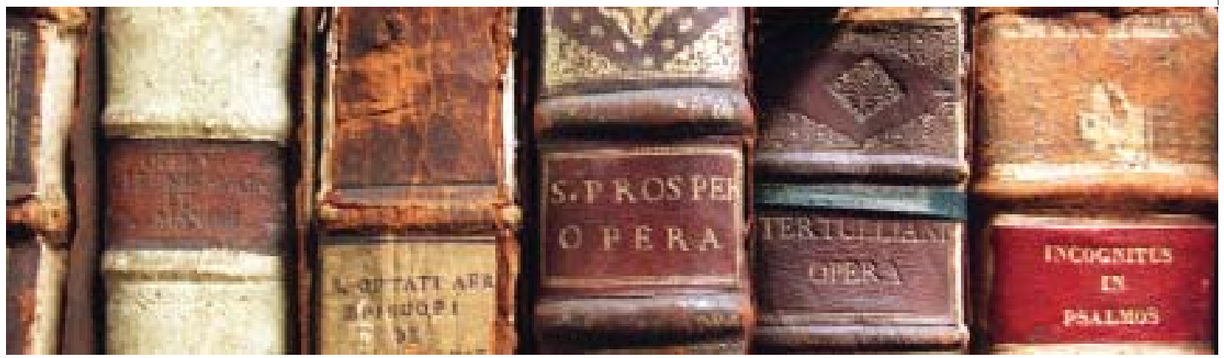
Founded in 2008 by Erin McKean, former editor in chief of American dictionaries at Oxford University Press, Wordnik, which went live last June, enhances the traditional dictionary experience by allowing anyone interested in the meaning of words to participate in their definition. To supplement Wordnik's catalogue of words pulled from six different dictionaries and thesauri, including The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language and The Century Dictionary, language enthusiasts can make suggestions for the inclusion of any word among the thousands that are omitted from print resources each year due to space limitations—and even submit invented words for consideration.

In addition to definitions, Wordnik offers users a wealth of unique data, including information about how a word is being tweeted, examples of related words that often appear in its context, and its value in Scrabble points. Like Thinkmap's Visual Thesaurus, another interactive online resource, which creates word maps, Wordnik uses visual elements to offer users innovative ways to conceive of language. Many definitions feature images from Flickr, Yahoo's photo-sharing site, that show how words are used in tags and captions, and also display charts that show how often the word has been used over time.

> "We think of Wordnik as part of a language community," says McKean.

"And we want to draw [from] sites that aren't thought of as 'language sites'—like Twitter and Flickr. Wordnik's job is to help you sort through everything to find the information about a word that's most relevant to you."

Wordnik has collected more than four billion words of text from Web pages, books, magazines, and



they're any good they're off the record. You get a lot of that in this business; it's a small world. At the end of one of her stories she goes back on the record, so I can give you the kicker: "I told the editor, 'I see what's happening. This book is really, really wonderful, and it's absolutely, presold, dead, and the only person who doesn't know it is the author. And that is the saddest thing in the world.'"

The story in question was about a major editor at a major house who is also majorly ambitious. This means that he can be majorly ruthless when he needs to be. Writers don't know this before they go into business with him. Molly knows it, but she sold him two of this author's books anyway. Sometimes you don't have much choice. Anyway, after the first book tanked, the second one never had a prayer, even if the writer never knew it. Molly knew it. She knew it when she tried to get a meeting before publication to talk about marketing and promotion and they wouldn't give her one. This meant there wasn't going to be any marketing or promotion.

I wasn't aware that this kind of thing happened to Molly. Molly represents a lot of famous writers, and a lot of commercial writers, and I would think that gives her leverage. When I ask Molly if she considered flexing her muscles—reminding this major editor that she doesn't have to keep submitting her major manuscripts to him she is aghast. "Stop submitting to ********? I couldn't stop submitting to a major house like ********." When I express my surprise, Molly adds, "It takes years and years and years to build really reliable relationships, where you feel, 95 percent of the time, that you have the ear of that publishing house. That's really what you're doing when you fight on behalf of an author. It's building relationships over time." But even Molly is not immune to shoddy treatment on occasion. No agent is.

The other thing that Molly wants to talk about, while we're on the subject of the sticky, messy, and unwholesome things that happen on the road to publication, is how routinely authors are being orphaned by their editors these days. Sometimes this is because the editor who acquired the book leaves for a better job, and sometimes it's because the editor is fired or laid off. Molly says that half of her authors have editors whom they inherited. Molly says that this is really, really saying something, and Molly is right. "It takes a lot of finessing to make sure the new editor has half the emotional investment of the editor who bought the book," she says. For starters, the new editor is overwhelmed with all the other books she's inherited from the editor who left. "It requires the finessing of an eighteenth-century Viennese diplomat. You can't start yelling. You have to keep the process moving along without alienating the new editor." Instead of raising hell, Molly tells the new editor, "'I know you've just inherited fourteen new books. I know you have your own list. I also know you have no assistant and that you're overworked and underpaid in the extreme. But I want you to long to do business with me. Please take my author's book and put it on the top of the pile.'"

I'm sorry to tell you that this isn't how every agent handles these situations. One editor told me a story about a prominent agent who reaches for the stick instead of the carrot. "By the time I inherited the book," she said, "the agent was already mad. I've never gotten a phone call from her that hasn't been hostile. Which really doesn't help or make me want to do more for the book. It makes me not want to deal with it at all."

Molly doesn't understand that strategy. She doesn't think it works and she doesn't think it's good business. She thinks it's important to be known as a friend to the entire publishing community—the assistants, the publicists, the rights people, the royalty people—that is going to be taking care of her books. She thinks the agents who get on the phone and scream at people have dropped the ball themselves. "They haven't really done much. They haven't really paid attention. They haven't really been working all along on behalf of their clients." As usual, Molly is right.

Necessary Agent

by Jofie Ferrari-Adler

This is a story about literary agents. It's a story about good literary agents and bad literary agents and, more specifically, it's a story about the tireless, often intangible work that good literary agents perform for their clients during the period after the contract is signed but before the book is published. Before the story can begin, however, I need to explain something about book editors: We have almost no power.

Let me hasten to add that if your editor's title is publisher, editorial director, or editor in chief, this truth doesn't apply. But if she doesn't have any of those titles—and most editors do not—I'm here to tell you that your editor is one of the least powerful people she knows. You probably already know that she needed the go-ahead from several of her colleagues who work in the sales, marketing, and publicity departments, not to mention the aforementioned publisher, editorial director, and editor in chief, to buy your book in the first place. What you may not realize is that in the twelve months before your book is published, that same team of people will make a series of decisions about the promotional money and energy it will receive relative to the other books on the same list; decisions that could ultimately have far more impact on your book's success or failure than anything your editor will ever be able to do. In fact, your editor probably won't even be invited to the meetings at which those decisions are made. This is not because she is disliked by her colleagues. It's not because she is bad at her job. On the contrary, it's because if she is any good at her job she is a fiercely loyal advocate for each and every one of her books. She nurtures them, protects them, and is as deeply invested in their well-being as any mother. She doesn't want to see any of them held back by vulgar fiscal considerations. She wants them all to be lavished with attention and praise—and promotional dollars. Which is precisely why she can't be trusted to make objective business decisions about their potential.

This is where a good literary agent comes in. An agent who understands that at a time when there is an industry-wide blockbuster mentality that makes it harder than it's ever been for editors to find the institutional support it takes to publish serious work well, it is more important than ever for agents to be fearless, savvy, and relentless advocates for their clients after their books are under contract. An agent who understands that the long and winding road to publication is fraught with trouble, and that her role has evolved into a symbiotic partnership with your editor. An agent who understands that in today's publishing industry, your editor needs her constant presence and support needling, brainstorming, cajoling, and sometimes even harassing. An agent who understands, in short, that your editor needs her help.

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"There are a lot of really sticky, messy, unwholesome situations that require the beady eye of an agent—not so much working with authors but working on the inside of the publishing track."

It's a sleepy afternoon in the spring and Molly Friedrich and I are talking on the phone. The first thing you need to know about Molly Friedrich is that she has the greatest voice of any literary agent who has ever lived. As you might imagine, Molly is very, very good at talking on the phone. To be honest, part of the reason I wanted to write this article was to have an excuse to talk to Molly on the phone. I work at an independent publishing house and don't hear from Molly as much as I'd like to.

Molly is telling me stories about the many different kinds of advocacy she has to perform on the road to publication she loves it, let's not kid ourselves—when a sticky, messy, or unwholesome situation arises with one of her clients. Molly has made deals for fifteen million dollars and three thousand dollars and everything in between. She says that if you get more than a million for your book ("let's say eight hundred thousand if you want to adjust for deflation") you can usually count on having the full attention of your publisher. So Molly is telling me stories that apply to the other 99 percent of authors. Unfortunately, I can't tell you most of them because if

"The Transcendence of the Ego" by Derrick Tyson, one of the images Wordnik uses to illustrate the word inspiration.

newspapers, which it uses to provide example sentences, audio pronunciations (users are also encouraged to record their own), and statistics on a word's frequency of use. "People need reference works that are dynamic," explains McKean. "Nobody can wait eighteen months just to get a rough idea of what a word means—you want that now," she adds, referring to her estimate of the average amount of time it takes a new word to make its way into a print dictionary. "You can't wait until a word 'settles down.' You have to show as much data as you can and let users draw their own conclusions."

When asked about her favorite word submitted by a Wordnik user, McKean says she's fond of awesomepants. "Yesterday I found the word quap," she continues, "which is a kind of obscure Italian fish, as far as I can tell." For users wanting a fresh verbal fix, McKean suggests hitting the Random Word button, which she calls "ridiculously addictive. You never know what's going to come up!"

Part of Wordnik's mission is to chronicle the evolution of language, to "show you what people actually do with language, not what we'd like them to do." What people are actually doing with language is also at the heart of Urban Dictionary, an online home for any word with an edge. Started by Aaron Peckham in 1999, the site, whose slogan is "Define Your World," is devoted to slang, catchphrases, and various cultural expressions. "I think Urban Dictionary can be useful because language changes so quickly," says Peckham. "It also doesn't try to be impartial—the definitions are full of opinions and biases. Each word can be defined multiple times."

While it seems there is no lack of linguistic imagination among English speakers, according to the publishers of the Oxford dictionaries, 90 percent of everything written today is communicated using only seven thousand words. That's a little over 4 percent of the 171,476 English words that have full entries in the second edition of the OED—and that figure doesn't include 47,156 obsolete words also included in the edition. In an effort to breathe new life into outmoded words, Oxford Fajar, a subsidiary of Oxford University Press, launched its own linguistic stimulation project: the Save the Words campaign, which allows anyone to "adopt" one or more words that have fallen out of popular usage. On the project's Web site (savethewords.org), users can subscribe to a word-a-day e-mail list, get tips on how to incorporate words like nidifice (nest) into their next work meeting, and create custom T-shirts with their adopted word.

The new online dictionaries and language sites demonstrate a twenty-first-century approach to defining our vocabulary—one that involves direct participation from all the builders and users of language. As popular modes of communication such as text messages and Twitter posts invite more abbreviations, spelling inconsistencies, and slapdash usage, sites like Wordnik are attempting to explore the nuances of language more fully. To use one of the examples from Save the Words, contributors to such endeavors could be considered isangelous—meaning equal to the angels.

Alex Dimitrov is the awards coordinator of the Academy of American Poets. He is also the founder of Wilde Boys, a queer poetry salon in New York City.

WHY WE WRITE

THE ART OF PERSERVERANCE

By Cecilia Ward Jones

Recently a friend inquired, as friends so often do, about what I was up to. "I am still and forever editing my novel," I said. To which she replied, "But that's like a hobby, right? Your writing. Since you don't publish."

I'm not published, ergo I'm not a writer? Her comment (and she was hardly the first to express such skepticism) and the years of submitting my work without any acceptances put the subject of writing-and, perhapsmore important, why I keep at it-soundly in front of me. If I don't get published, why do i do it? It's a good question, and in order to answer it, I first have to ask myself the underlying question, What led me to writing?

I'm Texan-bred, born, and raised-and when I was nine years old I went on a required summer visit to my grandparents' ranch, in Gonzales County. There was nothing to do. Nothing. There were no horses, at least none I was allowed to ride; no swimming hole; and only intermittent television reception. I was bored-and hot. I whined to my grandmother, who took me by my wrist, quick-marched me into the depths of the formal dining room where they kept Imortant Things Not to Be Touched by Children, pulled a book off the shelf, handed it to me , and said, "Read this."

It was an edition of Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women* published by the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Beatifully bound. Illustrations like fine paintings. I took the book out to the screened-in front porch, settled onto the glider, and with one set of bare toes on the concrete floor to push me and the other tucked under me, I began to read. I was transported from the high-cotton heat of deep Texas to a snowy New England winter. I read about a family about as different from mine as one could get and still be in America. I fell in love with Jo and her chosen profession, and by that evening I was determined to be a writer too.

Now if this was a fairy tale, I would've gone back to my little backwater hometown of Uvalde, started writing the very next week, and published my first novel by the age of twenty-one. The reality is I didn't write anything for thirty-seven years. I wanted to write, but I was one of those kids victimized by acedemic structure. My elemantary school was set up for three groups: high achievers, middle B students, and low achievers. I was a writer wannabe, a dreamer, a self-proclaimed actress, and a failure at scholastic achievement tests. In other words, a low achiever. Low achievers weren't offered much academically, certainly nothing as extravagant as creative writing. Yet, I persevered, making it through those low-achieving years and eventually getting into the University of Texas on a theatre scholarship. My higher education didn't last long though; I realized during the first week of college classes that I didn't know didly. I was seriously undereducated.

Instead, I led a life. I got married and, because of my husband's job, ended up in Seattle. The University of Washington had, at the time, a brand-new guidance program for which anyone could sign up and, for $450, be subjected to a battery of tests designed to measure academic proficiency, personality, even coordination. At the end of the testing they'd tell you what careers you were most suited for in the real world. I signed up and crossed my fingers, hoping that they tell me to be a writer and how I should go about doing that, because I didn't have a clue. Instead, they told me I was not academically qualified to go to college (that low-achiever designation again) and that I should sign up for the auto-maintenance class at Seattle Community College or, better yet, apply for a job at the Boeing factory.

Six years of therapy later I was back in Texas to attend to some family business. One afternoon, as I was having my hair done, my stylist told me about one of her clients, a studentat low-recidency BA program at Goddard College in Vermont. It seemed like a program particularly for those students who didn't quite fit in anywhere else.Could they mean low achievers? I

Do you see any collective project happening as a trend in writing right now, in the same way that, say, the modernists were trying to make sense of a new world?
No, but I think there are always different schools in the same way that Updike focused on the suburban married life, and I think other writers operate in certain other niches.

How about southern writers specifically? How are they trying to make sense of what the south looks like right now?
I think Southerners are mostly concerned with just telling a good story.

The tale?
Yeah.

So what is the future for independent bookstores? If their role is curatorial, will they become more like art galleries? Should they have public funding? Or will bookstores become nonprofit entities?
I don't know. I hope not, though. It's a very difficult business. But in many ways, I like the fact that it's a difficult business. Otherwise, people who want to make money—by selling crap—would be trying to get into the book business. [Laughter.]

This store specializes in literature, especially southern literature, as well as books about this region and this place. Do you think that specialization is part of the reason for your success?
I don't really think of it in terms of specializing. I think of it in terms of giving our customers what they want. If Nietzsche had been born here, our philosophy section would probably look a little different. [Laughter.]

So what are bookstores that are succeeding doing right?
Well, I think a lot of it has to do with adaptation. The business's ability to adapt in all kinds of ways to its own market, to be innovative, to not ignore the technological developments and, in some cases, take advantage of them. Thacker Mountain Radio was kind of an innovation.

How did that come to be?
Ever since the bookstore opened, there've always been people coming in wanting to have their art exhibit in the bookstore, or to stage a play, or do a music performance.

So that really meets your vision of a community place.
Yeah, except that I learned fairly early on that you have to make it relate to selling books. You can't just be an all-purpose community center; you've got to make it conform to the mission of selling books and promoting writers and literature. Because I did have art exhibits and it was just sort of a pain. So I kind of got away from that. What happened, then, was two graduate students who had been trying to develop a little kind of a music radio show that wasn't really working at one of the local bars, came and wanted to use Off Square Books as a venue. I told them that I'd done enough of this kind of messing around to know that I wasn't going to do something like that unless it could promote writers. I said, "Maybe if we did a radio show that incorporated both music and writers it could be something." And that's how that got started.

Now that you've finished your two terms as mayor, you're returning to the bookstore full time again. What are you most looking forward to? What did you most miss?
I just missed being here. I missed being around the books, going down to the receiving room and seeing what's come in each day, talking to the customers, knowing which books are coming out, being able to snag an advance reading copy of something that I know I'm gonna be interested in. The whole shooting match. So what I'm doing now is really kind of returning to my roots. I'm just going to be on the floor. I'm not going to resume buying; I'm not going to be doing all the business stuff; I'm not going to go running around to every store trying to control staff schedules and training. I just want to—

Be around the customers and the books.
Yeah. There may come a point when I want to do something else. I don't know. But that's the plan now.

Where would you like to see the store ten years from now? Is there anything you still want to achieve with it?
No. But returning to that whole future of books conversation, one of the things that I should've added has to do with what's happened at Square Books, Jr. We're selling more children's books than ever. The level of enthusiasm and excitement about books from toddlers to first readers to adolescents and teens...if you go in there and hang around for a few hours, you would never even think that there might be such a thing as a digital book.

Jeremiah Chamberlin teaches writing at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is also the associate editor of the online journal Fiction Writers Review.

INSIDE INDIE BOOKSTORES CONTINUED

Savile Bookshop, in Georgetown, for two years. In the fifties and sixties it was a Washington institution. It was a great old store. The founder died about ten years before we arrived. It had been through a series of owners and managers, and by the time we were working there it was on its last leg. It was also at the time that Crown Books was first opening in the Washington suburbs—it was the first sort of chain deep-discounter. The Savile had this reputation as a great store, but it was obviously slipping. We were on credit hold all over the place. So it ended up being a great learning experience.

Then you came back here with the intention of opening Square Books?
Sure. We opened the first store in the upstairs, over what was, I think, the shoe department of Nelson's Department Store. Back then the town square was so much different from what it is today, and commerce was not so terribly vital. It was certainly viable, but the businesses didn't turn over very much because the families that owned the businesses usually owned the buildings. Old Mr. Denton at his furniture store didn't care if he sold a stick of furniture all day; it was just what he did, run his store. So when I came home I knew I wanted to be on the square, and I just couldn't find a place. My aunt owned the building where Nelson's had a long-term lease on the ground floor, but there were three offices upstairs—rented to an insurance agent, a lawyer, and a real estate agent who were paying forty dollars, thirty dollars, and thirty dollars a month, respectively, for a total of a hundred dollars. So my initial rent was a hundred dollars a month.

Did you have a particular vision for this store from the beginning, or did it change over time?
The initial vision is still very much what the store is today. I wanted it to serve the community. Because of Mississippi's distinct history and character, as well as social disruptions, the state—and Oxford, in particular, due to the desegregation of the university in 1962, when there was a riot and two people were killed—was regarded as a place of hatred and bigotry. And I knew that this community was not that. I knew that there were a lot of other people here who viewed the world the same way my family did, and my instinct was that people would support the store not just because they wanted to buy books or wanted a bookstore here, but because they knew—not to overstate it—that a bookstore would send a message. That we're not all illiterate, we're not all…it said something about both the economic and cultural health of the community.

As someone who's spent most of his life in this town, how did you see the place after having been the mayor?
My view of the community is essentially no different from what it was before I was mayor. Except, I would say, I really appreciate all the people who work for the city. A lot of good public servants.

More recently, Willie Morris moved to Oxford in 1980, within a year after we opened the store. He was from Yazoo City, Mississippi. He was the editor of the [University of] Texas student newspaper, and from there got a job with the Texas Observer, where he became editor at a very young age. He was hired by Harper's Magazine to be an editor, and a few years later, in 1967, became its youngest editor in chief. And while at Harper's, he really changed the magazine and was on the ground floor of New Journalism. He published David Halberstam and Larry L. King; he published Norman Mailer's "Armies of the Night" [originally titled "Steps of the Pentagon"], the longest magazine piece ever to have been published; and he published Walker Percy.

He also wrote a book called North Toward Home, which was his autobiography, published in 1967, that kind of dealt with this whole ambivalence of the South and being from here and loving so much about it—stuff about growing up in Yazoo City, and his friends, and his baseball team, and his dog, and his aunt Minnie who lived next door—but also the racism. The murders and the civil rights movement. And he had to get out of the South 'cause he loved it too much and hated so much of everything that was going on.

That sense of conflictedness.
Right, right. The book expressed all that and was a touchstone for a lot of people my age. Then he got fired from or quit Harper's, depending on the story. He got in a fight with the publisher and submitted his resignation, believing that he wouldn't accept it. But he did. [Laughter.] So he continued to write, but none of his subsequent books were quite as big as North Toward Home. And Willie was a big drinker and he had kind of run out of gas in the black hole, which is what he called Manhattan. But Dean Faulkner Wells, William Faulkner's niece, and her husband, Larry, raised money to give Willie a visiting spot here at the university. So he came here that spring as a writer-in-residence. And he immediately befriended us and the bookstore. He said, "Richard, I'm going to bring all these writers, all my friends. I'm going to bring them down here and they're going to do book signings at your store and we're going to have a great time."

looked into the school, but with no way to get myself to Vermont, let alone pay for the program, I shelved the idea.

As fate would have it, a few years later I ended up living for a year in Brattleboro, Vermont, where my daughter was attending the Putney School. As soon as I knew I was going to be in Vermont I applied to Goddard and got in. Apparently they didn't care that I had a reputation as a low achiever beacause I was accepted and assigned to a mentor. She was the first writer i had ever met. I was forty-six years old and had never written anything. Through her guidance I began writing.

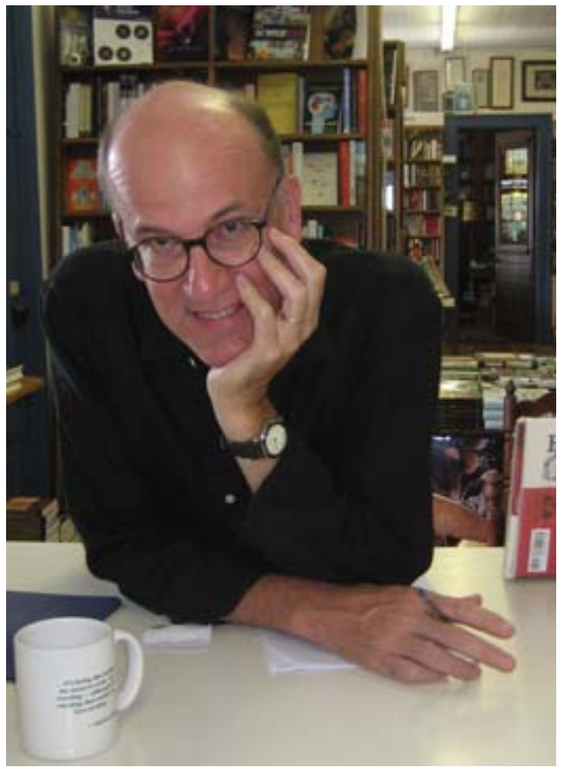
After I getting my undergraduate degree in 2000, I went on to Antioch University Los Angeles in Culver City, California, to get my MFA. Seven years later I remain unpublished. No words in print or online anywhere (until now). In those seven years, I've spent time at the Vermont Studio Center and attended the New York State Writers Institute and the Swanee Writers' Conference. Recently I submitteda portion of my novel to a contest sponsored by the Writers' League of Texas. I won first place in the Suspense catergory and received a ten-minute meeting with an agent from New Y ork City. At the end of our meeting, she requested the full manuscript. (I sent it to her last July, I'm still waiting for a response.) I've been mentored by the slew of great writers who tell me my stories are "excellent," or "You do what I am trying to get my students to do," or, and this is the best yet, " Why haven't I read any of your books?" But none of them have helped me along by introducing me to agents or publishing my stories in their literary magazines, or even giving me suggestions about how to help myself.

By this time a normal person probably would've gone on to other things, but I continue to write. Stubborn? Maybe. But it's what I do. I write. I get up every morning, sit in my computer, and work away. I live in hope that someday an envelope will arrive that doesn't have a rejection slip. And I live in a bigger hope that someday I'll print out the perfect sentence or paragraph or page or story, and someone will read it.

Editors postscript: Not long before this issue went to press, Cecilia Ward Jones informed us she had received her first acceptance.

Inside Indie Bookstores

by Jeremiah Chamberlin



Credit: Jeremiah Chamberlin

Richard Howorth, owner of Square Books.

This is the inaugural installment of Inside Indie Bookstores, a new series of interviews with the entrepreneurs who represent the last link in the chain that connects writers with their intended audience. Once the authors, agents, editors, publishers, and salespeople have finished their jobs, it's up to these stalwarts to get books where they belong: into the hands of readers. News of another landmark bookstore closing its doors has become all too common, so now is the perfect time to shine a brighter light on the institutions that mean so much to the literary community. E-mail us at editor@pw.org to share your thoughts about a favorite indie bookstore.

The first thing customers notice when they enter Square Books—apart from the customary shelves and tables overflowing with hardcovers and paperbacks—is the signed author photographs. There are hundreds of them, occupying nearly every vertical surface not already taken up by bookcases. They cover the walls and trail up the narrow staircase to the second floor, framing windows and reaching all the way to the fourteen-foot-high tongue-and-groove ceiling. Most of the photos are black-and-white publicity shots, the kind publishers send with press kits, but there are also large-format, professional ones—of Larry Brown, Barry Hannah, Richard Ford, and others. Many have that spare yet beautiful quality of something Eudora Welty might have taken. Collectively, they comprise an archeological record of this place's luminous history—all the authors have passed through these doors—as well as a document of the important role that this particular institution has had in promoting writers and writing.

Richard Howorth, the store's owner, would modestly deny having had a hand in any of the number of literary careers that have sprung from the fertile soil in this part of the country, but the honest truth is that Square Books has served as a nurturing place for writers—as a "sanctuary," to borrow a word from William Faulkner, another Oxford native—for more than thirty years now. He and his wife, Lisa, opened the first store in 1979. Seven years later they moved into their current location, formerly the Blaylock Drug Store, after buying the building. Since then, they've opened two other shops: in 1993, Off Square Books, which specializes in used books, remainders, and rare books and serves as the venue for store events and the Thacker Mountain Radio program; and, in 2003, Square Books, Jr., a children's bookstore. Howorth also helped establish the Oxford Conference for the Book, which brings together writers, editors, and other representatives from the publishing world each spring for public readings, roundtables, and panel discussions on writing and literacy. This year, as part of the seventeenth annual event, the conference will celebrate the legacy of Barry Hannah.

Square Books in Oxford , Mississippi

I made my first literary pilgrimage to Oxford nearly a decade ago. At the time, I was running Canterbury Booksellers, a small independent bookshop in Madison, Wisconsin. Invariably, whenever authors visited our store, one of the topics we'd end up discussing was where they were headed next or where they'd just been. Square Books was always mentioned as a place they one day hoped to go, were looking forward to going, or couldn't wait to get back to. Partly this has to do with its lineage, for few places can claim to have hosted readings for such varied and important authors as Etheridge Knight, Toni Morrison, Allen Ginsberg, Alice Walker, Alex Haley, George Plimpton, William Styron, Peter Matthiessen, and others. And partly it has to do with the Howorths themselves, who, despite the cliché about Southern hospitality, make all authors feel as if they were the first to visit the store.

This was certainly the case for me. Even though I wasn't reading, and even though I hadn't been back to town in almost ten years, I was welcomed with enormous generosity when I arrived. For two days I was given the grand tour, including a dinner with local writers at the Howorths' house, a walk through Faulkner's home, a trip to the Ole Miss campus to see the bronze statue of James Meredith under a marble archway in which the word courage is carved into the stone, as well as an oral history of what took place in Oxford during the Civil War as we drove through the shady neighborhoods of town.