

HOW ELIOT SPITZER TANKED
ON EDUCATION
Barrett p24

HIP-HOP SAMPLES
SOUTH ASIA
Chadha p48

SUN BURNIN', PAGE TURNIN':
BEACH READS
Books p52

the village

VOICE

HOW THE SUPREME COURT FOLLOWS THE CULTURE

By Sanford Levinson p38

THE NEW MIDDLE GROUND

BOOKS

Sun Burnin', Page Turnin'

VLS BEACH READS

ASHES

By Kenzo Kitataka

Translated by Emi Shimokawa

Vertical, 219 pp., \$23.95

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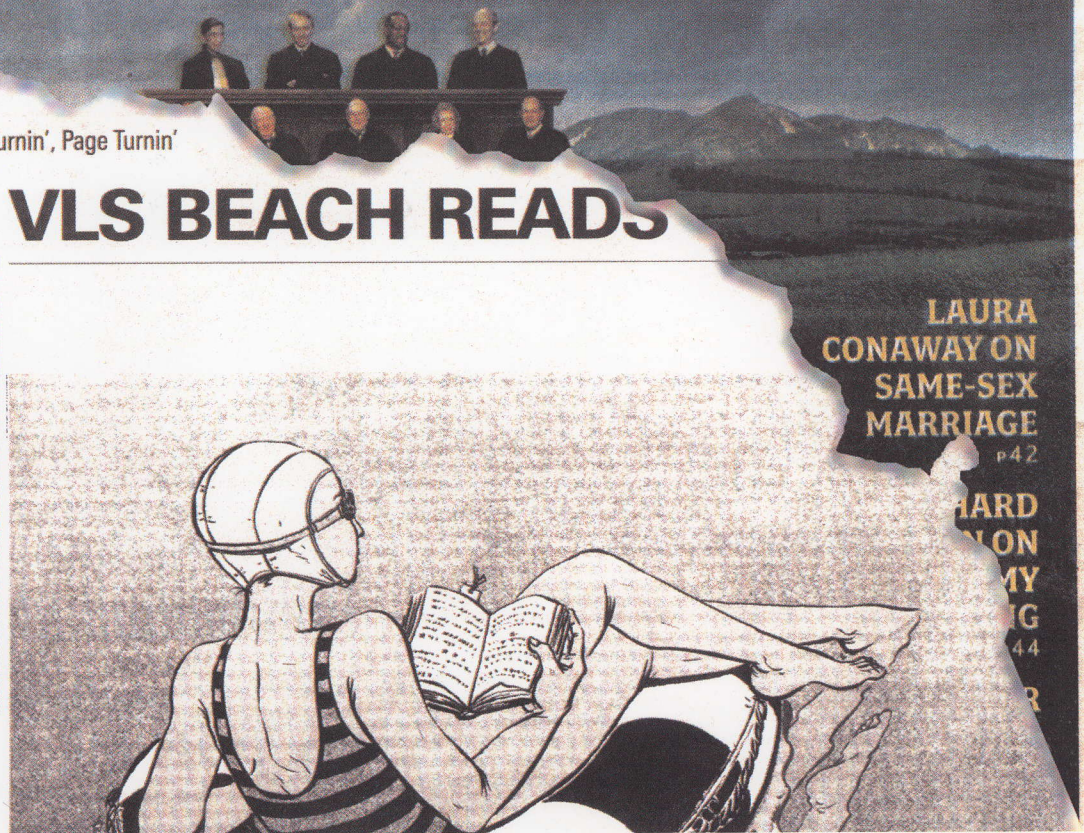
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Laura
CONAWAY ON
SAME-SEX
MARRIAGE

p42

WARD
ON
MY
ING
44



Sun Burnin', Page Turnin'

VLS BEACH READS

Summer's here—at last! Time to pack a picnic basket, sit in traffic, and stake out a few yards on the beach, where you can sip tepid mojitos and fry yourself to a crisp. As a diversion from that unmistakable slow-cook odor, the *Voice* presents enough chess thrillers, plague porn, and Rummie versifying to keep you busy for the next two months. For poolside use, we recommend laminating this page. Then indicate to your servant which title you want by simply pointing with a barbecue drumstick. —Ed Park

LIVERPOOL FANTASY

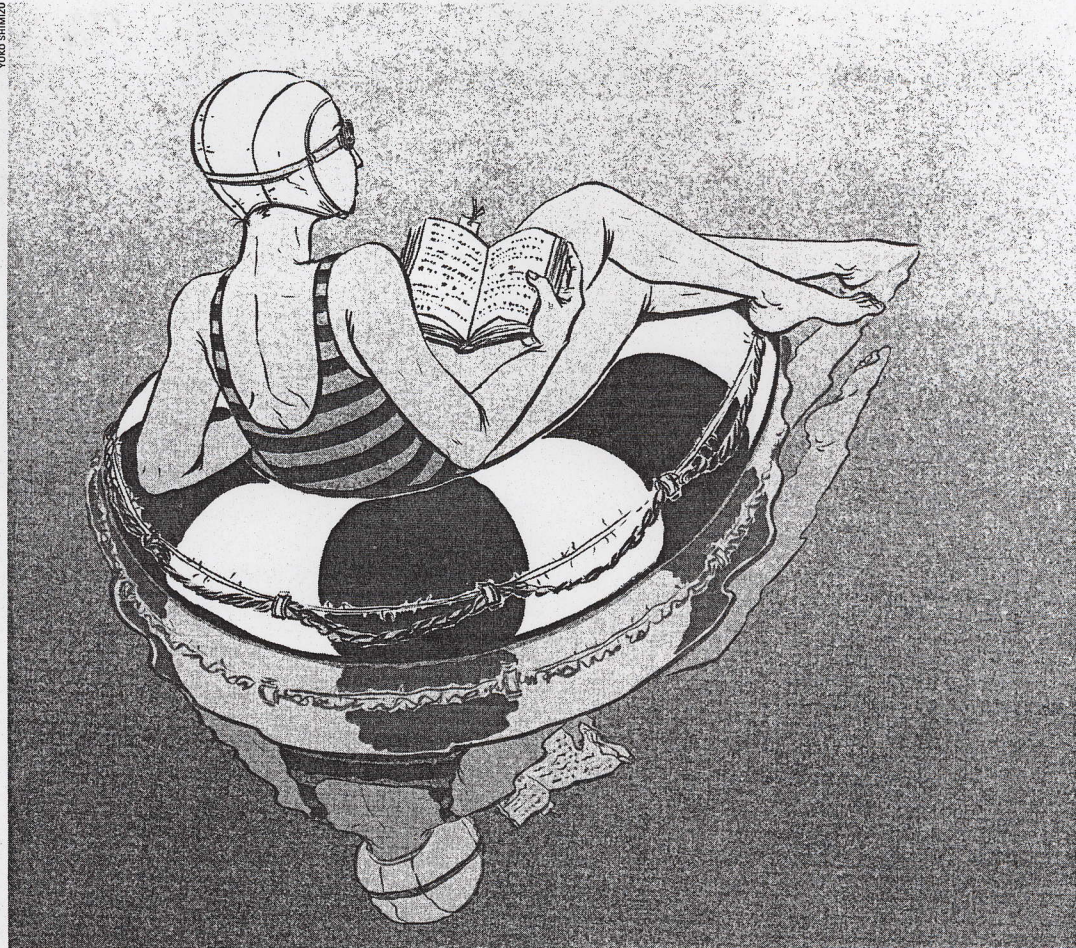
By Larry Kirwan
Thunder's Mouth, 310 pp., \$14.95
Paul croons in Vegas, George is a priest, Ringo loiters while wife Maureen brings in the hair-salon moolah, and John? He's known as "Looney Lennon," on the dole in 1987 Liverpool—the awful epilogue to his heated decision to dissolve the Beatles after "Please Please Me." Subtle as a blunderbuss, Kirwan's alternate history is *The Man in the High Castle* for those who can parse the importance of "How Do You Do It," and he takes such liberties with half-lives which never were that one fears a lawsuit-wielding Yoko materializing on the horizon. With a fine feel for the tactile minutiae of performance and a reckless disregard for Beatlemania piety (halfway through, we learn that Paul's trying to divorce Cher), *Liverpool Fantasy* is more than a clever coda to one's marathon viewing of the recent *Anthology* DVD release: Within its covers, the dead come roaring back to life. —E.P.

A LOVE NOIRE

By Erica Simone Turnipseed
Amistad/HarperCollins, 305 pp., \$19.95
Star-crossed lovers Noire, an artsy Ph.D. candidate with a flair for languages, and Innocent, an investment banker from Côte d'Ivoire, West Africa, meet at a book signing, where the featured author lectures on how to build a strong black nation through diversifying stock portfolios. Despite clashing sensibilities, and a hilarious host of homies and homegirls, whose meddling threatens to derail their romance, Noire and Innocent embark on an amorous odyssey that hits black boho haunts from New Orleans and the South Sea Islands to Paris and Abidjan. Along the way, with deliciously and responsibly rendered love scenes (condoms abound), Turnipseed explores not only the much hyped quest of Gen X brothers and sisters getting, and trying to stay, together amid a growing class divide and collapsing global boundaries, but gay love, bi love, interracial love, and good, old-fashioned self-love. It's an update of poet Nikki Giovanni's '60s lyric: "Black love is Black wealth." —Angela Ards

ORYX AND CRAKE

By Margaret Atwood
Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 376 pp., \$26
In Atwood's first dystopic excursion since *The Handmaid's Tale*, a worldwide plague leaves a lone human holdout (he calls himself Snowman) to play exasperated messiah to a test-tube race of childlike "Crakers" (not unlike H.G. Wells's Eloi). Scenes from the post-doomsday badlands alternate with flashbacks to the



scarcely idyllic buildup, when Snowman is Jimmy, growing up with mad-scientist-to-be Crake in *Brave New World* pharmaceutical colonies (segregated from seedy *Blade Runner* "pleeblands"). Hinging haphazardly on the romantic triangle that emerges when Oryx, the boys' third-world cyberfantasy, materializes as inscrutable temptress, *O&C*'s scenario factorizes down to tidy ironies—the most resonant one in this Genesis 2.0 being that even after religion is genetically eliminated, primitive belief systems regeminate like weeds. The best bits detail the indignities that await the scientifically inept in a Merck-antile future. Jimmy the word-smith wanders the ravaged earth, haunted by the imminent extinction of his vocabulary, all too aware of his morbidly comic role in this cosmic disaster—the copywriter for the apocalypse, condemned to sell the end of the world, and then survive it. —Dennis Lim

THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT

By Walter Tevis
Vintage, 243 pp., \$18
Even pawn-pushing patzers need to read the late Tevis's knuckle-biting wonder, in which eight-year-old Beth Harmon learns chess from the janitor at her Kentucky orphanage and proceeds on a knight's tour into the deepest

ranks of world competition. Tevis shows how the game fills in every gap left by the deprivations of her childhood, and his marvelous blow-by-blow descriptions channel the heat from reams of chess-journal ?s and /s. It's an American rejoinder to Nabokov's *The Defense*, and as in that novel, the excruciatingly focused life of the mind begins to seem like life itself: I move, therefore I am. With intense grace, Tevis finds the art to describe art. —E.P.

TO RUHLEBEN—AND BACK

By Geoffrey Pyke
Collins Library/McSweeney's, 217 pp., \$18
Geoffrey Pyke was a shiftless Cambridge student who, on assignment for a London newspaper in WW I, penetrated Germany's closed borders armed only with a fake passport, a decent command of the language, and a keen eye for personal and national peculiarity. (His eye could be pretty peculiar itself, as with his repeated claim that the standard Prussian "has no back to his head.") Arrested shortly thereafter, Pyke was offered an uncomfortably close look at the systemic rigors of Prussian punishment in a series of prisons, before being transferred to Ruhleben, a racetrack turned makeshift colony for Brits caught in the country after the clampdown. The prankish spirit

that led Pyke to undertake the trip, goaded by "above all things the colossal humour of the idea," finally led him to discover a means of escape. How, I won't tell, except to note that it involved adopting the mentality of French master criminal Arsene Lupin—who Pyke judged to be infinitely more baffling to the German mind than "somewhat bourgeois Englishman" Sherlock Holmes. In the end, the insights into Pyke's own mentality prove as fascinating as his adventure. —B. Kite

LOST IN A GOOD BOOK

By Jasper Fforde
Penguin, 399 pp., \$24.95
In my recipe book *Great British Dishes* (yes, such an animal exists), there is a pudding I would attempt, did it not require such terrifying amounts of Golden Syrup. Until I work up the courage, *Lost in a Good Book* provides all the tooth-numbing sweetness of treacle tart, but likely proves considerably less sticky. This swirl of science fiction, crime novel, and English-major in-jokes follows the adventures of literary detective Thursday Next, last glimpsed in 2002's *The Eyre Affair*. Like the extra fricative in Fforde's name, the book does not stint on lagniappe. Thursday inhabits an overstuffed parallel 1985 in which 19th-

century British novels enjoy totemic power and stratospheric Q ratings. While attempting to rescue her husband from chronological eradication, she must authenticate a copy of Shakespeare's *Cardenio*, protect her pet dodo, Pickwick, and survive the driving habits of Miss Havisham, on loan from *Great Expectations*. Piffle? Absolutely. Meta? Unbearably. Readable? Emphatically. —Alexis Soloski

THE LOCKLEAR LETTERS

By Michael Kun
MacAdam/Cage, 341 pp., \$19.95
This comic semi-epistolary novel, embracing office memos, job queries, florist cards, poetry, and, above all, plaintive letters to Heather Locklear, traces the path of Sid Straw, a middle-aged software salesman whose life collapses over the course of several anxiety-ridden months. This Baltimorean sad-sack begins the chronicle as a groveling, depressive Microserf whose life clearly peaked during his undergrad years at UCLA, where he was classmates but not quite pals with the future *Melrose Place* hottie. Grievously pass-agg and oblivious to his own unctuous neediness, Straw spills his guts to this virtual stranger before a series of disasters forces him to confront his essential aimlessness. If the book's skeletal structure sometimes seems as fleeting as a TV diva's season of fame, its air of droll desperation and sweetly uplifting finale are perfect for those sweltering days when tackling anything more substantial would bring up a sweat. —Mark Holcomb

P.G. WODEHOUSE: IN HIS OWN WORDS

By Barry Day and Tony Ring
Overlook, 300 pp., \$19.95
Comments might not be literature, as Gertie Stein averred, but one might think twice before choosing that *War and Peace* thingummy over this delectable compendium of quotes from Bertie Wooster's creator: Evelyn Waugh dubbed Wodehouse a master who could "produce on average three uniquely brilliant and entirely original similes to every page," and this companion volume to Overlook's laudable reprint project ups even that charmed quota, assembling a breezy bio from books, letters, interviews, and musicals. On the Bard: "Shakespeare's stuff was different from mine, but that is not to say it is inferior." On people with fishy aspects: "He looked like a halibut that has just been asked by another halibut to lend it a couple of quid till next Wednesday." Oh, I say! —E.P.

BRIARPATCH

By Ross Thomas
Minotaur/St. Martin's, 338 pp., \$13.95
This crime mini-epic's two-pronged storyline brings political consultant Benjamin Dill back to his unnamed and beastly hot native city to solve the murder of his detective sister and try to nail a very bad ex-foreign op or two. Thomas, who died in 1996, hard-boils his sentences to perfection ("He stood, staring down, carefully remembering the lies he had told Spivey") and infuses the labyrinthine plot with hair-trigger violence; the noir can get downright lovely, as in this description of police at a funeral, reacting to a sniping: "Dozens of pistols . . . blossomed in big fists." As impressive as the pacing and the body count is the full-scale imagining of the municipal machinery—press, police, plutocrats—that roils in its own obscure greasings. Better get Thomas's newly reissued *Out on a Rim* while you're at it—I predict an addiction. —E.P.

CHASING SHAKESPEARES

By Sarah Smith
Atria, 337 pp., \$24
Inside this Elizabethan mystery hides a graduate thesis. Joe, the Shakespearean scholar and narrator, unearths a musty, conceivably forged letter that could prove lethal to his profession.

It reads: "Those that are given out as the children of my brain are begot of his wit." Signed: William Shakespeare. In other words, *I didn't write all those plays*. What makes the book such a page-turner (especially for those readers who prefer gray, British days at school to sunshine by the pool) is that much here isn't fictional at all—as attested to by the 13-page bibliography. But disguised as fiction, Smith's mystery can court the academically unpopular thesis that Shakespeare the glover's son from Stratford is not Shakespeare the playwright at all. The ample evidence propping up this claim winds its way through arabesque regicide plots, intra-sibling espionage, the archives of the British Library, as well as the mad rush of construction in millennial London, and proves to be quite compelling—and even convincing. —Samantha Hunt

PIECES OF INTELLIGENCE: THE EXISTENTIAL POETRY OF DONALD H. RUMSFELD

Compiled and edited by Hart Seely
Free Press, 118 pp., \$12.95
As devotees of American lit and C-SPAN know, our current defense secretary is also one of our most gifted wordsmiths. Reinventing the briefing as poetry slam, D.H. Rumsfeld is an oral bard who stands in a tradition from Homer to hip-hop, a lineage of those impelled to transgress the boundaries of received language because "the standard words/Jangle in my head when I hear them." He ranges nimbly from Zen haiku ("I'm working my way/Over to figuring out/How I won't answer") to bleak Beck-etry ("How does it end?/It ends./That's all"). And in his troubling "The Unknown," Rumsfeld limns an epistemology of the mysterious qua mysterious: "[T]here are also unknown unknowns,/the ones we don't know we don't know." Faced with such enigmas, the poet feels like a "piece of meat," albeit an exquisitely "concepty" piece of meat. D.H. is a modern master—though he doesn't quite rise to the level of a Quayle. —Richard Pott

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By Kenzo Kitakata
Translated by Emi Shimokawa
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This yakuza fable reads like a treatment for a Takeshi Kitano film, and its aging mobster Tanaka evokes Beate's sullen screen ennui. Terse sentences evoke everyday Tokyo life, as Tanaka, farmed out to a splinter group for past infractions, glides expressionless through the antiseptic city. In his forays to seedy dives and upscale French restaurants, Western signifiers take on an Eastern feel: bourbon and soda, billiards and jazz, foie gras and Château Margaux. Kitakata delineates yakuza rituals, where the traditional hacking off of one finger is no longer sufficient punishment. As his boss nears death, an incompetent sycophant is poised to take over, and Tanaka enters a battle royal to wrest control. His philosophy: "If they don't crush me, I'll crush them." —Mary Jacobi

GOODNIGHTS AND FANCIES

By John Collier
New York Review Books, 418 pp., \$14.95
Roald Dahl ranked Collier one of the great modern short-story writers (along with Cheever and Salinger), and those with a penchant for Dahl's darker fancies will devour these direct transmissions from the Twilight Zone. Indeed, Collier wrote for that show (and *The New Yorker*), and his deft, crepuscular fiction raids a generous catalog of the uncanny: the outer limits of taxidermy, mannequins and mouse-traps, murder and walking spirits. His writing generates metaphors for itself—it's akin to the ingenious, lethal device known as the Steel Cat, or the lovely fungus of *Amanita phalloides*, "rich in vitamins D, E, A, T, and H." Bring it to the dilapidated beach house of your choice—and be sure to lock the doors. —E.P.

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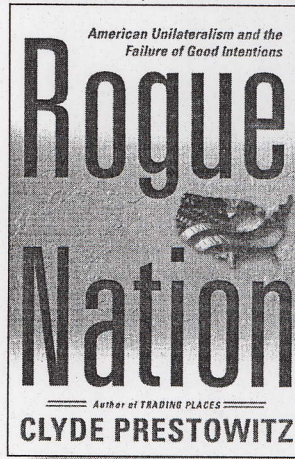
—David Gergen, former White House advisor to presidents Nixon, Ford, Reagan, and Clinton

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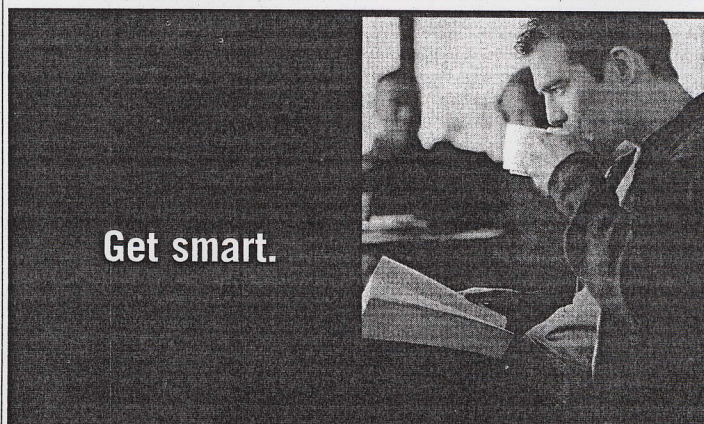
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