"Completely winning. . . . *A Reader's Book of Days* is any reader's delight." —MICHAEL DIRDA, *Wall Street Journal*

TRUE TALES FROM THE LIVES AND WORKS OF WRITERS FOR EVERY DAY OF THE YEAR

A Reader's Book of Days

Tom Nissley

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Contents

INTRODUCTION

January

February

March

April

May

June

July

August

September

October

November

December

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

INDEX

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Introduction

I was the guy in the library with books piled all around him, new ones every day. I'm sure they had a name for me behind the desk. Each morning I'd walk into the stacks with a handful of authors in mind—Colette, Heinlein, Babel, Baldwin, Welty—and come back with as many fat volumes as I could balance on my laptop: biographies, diaries, novels, complete correspondences. I lived between PG and PT in the Library of Congress system, with occasional forays upstairs to BX, D, E, F, and HV and down to QH and Z. I pulled out a half-dozen Brontë books at a time, and I blew the dust off the Franz Werfel biography from the auxiliary stacks that no one had checked out for years.

And every day I foraged for stories: moments in the lives of writers, or the invented lives of their characters, that I could connect to a particular date but also to something larger. Moviemakers have never really known how to dramatize the lives of writers—how many balled-up pages thrown into the trash can you show?—but writers have always left a vivid record of the lives they lived, as well as the ones they imagined. They gossip and despair in their diaries, they grouch and boast in letters, they transform their struggles into fiction. They drive themselves into poverty to write a masterpiece, badger their agents, fall in and out of love, crash cars and planes and motorcycles, stoke feuds, read books they hate and adore, dream of fame and regret it, discover their talent and drink it away.

The book I wanted to create would hold all those things and more, not just the usual almanac staples of births and deaths and publication dates. April 15, after all, isn't just the day that *Robinson Crusoe* was published, Henry James was born, and Edward Gorey died. It's also the day that Walt Whitman mourned the death of Lincoln, Charles Dickens called the Mississippi the "beastliest river in the world," George McGovern's political director told Hunter S. Thompson he was worried about his health, and Thomas Higginson received four poems from a woman named Emily Dickinson with a note that began, "Are you too deeply occupied to say if my Verse is alive?"

In the piles of books around me I looked for historic events (the day Charles Dodgson invented Wonderland for Alice Liddell and her sisters, the night Mary Shelley imagined Frankenstein's monster), but I also had my eye out for moments that were less momentous, the way the days in our lives usually are, and I've filled the corners of this book with reminders (Susan Sontag going to a double feature, Herman Melville playing croquet, David Foster Wallace describing his new tobacco-chewing habit to Jonathan Franzen) of the sheer dailyness of even the most eventful of lives.

Best of all was when I could find these two things—the historic and the humdrum—in the very same event. I knew how important the day Franz Kafka met Felice Bauer was to his literary life, but I didn't know that he stepped on her foot in the revolving door when he dropped her off at her hotel. And June 14, 1950, I learned, is not only the day Charles M. Schulz signed the syndication

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contract for his new comic strip. It's also the night he came home and celebrated by asking red-haired Donna Mae Johnson to marry him. (She turned him down.)

I spent a whole (and happy) year that way, collecting a year's worth of stories for the 366 daily pages of this book. Caught up as I was in other days—consuming books, at times, as if the dates they contained were their only fruit—I never knew what day it was in my own life. Any book I opened I read with a strange and narrow radar. I skimmed indexes, tracked anecdotes from reference to reference, typed "january," "february," "march," etc., into search boxes, and developed a particular appreciation for epistolary novels and a grudge against writers who didn't date their diary entries (John Cheever, that means you). My first question, when my wife told me about a book she was reading, was always "Does it have any dates?"

Just as many of the best of these tales connect the lives of writers with the books they created, I also wanted to do something in this book that I hadn't seen anywhere else: tell stories from the invented lives of fiction alongside those of the writers themselves. January 8 is the day Jane Austen wrote her sister about dancing with Tom Lefroy on his birthday, but it's also the day Callie, or Cal, Stephanides was born in Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*. L. Frank Baum finished the book he called then *The Emerald City* on October 9, the same day the mysterious title organization in Arthur Conan Doyle's "The Red-Headed League" closed its doors. Sometimes writers have connected the two themselves, knitting crucial days from their lives into their fiction. Bloomsday, James Joyce's booklong celebration of the day he met Nora Barnacle, is the most familiar example, but Toni Morrison, Truman Capote, and J. K. Rowling are among the many who have made their own birthdays important dates in their novels.

Dates in books, I realized as I combed for them, are a literary tool like any other—dialogue, geography, physical description—to be deployed or withheld according to the effect desired. A novelist might choose, or choose not, to tell you that something happened on October 21, just as she might tell you, or not, that a character has gray eyes or lives in Knoxville. Diaries, biographies, epistolary novels, histories, and explorers' accounts are all built on the bones of dates, as are mysteries, with their reliance on evidence and the tick-tock of police procedure. Memoirs, though, turn out to be concerned more with memory than evidence; it's a rare memoirist, even one as careful as Mary Karr, who gets specific about the days things happened. Science fiction, to my surprise, often uses dates as a way of grounding its speculations, but fantasy rarely does, although Tolkien did pay attention to the calendars of Middle Earth. Poets mostly prefer months to days. (An exception is when they want to mark an occasion in their title: Wordsworth above Tintern Abbey, Yeats after the Easter Rebellion, Frank O'Hara on his lunch hour.) "April" is poetic; "April 18" is not. It's too specific, too pedestrian. It's the stuff of journalism or letters or train schedules, the muckier genres that novels have always dirtied themselves with.

Specific dates carry with them the lure of the real that the novel has always dangled, the stray facticity every good storyteller or con man knows can put a tale over. Some novelists are maestros of the date: Nabokov, Joyce, Philip K. Dick, Zadie Smith. Lovecraft's unnameable horrors are made more dreadful by the precision of the days on which they occur, and much of the pleasure of Conan Doyle's stories of detection comes from the details of their setting: the geography of London, the variety of its carriages, and the exact day—January 4—the five orange pips arrive. In some books a single date becomes a talisman: the August 4ths the sad story in Ford Madox Ford's *The Good Soldier* keeps circling back to, or the memory of an April 27 that becomes a fetish in Orhan Pamuk's *The Museum of Innocence*.

Not every story cares about the calendar, of course. Do you ever know what day—or even month—it is in one of Kafka's novels? Time there is both too urgent and too infinite for the mere particularity of dates. Time has a different character in Virginia Woolf's novels too. *Mrs. Dalloway*,

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like *Ulysses*, is set on a single day in the middle of June, but she never says which one, leaving us no Dallowayday to celebrate the way we do Joyce's June 16, 1904. In fiction, her sense of time had less to do with what day it was than with, as *Mrs. Dalloway*'s working title put it, *The Hours*, or, as she named one of her essays, "The Moment."

But outside their fiction, Kafka and Woolf were two of the great artists of daily life—Kafka in his diary and especially his letters to his eternal fiancée Felice Bauer, and Woolf in her letters and especially her incomparable diary. They are among those writers whose daily impromptu autobiographies, like the diaries of Pepys, Thoreau, and Victor Klemperer or the letters of Flannery O'Connor or the James family, have become literature too. Then there are those who have the everyday art of their lives recorded by others: Dr. Johnson by his Boswell, of course, but also Herman Melville, who was no diarist but whose days appear again and again in these pages thanks to the blessed obsessiveness of biographers like Jay Leyda and Hershel Parker, and literary characters like Zora Neale Hurston and Jack Kerouac, whose self-creation made their days lastingly vivid.

Now you know how I read to make this book. How should you read it? If you're like me, you'll look up your birthday first. Some readers will simply open it at random, or seek out favorite names in the index, or read a single page on its appointed day before moving on to the next one, or even sit down and read it straight through. Most of all, I hope you will get detoured from this book to start opening some of the other books it's made of. That's what I'm going to do now that I've finished writing it.

Seattle, Washington
March 28, 2013

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January You'd think more books would start in January. Does it not feel original enough to open a story with the new year? Or do we find more natural beginnings in the spring, or when we return to work or school after the summer? What, after all, is born in the dead month of January besides a new calendar?

There are exceptions. There's Archie Jones, in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth*, roused to life on New Year's Day from his attempt to gas himself in his car in the delivery zone of a halal butcher's shop, and Bridget Jones, sourly recording in her diary the fourteen alcohol units, twenty-two cigarettes, and 5,424 calories she consumed on New Year's Eve the day (and night) before. And there are January beginnings that seem like endings: the death just hours after midnight on January 1, 2021, of the last human born before the species became infertile in P. D. James's *The Children of Men*, and the New Year's deadline haunting Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union*, when the crowded but temporary Jewish settlement in Sitka, Alaska, is set to revert to local control.

Calendars do begin in January, although that wasn't always the case. In 1579 March was still, officially at least, the first month of the year in England, but Edmund Spenser justified beginning his pastoral poem *The Shepheardes Calender* in January because it was the first month after the rebirth of the "decayed world" through the birth of Christ. In colonial America the calendar was a printer's bread and butter: an almanac was often the only book a household would buy during the year, which drew Benjamin Franklin, like many of his fellow printers, to create his own. The first edition of *Poor Richard's Almanack*, which soon became the colonies' favorite, included a tongue-in-cheek prediction that one of his main rivals, the *American Almanac*'s compiler Titan Leeds, would die, "by my Calculation made at his Request," at 3:29 P.M. on October 17 of the coming year. (Leeds was not amused, but survived the year.)

In his *Sand County Almanac*, Aldo Leopold was more content to observe than predict, and for him the barely detectable stirrings of January in Wisconsin—the venturing forth of a skunk from hibernation, the skittering of a meadow mouse from the melting shelter of the thawing snow—make observation "almost as simple and peaceful as snow, and almost continuous as cold. There is time not only to see who has done what, but to speculate why."

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RECOMMENDED READING FOR JANUARY

A Calendar of Wisdom by Leo Tolstoy (1909) ⚭ What did Tolstoy, in his last years, believe was the great work of his life? *War and Peace*? *Anna Karenina*? No, this anthology he spent fifteen years gathering, which mixed his own aphorisms with those of the "best and wisest thinkers of the world," organized by a theme for each day of the year.

At the Mountains of Madness by H. P. Lovecraft (1936) ⚭ As the southern summer opens up the South Pole for exploration, a scientific expedition led by professors Dyer and Lake discovers behind a range of unknown Antarctic mountains a vast, dead, and ancient city, one of the most evil and benighted of Lovecraft's inhuman horrors.

"New Year Letter" by W. H. Auden (1940) ⚭ With hatreds convulsing the world "like a baffling crime," Auden composed one of his great long poems as a letter to "dear friend Elizabeth," whose hospitality in his adopted home of New York helped him toward this vision of order in art and life during a time of tyranny.

Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? by Philip K. Dick (1968) ⚭ Many more people know *Blade Runner* than its source novel, set on a single January day in a post-nuclear 1992, which features, rather than Ridley Scott's rainy, neon glamour, Dick's equally thrilling and disturbing brand of stripped-down noir.

Airport by Arthur Hailey (1968) ⚭ Arthur Hailey wrote blockbusters like no one else, earnest and fact-filled dramas set in a series of massive industrial monoliths: banks, hotels, power plants, and, in this case, Lincoln International Airport in Illinois during the worst winter storm of the decade, with one jetliner stuck at the end of a runway and another coming in fast with a bomb on board.

"In California: Morning, Evening, Late January" by Denise Levertov (1989) ⚭ Levertov's pastoral is

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unseasonal in the temperate lushness of its California winter, and unsettling in its vision of the industrial forces invading and managing its beauty.

The Children of Men by P. D. James (1992) ✣ Another novel overshadowed by its movie adaptation, *The Children of Men*, in a startling departure from James's Adam Dalgliesh mysteries, uses the premise of a world in which human fertility has disappeared to examine the nature and lure of power.

White Teeth by Zadie Smith (2000) ✣ Smith's debut, which begins with Archie Jones's failed January suicide, has too much life to begin with a death: it overflows with not only the variety of multiethnic London but the exuberance of Smith taking her brilliant talent for its first walk out on the stage.

The Omnivore's Dilemma by Michael Pollan (2006) ✣ One of the omnivore's dilemmas is how to navigate a world whose technology and global trade have accustomed even New Englanders to unseasonal luxuries like sweet corn and asparagus in the middle of January.

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January 1

BORN: **1879** E. M. Forster (*Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *A Room with a View*), London
1919 J. D. Salinger (*The Catcher in the Rye*, *Franny and Zooey*), New York City
DIED: **2002** Julia Phillips (*You'll Never Eat Lunch in This Town Again*), 57, West Hollywood, Calif.
2007 Tillie Olsen (*Tell Me a Riddle*, *Silences*), 94, Oakland, Calif.

1803 Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that the rise of the restaurant in post-revolutionary France coincided with the rise of the restaurant guide. On New Year's Day a man-about-town named Alexandre Balthazar Laurent Grimod de La Reynière published his first *Almanach des Gourmands*, a pocket-sized, almost annual guide to eating aimed, with a slyly decadent style, at the "purely animal pleasures" unleashed by the upheaval of the Revolution (through which Grimod himself had successfully maneuvered, despite his noble birth). The judgments of the *Almanach* were drawn in part from the Jury Dégustateur, a group of gourmands who met weekly at Grimod's mansion for five-hour tasting sessions: the Michelin or Yelp of their day.

1926 Isaac Babel confessed to his diary that he hadn't "done a thing as far as serious literature goes for about ten months, but have simply been hanging around in Moscow in search of big pay-offs."

1947 In a *Guide to Your Child's Development* she has purchased for the purpose, Charlotte Haze notes on the twelfth birthday of her daughter, Dolores, that the girl is fifty-seven inches tall and possesses an IQ of 121. She also completes an inventory of the child's qualities: "aggressive, boisterous, critical, distrustful, impatient, irritable, inquisitive, listless, negativistic (underlined twice) and obstinate." For Charlotte's new husband, Humbert Humbert, this list of epithets is "maddening" in its viciousness toward the girl he calls Lolita and claims to love. But he has his own reasons to revolt at the child's birthdays: after just a few more of them she'll no longer be a "nymphet," and soon after that she'll be—"horror of horrors"—"a 'college girl.' "

1970 Detached from the rhythms of any planet's orbit or rotation, the star-faring trading culture of the Qeng Ho in Vernor Vinge's 1999 Hugo-winning novel, *A Deepness in the Sky*, measures time in seconds rather than days or years: kiloseconds, megaseconds, gigaseconds. When did their clock begin ticking? Not, as many assume, at the moment thousands of earth-years before, when the first human set foot on the moon, but about fifteen megaseconds later, at "the 0-second of one of Humankind's first computer operating systems": the Unix system, which indeed started its counter at midnight on New Year's Day in 1970. It's a telling shift in the history of science fiction, which has mirrored technology by turning its imagination from the exploration of space to the development of machine intelligence.

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January 2

BORN: 1951 André Aciman (*Call Me by Your Name*, *Out of Egypt*), Alexandria, Egypt
1956 Lynda Barry (*Ernie Pook's Comeek*, *What It Is*), Richland Center, Wis.
DIED: 2000 Patrick O'Brian (*Master and Commander* and the rest of the Aubrey-Maturin series), 85, Dublin
2008 George MacDonald Fraser (*Flashman* and the rest of the Flashman series), 82, Isle of Man

1960 Donald Malcolm, in *The New Yorker,* on Robert Ruark's *Poor No More*: "With breathtaking ingenuity, he has managed to include between a single set of covers a representative example of nearly every kind of bad novel . . . a sort of Golden Treasury of Commercial Narrative."

1995 "The escape from Glades Correctional Institution seemed the stuff of movies," wrote one local Florida paper, and in time it would be, but only after Elmore Leonard used it to inspire the first big scene in *Out of Sight*, published just a year after the jailbreak. To the real-life story of Cuban inmates tunneling twenty-five yards under the prison chapel, Leonard added the characters of Jack Foley, a recidivist bank robber with even more than the usual Leonard cool who tags along with the Cubans on the way out, and Karen Sisco, a U.S. Marshal who soon discovers her weak spot for charming bank robbers. Two years later George Clooney and Jennifer Lopez, as Jack and Karen, climbed into the trunk of a car and heated up the finest of all Leonard film adaptations, which date back to 1957's *3:10 from Yuma*.

1998 On this day in London, one of the patron saints of entertainingly excessive knowledge, Frank Muir, passed away at the age of seventy-seven. Paired for decades with Dennis Norden, Muir was ubiquitous in postwar Britain as a bow-tied wit both behind the scenes as a writer for BBC Radio and TV and a panelist on the quiz shows *Call My Bluff, My Word!*, and *My Music*, the latter two of which introduced him to American audiences via public radio. In their trademark *My Word!* segment, Muir and Norden spun out ingeniously convoluted shaggy-dog tales that ended on a punch-line pun, which were collected in a half-dozen books that, like his anthologies, the *Oxford Book of Humorous Prose* and *The Frank Muir Book: An Irreverent Companion to Social History*—and like his particular brand of learned drollery—are by now well out of print and fashion.

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January 3

BORN: **1892** J. R. R. Tolkien (*The Hobbit*, *The Fellowship of the Ring*), Bloemfontein, Orange Free State
1973 Rory Stewart (*The Places in Between*, *The Prince of the Marshes*), Hong Kong
DIED: **1923** Jaroslav Hašek (*The Good Soldier Švejk*), 39, Lipnice nad Sázavou, Czechoslovakia
2005 Will Eisner (*The Spirit, A Contract with God*), 87, Lauderdale Lakes, Fla.

1889 In 1888, as he fought off the encroachment of his madness, Friedrich Nietzsche wrote some of his most lasting works: *Twilight of the Idols*, *The Antichrist*, and *Ecce Homo*. By December, though, his self-grandeur was overflowing—he called himself a clown and a god, plotted to destroy the German Reich by provoking a war, and wrote that "quite literally, I hold the future of humanity in my hand." And on this day, just after the turn of the year, he collapsed in Turin, putting his arms—as the stories say, and they seem to be true—around a mistreated workhorse and falling unconscious to the street. It was the letters he wrote to friends the next day, speaking delusions far beyond his earlier grandeur, that brought them to Turin to place him in the psychiatric care under which he spent his last, silent decade.

1951 Precocious in all things, Susan Sontag was just seventeen when, after a short engagement and an even shorter courtship (they became engaged ten days after meeting), she married her twenty-eight-year-old sociology instructor at the University of Chicago, Philip Rieff. "I marry Philip with full consciousness + fear of my will toward self-destructiveness," she recorded in her diary, in a note far more terse than her passionate entries in the same journal on the female lovers she called "H" and "I." Soon after, she would later recall, she read *Middlemarch* for the first time and "realized not only that *I* was Dorothea but that, a few months earlier, I had married Mr. Casaubon." They divorced in 1959.

1992 "Dial and see; just try me." Rick Deckard wants his wife, Iran, to dial their Penfield mood organ to a productive setting this morning—perhaps 481, "awareness of the manifold possibilities open to me in the future," or at least 594, "the desire to watch TV, no matter what's on it"—but she prefers the setting she has planned for the day, "self-accusatory depression." The mood organ is one of the features of the near-future world Philip K. Dick invented for *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* that Ridley Scott didn't include when he adapted it into *Blade Runner* (the electric sheep of the title, which Deckard keeps as a pet because he can't afford a high-status real animal, didn't make it either), but both book and movie are concerned with the question that drove all of Dick's visionary fiction: in an age of machines, what is real, and what is human?

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January 4

BORN: **1943** Doris Kearns Goodwin (*Team of Rivals*, *No Ordinary Time*), Brooklyn
1962 Harlan Coben (*Tell No One*, *Gone for Good*), Newark, N.J.
DIED: **1986** Christopher Isherwood (*The Berlin Stories*), 81, Santa Monica, Calif.
2005 Guy Davenport (*The Jules Verne Steam Balloon*), 77, Lexington, Ky.

1912 "Two desperate and notorious criminals," reported the *San Francisco Call*, took "French leave" from the Ingleside jail on this day, escaping their steel cells for parts unknown: Harry Davenport, a well-known pickpocket, and "Thomas Callaghan, alias Jack Black, 'dope fiend,' burglar, murderous thug, about to go to Folsom to serve a term of 25 years." Fourteen years later, that same Jack Black was the librarian of that same *San Francisco Call*, having in the meantime reformed himself, more or less, and written *You Can't Win*, a bestselling memoir of his underworld life that was kept alive for decades by the appreciation of William S. Burroughs, who borrowed its style—and a hoodlum character named Jack—for his first novel, *Junky*.

1946 After a four-day bender with his second wife, Margery Bonner, in Cuernavaca, Mexico, the site of the alcohol-soaked dissolution of his first marriage, Malcolm Lowry noticed—and hoped his wife wouldn't—a tree in the Borda Garden carved with the message "Jan and Malcolm December 1936—Remember me."

1958 Lewis Mumford, whose *The Culture of Cities* had made him a leading voice on urban America for two decades, found an ally and a protégée in Jane Jacobs, the Greenwich Village neighborhood activist and writer. "There are half a dozen publishers who'd snap up a ms. of yours on the city," he wrote her on this day. "There's no one else who's had so many fresh and sensible things to say about the city." But when it came out three years later, Jacobs's book, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, dismissed *The Culture of Cities* as a city-hating "morbid and biased catalog of ills." Mumford returned fire in *The New Yorker*, praising her fresh and shrewd activism but dismissing her "schoolgirl howlers." Nevertheless, in the same month his review came out, Jacobs and Mumford joined forces to help block Robert Moses's proposed Lower Manhattan Expressway.

1991 It's "like V-E Day and V-J Day all rolled into one" when Frannie Goldsmith has her baby, Peter, in the tiny Free Zone community in Boulder, Colorado. With one immune parent, there's a chance he'll be the first child born in the Free Zone to survive the superflu that wiped out 99.4 percent of humanity since it escaped from a U.S. Army lab, although after a couple of days Peter too starts showing the familiar signs of illness. There are dozens more pregnant women in the Free Zone, so not everything is riding on his survival; nevertheless, the hopes of the small community of survivors—and of all those who have read the thousand or so pages of Stephen King's *The Stand* to that point—rest on his tiny shoulders.

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January 5

BORN: **1932** Umberto Eco (*The Name of the Rose*, *Foucault's Pendulum*), Alessandria, Italy
1938 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (*The River Between*, *Wizard of the Crow*), Kamiriithu, Kenya
DIED: **1987** Margaret Laurence (*The Stone Angel*, *The Diviners*), 60, Lakefield, Ont.
1996 Lincoln Kirstein (*What Ballet Is All About*), 88, New York City

1889 Mark Twain's enthusiasm for business ventures was as unquenchable as his judgment was poor. And no investment was more disastrous than the Paige Compositor, a typesetting machine Twain was certain would make such previous innovations as the telephone and the locomotive seem "mere toys, simplicities." Twain took over full ownership of its development in 1886 and on this day thought he had witnessed history: "Saturday, January 5, 1889, 12:20 PM. EUREKA! I have seen a line of movable type, *spaced and justified by machinery*!" The temperamental machine, though, lost the race to market to the more reliable Linotype, and Twain was driven into bankruptcy after $300,000 in losses, believing all the way that James W. Paige, its inventor, was a "Shakespeare of mechanical invention."

1895 Too nervous to attend the opening night of his own play, *Guy Domville*, Henry James, who had spent five years attempting to conquer the London stage, distracted himself by going instead to Oscar Wilde's latest success, *An Ideal Husband*. Returning in time to witness his play's final lines, he missed one hostile exchange—when his hero lamented, "I'm the *last*, my lord, of the Domvilles!" a shout from the audience was said to have replied, "It's a bloody good thing y'are"—but wasn't spared the wrath of the gallery when, in response to the cheers of his friends in the crowd, he took a curtain call and was met with howls and catcalls from the cheap seats. The fiasco—"the most horrible hours of my life"—forever haunted James, but it also cured him for good of the theater bug and returned him to the grand fictional ambitions of his late period.

1920 The successful London stage premiere of A. A. Milne's *Mr. Pim Passes By*, starring Leslie Howard (the future Ashley Wilkes), made the author's fortune before he ever wrote about a silly old bear.

1943 Eleven novels into a career always promising to tip over from critical to popular acclaim, Dawn Powell had an idea for her twelfth. "I could write a novel about the Destroyers," she wrote in her diary, "that cruel, unhappy, ever-dissatisfied group who feed on frustrations (Dorothy Parker, Wolcott Gibbs, Arthur Kober, etc.) . . . If people are in love, they must mar it with laughter; if people are laughing, they must stop it with 'Your slip is showing.' " Five years later, the book became *The Locusts Have No King,* both a satire of ambitious literary New Yorkers that many fans consider her finest and, in her words, a "great true romance" of love held tightly in spite of the Destroyers (and the atom bomb).

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January 6

BORN: 1883 Kahlil Gibran (*The Prophet*, *Broken Wings*), Bsharri, Ottoman Syria
1931 E. L. Doctorow (*Ragtime*, *The Book of Daniel*, *The March*), Bronx, N.Y.
DIED: 1944 Ida Tarbell (*The History of the Standard Oil Company*), 86, Bridgeport, Conn.
2000 Don Martin (*Don Martin Steps Out*, *The Mad Adventures of Captain Klutz*), 68, Miami, Fla.

1892 As homebound women living in the heart of New England's intellectual ferment who turned their brilliance inward in private writings only published and celebrated after their deaths, Emily Dickinson and Alice James have often been compared. James lived just long enough to make the comparison herself, quoting Dickinson's lines with approval in her diary just two months before her death: "How dreary to be somebody / How public, like a frog / To tell your name the livelong day / To an admiring bog!" "Dr. Tucky asked me the other day whether I had ever written for the press" like her brothers Henry and William, she added. "I vehemently disclaimed the imputation. How sad it is that the purely innocuous should always be supposed to have the trail of the family serpent upon them."

1952 Amos Oz ends *A Tale of Love and Darkness*, his memoir of his youth in the early days of Israel, with the event the book has been circling around: his mother's suicide, when she was thirty-eight and Oz was twelve. Worn down by sadness and insomnia while visiting her sister, she spent the day walking the cold and rainy streets of Tel Aviv following her doctor's prescription to "look for handsome young men" and then took all her sleeping pills at some point during the night and never woke up. At their apartment in Jerusalem, meanwhile, her husband and son, who was still a few years away from running off to a kibbutz and changing his name from Klausner to Oz, spent the same evening reading, writing, and playing checkers before going off to bed.

1975 She made her first appearances in the Talk of the Town section of *The New Yorker* as "Sassy Antiguan Jamaica Kincaid," whose observations were quoted extensively by her friend George W. S. Trow; on this day, in a report on lunchtime disco dancers, she confessed her favorite song was "Kung Fu Fighting." But in those days Talk of the Town pieces didn't carry bylines, so it was only when her name *didn't* appear in the magazine that Kincaid really started writing for it. With her first book still almost a decade away, she gathered her forces under the magazine's cloak of anonymity, apprenticing on subjects such as taking the train from Cleveland, a promotional event for cheese, and Boz Scaggs.

1975 John Updike, in *The New Yorker*, on Iris Murdoch's *The Sacred and Profane Love Machine*: "Let it be asked now: What other living novelist in the language is the peer of Iris Murdoch at inventing characters and moving them fascinatingly, at least as long as the book is in our hands?"

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January 7

BORN: **1891** Zora Neale Hurston (*Their Eyes Were Watching God*), Notasulga, Ala.
1957 Nicholson Baker (*The Mezzanine*, *U and I*, *Vox*), New York City
DIED: **1967** David Goodis (*Down There*, *Dark Passage*), 49, Philadelphia
1972 John Berryman (*The Dream Songs*), 57, Minneapolis

1877 Completed on this day when its author was not yet fifteen, *Fast and Loose: A Novelette* certainly promises illicit fun. As one reviewer noted, "The very title suggests something desperate. Who is fast? What is loose? . . . We prophesy 128 pages of racy trash & are glad to think we shall be wasting our time agreeably." The reviewer, though, was none other than the author, Edith Jones, who not only wrote the book (for the enjoyment of a friend) but attached three wittily scathing reviews—"the whole thing a fiasco," said another—mocking her own efforts. Eight years later, Miss Jones married and became Edith Wharton, but despite this precocious beginning it wasn't until she was thirty-eight that she published her first novel, *The Touchstone*.

1938 Stabbed by an unknown assailant on a Paris street just after midnight, Samuel Beckett woke in the hospital to see his concerned employer, James Joyce, who soon brought him a reading lamp and paid for a private room for his recovery.

1950 "I shall keep a diary." Those words have been known to start a novel—and of course any number of diaries—but in Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*, they don't appear until a third of the way through the story. Finding herself turning a household event into a short story, Anna Wulf asks, "Why do I never write down, simply, what happens? . . . Obviously, my changing everything into fiction is simply a means of concealing something from myself." And so she begins recording her life more directly, in her Blue Notebook. Or so she thinks. In Lessing's nested story of self-discovery, that notebook proves no more satisfactory than the others: "The Blue Notebook, which I had expected to be the most truthful of the notebooks, is worse than any of them."

2000 What was a "McG"? To the cognoscenti, they were portraits of the recently deceased—usually those with only a fleeting or obscure relation to the mainstream of history—crafted on deadline for the *New York Times* obituary page by Robert McG. Thomas Jr. with an unusual and sympathetic enthusiasm for the eccentricities of personality and fate. In the short period of his flourishing in the late 1990s, as celebrated in the collection *52 McGs*, Thomas profiled, among many others, "Lewis J. Gorin Jr, Instigator of a 1930's Craze," "Charles McCartney, Known for Travels with Goats," and "Toots Barger, the Queen of Duckpins' Wobbly World," but on this day his own name came up on the *Times* obit assignment desk. The headline the next day read, "Robert McG. Thomas Jr., 60, Chronicler of Unsung Lives": "The cause was abdominal cancer, said his wife, Joan."

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January 8

BORN: 1909 Evelyn Wood (speed-reading impresario), Logan, Utah
1942 Stephen Hawking (*A Brief History of Time*), Oxford, England
DIED: 1642 Galileo Galilei (*Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems*), 77, Arcetri, Italy
1896 Paul Verlaine (*Romances sans paroles*), 51, Paris

1796 The earliest surviving letter by Jane Austen began with birthday greetings to her sister Cassandra, but its strongest sentiments were reserved for one whose birthday was the day before, a young Irishman named Tom Lefroy. At "an exceeding good ball" that night, Jane reported, "I am almost afraid to tell you how my Irish friend and I behaved. Imagine to yourself everything most profligate and shocking in the way of dancing and sitting down together." But in Austen's England, the promising young Lefroy, who in old age confessed a "boyish love" for Austen, couldn't court a woman without property. Marrying an heiress instead, he returned to Ireland, where, a half century later, long after Austen's death, he became Lord Chief Justice.

1938 At the age of thirty-eight, with his father nearing death, Jorge Luis Borges began his first full-time job, as an assistant at a remote branch of the Buenos Aires Municipal Library. Told by his colleagues to slow his cataloguing of the library's paltry holdings or else they'd all be out of a job, he limited his work to an hour a day and spent the remainder reading and writing while his co-workers talked about sports and women. Though he was despondent at the "menial and dismal existence" he'd made for himself from his aristocratic legacy, during these years he wrote his most distinctive works, the stories of *The Garden of Forking Paths*, including "The Library of Babel," the tale of an archive whose infinite contents drive its librarians to despair.

1960 As she tells us on the first page of Jeffrey Eugenides's *Middlesex*, Callie—or Cal—was born for the first time on this day, as a girl in Detroit. Even before that day, though, two genes, "a pair of miscreants—or revolutionaries, depending on your view," had given her a genetic and genital legacy that would result, fourteen and a half years later, in a discovery that she calls her second birth, as a boy, in a hospital in northern Michigan—Hemingway country, fittingly. But on this day, however complicated her eventual path from Callie to Cal, her father proudly took part in the

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simple, binary ritual of handing out cigars ribboned in pink.

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January 9

BORN: **1901** Chic Young (*Blondie*, *Dumb Dora*), Chicago
1908 Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*, *The Mandarins*), Paris
DIED: **1324** Marco Polo (*The Travels of Marco Polo*), c. 69, Venice
1923 Katherine Mansfield (*The Garden Party*, *The Journals*), 34, Fontainebleau, France

1873 Twenty years after he wrote "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and sixteen since he'd last published a novel, Herman Melville's own position as a self-effacing clerk was given a poignant portrait in a letter from his brother-in-law to George Boutwell, the secretary of the treasury. Was there anything Boutwell could do to assure Melville "the undisturbed enjoyment of his modest, hard-earned salary" of $4 a day as a customs inspector? Making no mention of Melville's forgotten fame as an author, the letter emphasized his principled ability to, like Bartleby, say no: "Surrounded by low venality, he puts it all quietly aside,—quietly declining offers of money for special services,—quietly returning money which has been thrust into his pockets behind his back."

1922 At 74 rue Cardinal Lemoine in the Latin Quarter, Ernest and Hadley Hemingway rented their first Paris apartment.

1927 Writing to his mother that everyone at Oxford was either "rich and vapid or poor and vapid," Henry Yorke, with his first novel already published the previous fall under the name Henry Green, left without his degree to work instead on the shop floor of the Birmingham manufacturer of bathroom plumbing and brewery equipment owned by his father. After two years he rose to management, a career that ran alongside, and even outlasted, his writing life as Henry Green, whose best-known novels—all of them subtle and thrillingly innovative—inhabit both sides of Yorke's life: *Living*, the workers on the factory floor, *Party Going*, the upper class into which he was born, and *Loving*, an upstairs-downstairs tale of both.

1944 Francis T. P. Plimpton, one of the most prominent lawyers in New York City, was a man of great discipline and industry, and expected the same from his children. His eldest, George, was less able to harness his own considerable energies, and when he ran into trouble at Exeter his father sent him on New Year's Day a typed list of eight "Resolutions," twenty-six "Supplementary Resolutions" (among them "I will not day dream" and "I will stand up straight, and walk as if I were carrying a pail of water on my head"), and four justifications for immediate withdrawal from the school, including failure to write his parents "every day." Young George did make an effort—in his letter on this day he reported, "Followed schedule perfectly"—but just weeks before his graduation he was, to his shame, expelled for surprising his housemaster with a Revolutionary War–era musket and yelling, "Bang bang! You're dead."

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January 10

BORN: 1928 Philip Levine (*What Work Is*, *Ashes*), Detroit
1953 Dennis Cooper (*Closer*, *Frisk*, *Try*, *Guide*, *Period*), Pasadena, Calif.
DIED: 1951 Sinclair Lewis (*Main Street*, *Babbitt*, *Elmer Gantry*), 65, Rome
1961 Dashiell Hammett (*Red Harvest*, *The Maltese Falcon*), 66, New York City

1776 Published: *Common Sense; Addressed to the Inhabitants of America* by "an Englishman" (R. Bell, Philadelphia). (Its author, Thomas Paine, donated his considerable profits, from 500,000 copies sold in the first year, to the Continental Army.)

1846 Be careful what you ask for. That appears to be the lesson of the "*Corsair* affair," one of the strangest in the odd and passionate philosophical career of Søren Kierkegaard. Stung by attacks on his writing in the *Corsair*, a satirical scandal sheet read by everyone from servants to royalty in Copenhagen, Kierkegaard made a perverse public request for more abuse. He got it, and was especially wounded by caricatures in the paper that depicted him as a hunchbacked eccentric who had the cuffs of his trousers cut at different lengths as a sign of his genius. Once a proud walker of the city who delighted in speaking to anyone he met, Kierkegaard found himself a laughingstock, a wound he nursed for the rest of his life. Even his tailor suggested he take his business elsewhere.

18– The metamorphosis of respectable Dr. Jekyll into murderous Mr. Hyde is a basic scene in our mythology of horror, but in the original tale, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, it's the reverse transformation that is so terrifying it kills the man who witnesses it. Given the choice, just after midnight on this day, *not* to see the effects of the chemical mixture he has delivered, on Jekyll's request, to Mr. Hyde, Dr. Lanyon replies, "I have gone too far in the way of inexplicable services to pause before I see the end." The end he sees is the terrible Hyde turned before his eyes, "like a man restored from death," into his friend Henry Jekyll. "I must die," Lanyon wrote afterward, "and yet I shall die incredulous."

1953 Writing in her journal at midnight in her parents' house in London, Iris Murdoch recounted one of her first nights with Elias Canetti: "We laughed very much, C. keeping up a stream of pompous-sounding discussion in an audible voice for my parents' benefit in intervals of kissing me violently." For three years they kept up a secret affair and for forty years a friendship, until his death. Dominating both in his arrogance and his intense receptiveness, Canetti seemed to her that night like a "beast" and an "angel," and his presence can be seen in the terrible attraction of characters in many of her novels, from *The Flight from the Enchanter*, published the year after their breakup, to *The Sea, the Sea*, which won the Booker Prize in 1978, three years before Canetti received the Nobel Prize for Literature.

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January 11

BORN: **1842** William James (*The Varieties of Religious Experience*), New York City
1952 Diana Gabaldon (*Outlander*, *Dragonfly in Amber*), Arizona
DIED: **1928** Thomas Hardy (*Tess of the d'Urbervilles*, *Jude the Obscure*), 87, Dorchester, England
1980 Barbara Pym (*Excellent Women*, *Quartet in Autumn*), 66, Finstock, England

1842 On New Year's Day, John Thoreau Jr. cut a tiny piece of skin off the tip of his ring finger while stropping his razor. He hardly gave it a thought until seven days later, when he removed the bandage and found the wound had "mortified." The next day, the terrible spasms of lockjaw took hold, and on this day, having calmly said to his friends, "The cup that my father gives me, shall I not drink it?" he died in the arms of his younger brother, Henry, with whom he had founded a grammar school and taken the trip Henry later memorialized in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*. For a time afterward, Henry grieved quietly, but then, on the 22nd, though he had no injury to cause it, he began to suffer from the precise symptoms of lockjaw himself. He convulsed for two days before recovering, and for the rest of his life suffered awful dreams on the anniversary of his brother's death.

1844 Having just struck up a correspondence with the botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker, Charles Darwin broached a delicate subject with an almost shameful hesitancy: "I am almost convinced (quite contrary to opinion I started with) that species are not (it is like confessing a murder) immutable." He added, "I think I have found out (here's presumption!) the simple way by which species become exquisitely adapted to various ends.— You will now groan, & think to yourself 'on what a man have I been wasting my time in writing to.'— I shd, five years ago, have thought so." His hesitancy would remain: it was another fourteen years before he announced his theory in public, and a year after that until the publication of *On the Origin of Species*.

1914 The *Nouvelle revue française* was one of the publishers that rejected the first volume of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*—they hardly read it, put off by "its enormous size and because Proust had a reputation as a snob"—but Proust's revenge was quick and sweet. After the book was published André Gide, novelist and editor of *NRF*, wrote with his abject apologies: "For several days I have not put down your book; I am supersaturating myself in it, rapturously, wallowing in it. Alas! why must it be so painful for me to like it so much?" Proust replied that his joy at Gide's change of heart far outweighed the pain of the earlier rejection: "I finally obtained that pleasure, not as I hoped, not when I hoped, but later, and differently, and far more splendidly, in the form of this letter from you. In that form, too, I 'recaptured' Lost Time."

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January 12

BORN: **1949** Haruki Murakami (*Norwegian Wood*, *1Q84*), Kyoto, Japan
1969 David Mitchell (*Cloud Atlas*, *number9dream*), Southport, England
DIED: **1965** Lorraine Hansberry (*A Raisin in the Sun*, *Les Blancs*), 34, New York City
1976 Agatha Christie (*Murder on the Orient Express*), 85, Wallingford, England

1926 A hurricane brought in the new year, sweeping nearly everything aside on the Samoan island of Ta'u. As the storm rose, Margaret Mead, coming of age herself at twenty-four while she did the fieldwork for what would be her first book, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, was "absorbed in the enormous and satisfying extravagance" of making hard sauce for a holiday fruit cake, but the winds started tearing the village to shreds. Taking refuge with two babies in the bottom of an emptied water tank, Mead rode out the storm and emerged in the morning to a village "weaving furiously" to reconstruct itself. Finally, on this day, in response to frantic telegrams from her teacher and friend Ruth Benedict, who had heard of the hurricane in New York, she wired back a single word, "Well."

1957 Robert Phelps, in the *National Review*, on *The Old Farmer's Almanac*: "The wish for a chronology of significant events is as persistent as it is involuntary . . . Simply to know, to be a squinting, amateur witness to so much precision and progression, is delightful."

1974 A groundbreaking scrapbook of three hundred years of African American history, *The Black Book*, published on this day, is now itself a piece of history, a record of a moment when someone like Toni Morrison, then an editor at Random House and the author of a single novel, had gained the authority to see a project like it into print. Working with collectors who had been gathering the materials for decades, Morrison and Middleton Harris curated a loving hodgepodge of newspaper clippings, minstrel-show placards, slave-auction records, patent diagrams, biographical sketches, voodoo spells, and portraits of the famous and the anonymous. "I was scared," Morrison said at the time, "that the world would fall away before somebody put together a thing that got close to the way we really were."

1997 You don't find out the birthday of one of the most memorable of modern characters until late in the story, when Dave Bowman, stranded on a spacecraft half a billion miles from Earth, realizes he needs to destroy the only other intelligence left on the ship. As he removes its memory blocks, the mind of his companion is reduced to its most basic elements: "I am a HAL Nine Thousand computer Production Number 3. I became operational at the Hal Plant in Urbana, Illinois, on January 12, 1997." If you can't help but hear the disturbingly soothing voice of Douglas Rain speaking those words as you read Arthur C. Clarke's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, don't worry you're doing literature a disservice: *2001* was a rare novel written *alongside* the screenplay, as two versions of the same imagined world.

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January 13

BORN: **1940** Edmund White (*A Boy's Own Story*, *The Beautiful Room Is Empty*), Cincinnati
1957 Lorrie Moore (*Self-Help*, *The Gate at the Stairs*), Glens Falls, N.Y.
DIED: **1599** Edmund Spenser (*The Faerie Queen*, *Epithalamion*), c. 46, London
1941 James Joyce (*Ulysses*, *Finnegans Wake*), 58, Zurich

1898 Émile Zola had written on the Dreyfus Affair before, in essays so scathing that *Le Figaro* refused to print any more, but his open letter to French president Félix Faure in the newspaper *L'Aurore*, known immediately by its headline, *"J'accuse"* (given it by the paper's publisher, future prime minister Georges Clemenceau), galvanized the entire country. Putting his life and his position as France's leading novelist on the line amid anti-Semitic riots, Zola defended Major Dreyfus, the Jewish officer who had spent four years on Devil's Island after a trumped-up conviction for treason, and courted arrest for libel by naming those he thought responsible. He was indeed twice convicted, but the force of his essay and the evidence brought out in his libel trials transformed public opinion and led to Dreyfus's exoneration in 1906.

1909 On his first anniversary as a lawyer at the American Bonding Company, Wallace Stevens wrote his future wife, "I certainly do not exist from nine to six, when I am at the office . . . At night I strut my individual state once more—soon in a night-cap."

1934 M. F. K. Fisher, reading Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*, wished "to have, someday, a style one *n*th as direct."

1970 It was just a few months after the Stonewall riot, at which he had been a skeptical but interested observer, that Edmund White, on his thirtieth birthday, decided to shake off the shame of not yet having a book to his name by moving to Rome. He didn't make the most of it—his friend and mentor Richard Howard wagged his finger from afar, "Here you are in the central city of Western culture and you've managed to turn it into some kicky version of Scranton"—and when he returned after six months to New York he found that "the 1970s had finally begun," the gay, post-Stonewall '70s, that is: "I couldn't believe how unleashed New York had become."

1987 There may be no better window into the passive-aggressive hothouse of *The New Yorker* during the later William Shawn years than the account in Renata Adler's *Gone* of a mass staff meeting on the day word got out that Shawn, the magazine's editor for thirty-five years, was being replaced. As voices, variously querulous and strident, were raised about whether or not to write a letter of protest to the magazine's owner, Adler, an active courtier in the palace intrigue herself, filtered the inconclusive proceedings through her imperious style, cutting toward her enemies, alternately adoring of and exasperated with Shawn himself, and mournful for a magazine that to her mind, no matter its later incarnations, was now forever gone.

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January 14

BORN: **1886** Hugh Lofting (*The Story of Doctor Dolittle*), Maidenhead, England
1947 Taylor Branch (*Parting the Waters*), Atlanta
DIED: **1898** Lewis Carroll (*Through the Looking Glass*), 65, Guildford, England
1977 Anaïs Nin (*Delta of Venus*, *Henry and June*), 73, Los Angeles

1928 Dr. Seuss's first contribution to the common language was not "A person's a person, no matter how small" but "Quick, Henry, the Flit!"—the tagline for his series of ads for Standard Oil's insecticide, which became a '30s catchphrase on radio and in song. (Seuss was hired after the wife of an ad exec saw his cartoon in this day's issue of *Judge*, a satirical weekly, with the punch line "Darn it all, another Dragon. And just after I'd sprayed the whole castle with Flit!") As Seuss often said, his work for the petroleum giant directed the course of his later career: "I would like to say I went into children's book writing because of my great understanding of children. I went in because it wasn't excluded by my Standard Oil contract."

1939 "When I read through this book I'm *appalled* at myself!" Tennessee Williams wrote in his journal just after moving to New Orleans. "It is valuable as a record of one man's incredible idiocy! . . . Am I all animal, all willful, blind, stupid *beast*?"

1973 The date and the year are unnamed, but let's assume that it's on this January Sunday that the New York Giants, starring Billy Clyde Puckett, stud hoss of a running back, and Shake Tiller, semi-intellectual split end and fellow ex-TCU All-American, take on the dog-ass New York Jets in the Super Bowl in front of 92,000, among them Barbara Jane Bookman, a childhood friend to both Giants and "so damned pretty it makes your eyes blur." It's the most amiable of love triangles in the most foul-mouthed of sports classics, Dan Jenkins's *Semi-Tough*, as narrated by Billy Clyde himself with a glass of Scotch and a little tape recorder in his and Shake's "palatial suite here at the Beverly Stars Hotel in Beverly Hills, California."

2010 Tony Judt's essay "Night," in the *New York Review of Books* on this day, began with a statement of fact shocking to readers who had known him only as a prolific historian and essayist: "I suffer from a motor neuron disorder, in my case a variant of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS): Lou Gehrig's disease." A further shock came on its heels: his disease had progressed enough that he was, more or less, a quadriplegic, living in the cage of his own body, nearly immobile but still able to feel sensation and, with full clarity, think. And so, having recently completed a massive and masterful work of synthetic history, *Postwar*, Judt turned to tiny, hard-won essays of memory, observation, and reflection, composed during his lonely, sleepless nights, dictated during the days, and collected after his death that summer in *The Memory Chalet*.

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January 15

BORN: **1622** Molière (*Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope*), Paris
1933 Ernest J. Gaines (*A Lesson Before Dying*), Pointe Coupee Parish, La.
DIED: **1893** Fanny Kemble (*Journal of a Residence on a Georgian Plantation*), 83, London
1982 Red Smith (*To Absent Friends*, *The Red Smith Reader*), 76, Stamford, Conn.

1848 *Douglas Jerrod's Weekly Newspaper* on the new novel by "Ellis Bell": "In *Wuthering Heights* the reader is shocked, disgusted, almost sickened by details of cruelty, inhumanity, and the most diabolical hate and vengeance, and anon come passages of powerful testimony to the supreme power of love."

1895 Poor Hurstwood: his decline in Theodore Dreiser's *Sister Carrie* matches the rise of Carrie, his former protégée, but he's inspired to make one last, ill-fated grab toward his old vitality by a notice in the papers that the Brooklyn streetcar lines, facing a strike by their motormen, are hiring replacements. His day out on the lines, though, is a nightmare: mobs of strikers assault him as a scab in scenes Dreiser based on the massive Brooklyn streetcar strike in January 1895, a strike Dreiser had covered himself for the *New York World*, struggling, much like the striking motormen, against a horde of other bottom-feeding reporters to cobble together a daily living.

1907 Calling the book "a rather strained rhapsody with whaling for a subject," Joseph Conrad declined an offer to write a preface for *Moby-Dick*.

1924 The restless interests of Edmund Wilson—who wrote about everything from Karl Marx to modernist poets to the Zuni to the Dead Sea Scrolls—found perhaps their furthest reach when, having taken work as a press agent for the Royal Swedish Ballet, he interested his employers in *Cronkhite's Clocks*, a work of his own composition that he described in a letter on this day as "a great super-ballet of New York," written for "a Negro comedian and seventeen other characters, full of orchestra, movie machine, typewriters, radio, phonograph, riveter, electromagnet, alarm clocks, telephone bells, and jazz band," as well as, in a starring role, Charlie Chaplin. But Chaplin, making *The Gold Rush* in California at the time, said he only worked on things he created, and that was the end of the ballet.

1959 With his four children, four months' worth of food, five hundred books, and a crew of a dozen or so ready to sail on his hundred-ton schooner, Sterling Hayden, once a wartime OSS agent in the Balkans and once promoted by Paramount Pictures as "the Beautiful Blond Viking God," now bitterly divorced and sour on Hollywood, waited for a judge's permission to set out for the freedom of the South Seas. The judge ruled he couldn't take the children out of the country, but Hayden hoisted anchor anyway and sailed for Tahiti, an adventure he recounted in a memoir named after his ship, *Wanderer*, a brooding, two-fisted tale of the sea and Hollywood ennui published not long before his return to the screen as Gen. Jack D. Ripper in *Dr. Strangelove*.

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January 16

BORN: 1933 Susan Sontag (*On Photography, Against Interpretation*), New York City
1955 Mary Karr (*The Liars' Club*, *Cherry*, *Lit*), Groves, Tex.
DIED: 1794 Edward Gibbon (*The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*), 56, London
2009 John Mortimer (*Rumpole of the Bailey*), 85, Turville Heath, England

1605 Published: *El ingenioso hidalgo don Quixote de la Mancha*, the first volume of *Don Quixote,* by Miguel de Cervantes (Francisco de Robles, Madrid)

1632 It is possible that both René Descartes and Thomas Browne were in attendance when Dr. Nicolaes Tulp presented the public dissection Rembrandt immortalized in *The Anatomy Lesson*. The annual "anatomies" were a major social event, and both Descartes and Browne were in Holland then and had great scientific and philosophical interest in the subject (Descartes had made his own animal dissections in search of the sources of memory and emotion). The mere possibility they were there was enough for W. G. Sebald, who in the midst of a meditation on Browne in the early pages of *The Rings of Saturn* claims that Rembrandt, unlike Descartes, was drawn not to the mechanics of the body but to the grotesque, open-mouthed horror of the cadaver, a criminal hanged just an hour before.

NO YEAR Before *The Fountainhead* and *Atlas Shrugged*, Ayn Rand found her first audience on Broadway with a play called *Night of January 16th*. Rand had disowned it by then—on opening night she sat in the back row and yawned "out of genuine boredom"—but with its theatrical gimmick, a trial in which a jury of audience members decided on the guilt or innocence of an accused murderer, the play lasted for six months on Broadway and became a local-theater staple; in a bit of happenstance enjoyed by Robert Coover in his novel *The Public Burning*, the part of District Attorney Flint in the Whittier Community Players production in 1938 was played by local lawyer Richard M. Nixon.

1966 Conrad Knickerbocker, in the *New York Times*, on Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*: "At a time when the external happening has become largely meaningless and our reaction to it brutalized, when we shout 'Jump' to the man on the ledge, Mr. Capote has restored dignity to the event. His book is also a grieving testament of faith in what used to be called the soul."

1979 "Proceeding with *Bellefleur*. Slowly, as usual." It's the sort of unsatisfied remark you might read in any writer's diary, but in the *Journals* of Joyce Carol Oates, whose productivity—bewildering to everyone but herself—has always threatened to obscure the value of her works, it's incongruous enough that even she took note: "I suppose since I've written 450 pages since Sept. 24 I can't have gone as slowly as it seems." Time feels different to her when she's consumed in her stories, she added: she feels like she's "crawling on her hands and knees" while to everyone else it seems she is sprinting, a "queer unfathomable teasing paradox."

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January 17

BORN: **1860** Anton Chekhov (“The Lady with the Dog,” *Uncle Vanya*), Taganrog, Russia
1962 Sebastian Junger (*The Perfect Storm*, *Fire*, *War*), Belmont, Mass.
DIED: **1964** T. H. White (*The Once and Future King*, *Mistress Masham’s Repose*), 57, Piraeus, Greece
1972 Betty Smith (*A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*), 75, Shelton, Conn.

1904 On Anton Chekhov’s forty-fourth birthday (six months before his death), *The Cherry Orchard* had its premiere at the Moscow Art Theatre, directed by Constantin Stanislavsky.

1925 Laura Ingalls Wilder had written for the *Missouri Ruralist*, a farm newspaper, for over a dozen years, but her short article “My Ozark Kitchen,” in *Country Gentleman* on this day, was among her first for a national audience. Her move to a wider readership was pushed by her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, already one of the best-paid freelance writers in the country. “I’m trying to train you as a writer for the big market,” Rose wrote. “You must understand that what sold was *your* article, *edited* . . . So that next time you can do the editing yourself.” Seven years later Rose edited her mother’s childhood stories into a book called *Little House in the Big Woods*, the beginning of a series whose true authorship—by mother or daughter or, most likely, both—has been debated ever since.

1929 For ten years, Olive Oyl, her tiny and ambitious brother, Castor, and her meathead boyfriend, Ham Gravy, had been starring in E. C. Segar’s *The Thimble Theatre* in Hearst’s *New York Journal*, along with a series of oddball minor characters who cycled in and out of the series. In this day’s episode, Castor Oyl went in search of someone to captain a boat he had bought as part of his latest get-rich-quick scheme (involving a good-luck bird named the Whiffle Hen). “Hey there! Are you a sailor?” he shouted at a man on the dock. “ ’Ja think I’m a cowboy?” came the reply from a man in a sailor suit with a corncob pipe and massive, tattooed forearms. And so was born Popeye, who soon took over the strip and long outlived his creator, who died of leukemia in 1938.

1971 Joseph Epstein’s “liberal” expression of disgust with homosexuality—and its alleged new vogue—in a *Harper’s* essay brought post-Stonewall protesters into the *Harper’s* offices and pushed Merle Miller, a novelist, reporter, screenwriter, and former *Harper’s* editor, to make his own statement in the *New York Times Magazine*. In “What It Means to Be a Homosexual,” Miller came out at age fifty-one, recounting a history of being called “sissy,” finding love among young outcasts, and living a closeted life in a culture that despised his sexuality, often under the cloak of “toleration.” While Epstein declared he could think of nothing worse for his sons than to be gay, Miller closed his piece, which spurred a record 2,000 letters to the *Times*, most of them grateful, by saying, “I would not choose to be anyone or any place else.”

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January 18

BORN: 1882 A. A. Milne (*Winnie-the-Pooh*, *When We Were Very Young*), London
1925 Gilles Deleuze (*Anti-Oedipus*, *A Thousand Plateaus*), Paris
DIED: 1936 Rudyard Kipling (*Kim*, *The Jungle Book*), 70, London
1989 Bruce Chatwin (*In Patagonia*, *The Songlines*), 48, Nice, France

1902 "As for my not having read Stevenson's letters—my dear child!" Jack London wrote to Anna Strunsky, his fellow Socialist and the woman to whom he would have rather been married. "When the day comes that I have achieved a fairly fit scientific foundation and a bank account of a thousand dollars, then come & be with me when I lie on my back all day long and read, & read, & read, & read."

1939 With E. M. Forster and a young friend of Isherwood's to see them off on the boat train from London, W. H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood left England for America. Well traveled, this time they were leaving for good, each for his own reasons—Auden to escape the cage of his celebrity and Isherwood out of a general restlessness: "I couldn't stop traveling." But their departure, on the eve of war, was seen as a betrayal by some at home. The *Daily Mail* called Auden a "disgrace to poetry," and Evelyn Waugh, in his next novel, *Put Out More Flags*, satirized them as Parsnip and Pimpernell. Arriving to a snowstorm in New York eight days later, the two, friends for a decade and a half and sometimes lovers, soon parted, with Auden settling into the city, and Isherwood heading to California in May.

1947 Raymond Chandler asked his editor at the *Atlantic Monthly* to pass along a message to his zealous copy editor: "When I split an infinitive, God damn it, I split it so it will stay split."

1960 Mikael Blomkvist, crusading editor in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy, is born.

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1969 George Steiner, in *The New Yorker*, on Hermann Hesse: “Why the Hesse vogue? Possibly a fairly rude, simple answer is in order. The young have read little and compared less.”

1999 Daphne Merkin, in *The New Yorker*, on A. L. Kennedy’s *Original Bliss*: “This is one of those books that makes you curious to meet the author; you wonder how Kennedy came to dream up Helen and Edward and how, at the age of thirty-three, she understands so much about the existential unease that wafts, unremarked on, through ordinary life.”

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January 19

BORN: 1809 Edgar Allan Poe ("The Raven," *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*), Boston
1929 Patricia Highsmith (*The Talented Mr. Ripley*), Fort Worth, Tex.
DIED: 1997 James Dickey (*Deliverance*, *Buckdancer's Choice*), 73, Columbia, S.C.
2011 Wilfrid Sheed (*A Middle Class Education*), 80, Great Barrington, Mass.

1813 Among the most unsettling of American tales is "William Wilson," the story of a man haunted from youth by a double who shares his name, his size, his features, and even this date as his birthday. Intimate rivals as schoolboys, the two Wilsons part ways, but the narrator finds, as he leads a life of cruelty and extravagant debauchery across Europe, that his double appears again and again at his side to remind him of his nature in low, insinuating whispers. When, finally, the narrator is driven to murder his twin, he finds, as *Fight Club* fans might not be surprised to hear, that he has murdered himself. In a further blurring of identity, the Wilsons share their birthday (though not its year) with their creator, Edgar Allan Poe.

1921 "So long." "See you tomorrow." For a short time one winter, two boys played together in the unfinished house the father of one of them was building and, when evening came each day, parted with those words, until one day one boy didn't come back. William Maxwell built his short novel *So Long, See You Tomorrow* from two events over a half-century old that still caused him a vertigo not unlike what you might feel walking along an unfinished beam with the risk of falling below: the death of his mother in 1918 and the sudden absence of his friend Cletus, who didn't return to play after his father killed a man and then himself.

1943 One night at Patsy's Bar and Grill in Harlem, a fellow patron called Langston Hughes over to join him and a friend. As the man explained, with a stubborn fatalism, that he didn't know what kind of cranks he was building in his war-plant job—"I don't crank with those cranks. I just make 'em"—his friend said, "You sound right simple." On this day soon after, Hughes added a new character to his weekly column in the *Chicago Defender*, "My Simple Minded Friend," who commented on the news of the day with the same plain-spoken sensibility and who, over time,

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developed into Jessie B. Semple, the hero of Hughes's "Simple" stories and the most popular creation in his wide-ranging career.

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January 20

BORN: **1804** Eugène Sue (*The Mysteries of Paris*), Paris
1959 Tami Hoag (*Night Sins*, *Kill the Messenger*), Cresco, Iowa
DIED: **1900** John Ruskin (*The Stones of Venice*, *Modern Painters*), 80, Brantwood, England
2011 Reynolds Price (*A Long and Happy Life*, *Kate Vaiden*), 77, Durham, N.C.

1006 It's fortunate that any details at all about the life of Murasaki Shikibu have survived the thousand years since she lived, much less that her epic of courtly life, *The Tale of Genji*, has itself endured to be considered by many the first novel. Murasaki was a court nickname for a woman whose real name and birth date aren't certain, but we do know, thanks to a diary entry, that she entered service in the emperor's court on "the twenty-ninth of the twelfth month," the last day of the year in the imperial Japanese calendar and the equivalent in the West, as some scholars measure it, of January 20, 1006. By that point, it's thought, she had already written much of *The Tale of Genji*; its early episodes, meant to entertain the aristocracy, may have been what won their author her place in the empress's entourage.

1775 Samuel Johnson had long been an irascible skeptic of the "Ossian" poems then taking Europe by storm, which the Scottish poet James Macpherson claimed he had translated from the work of a third-century Gaelic bard. Asked in 1763 whether any modern man could have composed such poetry, he growled, "Yes, Sir, many men, many women, and many children." And his final reply in his exchange with the equally fractious Macpherson is legendary: "You want me to retract. What shall I retract? I thought your book an imposture from the beginning . . . Your rage I defy . . . and what I have heard of your morals disposes me to pay regard not to what you shall say, but what you can prove." But though most came to agree with Johnson that the poems were a fraud, their popularity only increased, gaining admirers from Goethe and Wordsworth to Jefferson and Napoleon.

1988 With more pounds of dog food in his backpack than pennies in his pocket and a vague hope of finding a job and a place to stay in California, Lars Eighner, out of work for a year and about to be evicted, set up on the shoulder of Highway 290 west out of Austin, Texas, with his dog Lizbeth and a sign reading, "To L.A. with Dog." Eighner made it to L.A. but soon hitched back to Austin, where he spent the next few years surviving on the streets and writing what became, after his essay "On Dumpster Diving" was an instantly anthologized hit, *Travels with Lizbeth*, a memoir whose wry elegance contrasts with the desperation of his circumstances.

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January 21

BORN: 1952 Louis Menand (*The Metaphysical Club*, *American Studies*), Syracuse, N.Y.
1962 Tyler Cowen (*Discover Your Inner Economist*), Kearny, N.J.
DIED: 1932 Lytton Strachey (*Eminent Victorians*, *Queen Victoria*), 51, Ham, England
1950 George Orwell (*1984*, *Animal Farm*, *Homage to Catalonia*), 46, London

1846 "How do you write, o my poet?" Elizabeth Barrett, in a question echoed at thousands of author appearances since, asked Robert Browning, "with steel pens, or Bramah pens, or goosequills or crowquills?" In her case she asked because she had a gift for him, "a penholder which was given to me when I was a child, & which I have used both then & since in the production of various great epics & immortal 'works.' " She had replaced it with a lighter one, and asked, "Will you have it dearest? Yes—because you can't help it."

1849 "Do you know Sarah Helen Whitman?" Horace Greeley wrote his fellow editor Rufus Griswold about a poet of their acquaintance. "Of course, you have heard it rumored that she is to marry Poe. Well, she has seemed to me a good girl, and—you know what Poe is . . . Has Mrs. Whitman no friend within your knowledge that can faithfully explain Poe to her?"

1863 Few of Emily Dickinson's poems were published during her lifetime, but that doesn't mean none of the others had readers. When her uncle Loring Norcross died, a few years after his wife, Emily's beloved aunt Lavinia, Dickinson wrote in sympathy to her cousins Loo and Fanny, and closed the letter, "Good night. Let Emily sing for you because she cannot pray." The twelve lines that followed, which begin " 'Tis not that dying hurts us so— / 'Tis living—hurts us more—," were not written for the occasion—death was no stranger to Dickinson, and she had composed them during the previous year—but they were appropriate to a New England January, with their description of the living as birds who, unlike the dead they mourn, don't fly south to a "Better Latitude" when the frost approaches. "We—" she said to her grieving cousins, "are the Birds—that stay."

1870 Philip Henry Gosse was a Victorian naturalist of some repute who, in addition to popularizing the aquarium, spent much of his busy career attempting to reconcile the geologic evidence of the earth's age with the biblical story of creation. For readers, though, he has survived as the other title character in his son Edmund's classic memoir, *Father and Son*. Entrusted after his wife's death with the spiritual development of young Edmund, the elder Gosse and his Protestant sect descended on the child with a spiritual intensity that had the unintended effect of propelling Edmund into fierce secularism, a "horrid, insidious infidelity" that Gosse Sr. lamented in a lengthy letter on this day that his son, more than three decades later, used to close his memoir and to demonstrate their final irreconcilability.

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January 22

BORN: **1788** Lord Byron (*Don Juan*, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*), London
1937 Joseph Wambaugh (*The New Centurions*, *The Onion Field*), East Pittsburgh, Pa.
DIED: **1993** Kobo Abe (*The Woman in the Dunes*, *The Ruined Map*), 68, Tokyo
2003 Bill Mauldin (*Up Front*, *Back Home*), 81, Newport Beach, Calif.

1824 Even in 1824 the age of thirty-six was not elderly, but for Lord Byron it was. Mired in the rain in Missolonghi, where he had hoped to be the savior of Greek independence but was finding he was mainly its banker, and where a beautiful, black-eyed teenage page named Loukas had similarly shown more interest in his gifts than in his affections, Byron wrote one of his final poems, "On This Day I Complete My Thirty-Sixth Year," in which he declares that since, at his advanced age, he can no longer rouse the hearts of others, he has nothing left but to seek a "Soldier's Grave" in the "Land of honourable Death." And die he did, three months later, though from sepsis, not the sword.

1948 Despite his success in placing his early stories in national magazines, J. D. Salinger still hadn't been embraced by the one he wanted most, *The New Yorker,* which had accepted his first Holden Caulfield story but kept it on the shelf for five years. Finally *New Yorker* editor William Maxwell wrote to Salinger's agent to say, "We like parts of 'The Bananafish' by J. D. Salinger very much, but it seems to lack any discoverable story or point." Salinger eagerly made the extensive changes they requested, and on this day, a year later, their long back-and-forth about the story ended with a final editorial query before "A Perfect Day for Bananafish" could be published: is "bananafish" one word or two?

1956 W. H. Auden, in the *New York Times*, on J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Return of the King*: "Either, like myself, people find it a masterpiece of its genre or they cannot abide it, and among the hostile there are some, I must confess, for whose literary judgment I have great respect."

1967 There may have been more prolific authors in the golden age of the pulp magazines than Harry Stephen Keeler, who died on this day in Chicago, but few possessed an imagination as vast and untethered as his. In dozens of books whose titles—*The Skull of the Waltzing Clown*; *Finger! Finger!*; *Y. Cheung, Business Detective*; *I Killed Lincoln at 10:13!*—only hint at the wonders within, Keeler cast aside traditional notions of plot, character, and consequence in favor of an extravagance of incident and invention, following a theory of fiction he called "webwork" that one of the small army of fans dedicated to resurrecting his work has described as "coincidence porn."

1982 Adam Mars-Jones, in the *TLS*, on Raymond Carver's *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*: "That's the trick, though: to throw your voice so that it seems to be coming from the furniture, and Carver is an excellent ventriloquist."

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January 23

BORN: **1783** Stendhal (*The Red and the Black*, *On Love*), Grenoble, France
1930 Derek Walcott (*Omeros*, *In a Green Night*), Castries, St. Lucia
DIED: **1991** Northrop Frye (*Anatomy of Criticism*, *Fearful Symmetry*), 78, Toronto
2007 Ryszard Kapuściński (*The Emperor*, *The Soccer War*), 74, Warsaw

1759 The French *Encyclopédie* was a compendium of human knowledge but also a radical Enlightenment attack on superstition at a time when revolution was brewing. Finally, after eight years of publication, the royal authorities had enough. "In the shadows of a dictionary which assembles an infinity of useful and curious facts about the arts and sciences," warned the public prosecutor on this day, "one has admitted all sorts of absurdities, of impieties spread by all authors, embellished, augmented, and shockingly obvious," and by summer the project was officially banned. But work continued, for the *Encyclopédie* had important friends as well as enemies. When police searched the house of its editor, Denis Diderot, they found nothing, because the tens of thousands of pages of manuscript had been hidden by the king's chief censor in his own office.

1886 James Ashcroft Noble, in the *Academy*, on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*: "It is, indeed, many years since English fiction has been enriched by any work at once so weirdly imaginative in conception and so faultlessly ingenious in construction as this little tale, which can be read with ease in a couple of hours."

1892 The *Spectator* on Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles*: "We confess that this is a story which, in spite of its almost unrivalled power, is very difficult to read, because in almost every page the mind rebels against the steady assumptions of the author, and shrinks from the untrue picture of a universe so blank and godless."

1931 "10:15 p.m. Important discovery . . . found monstrous barrel-shaped fossil of wholly unknown nature . . . Arrangement reminds one of certain monsters of primal myth, especially fabled Elder Things in *Necronomicon* . . . 11:30 p.m. Matter of highest—I might say transcendent—importance . . . Vast field of study opened . . . I've got to dissect one of these things before we take any rest." The wireless dispatches from Dr. Lake's expedition, which has already discovered Antarctic mountains higher than the Himalayas, send the rest of his scientific party into ecstasy with their revelations. But, as readers of H. P. Lovecraft will expect, such hopes soon turn to horror, and the following day, in Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness*, the terror begins as the monstrous Elder Things, awakened, begin their *own* dissections.

1976 Russell Davies, in the *TLS*, on E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime*: "I am at a loss to say how this most wooden of jigsaws has come to be regarded as a powerful and impressive novel—unless it be by that uncontrollably spawning common consent that takes over when the American public realizes a publicity campaign has got too big to face failure."

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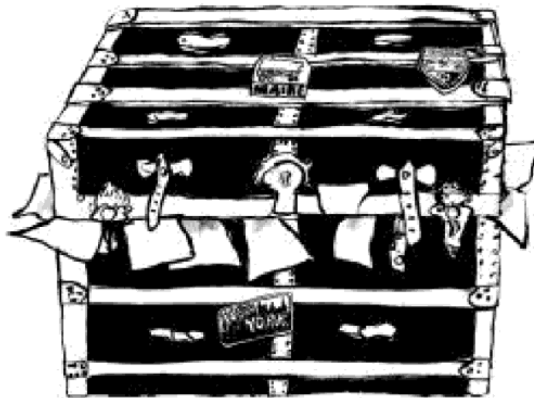
January 24

BORN: **1776** E. T. A. Hoffmann (*The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*), Königsberg, Prussia
1862 Edith Wharton (*The House of Mirth*, *The Age of Innocence*), New York City
DIED: **1986** L. Ron Hubbard (*Dianetics*, *Battlefield Earth*), 74, Creston, Calif.
2013 Richard G. Stern (*Other Men's Daughters*), 84, Tybee Island, Ga.

1922 A champion of T. S. Eliot since he called "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" the "best poem I have yet had or seen from an American," Ezra Pound eagerly became the hands-on editor of *The Waste Land* in 1921. Much as Gordon Lish would do with Raymond Carver's stories sixty years later, he pruned half of Eliot's manuscript away, leaving a compact and opaque masterpiece that Eliot largely accepted, saying later that "I should wish the blue penciling . . . to be preserved as evidence of Pound's critical genius." Pound happily accepted credit, writing Eliot on this day to congratulate him on the revisions and attaching a little ditty saying that if readers wanted to know how *The Waste Land* was born, "Ezra performed the Caesarian Operation."

1934 T. H. Mathews, in the *New Republic*, on Dashiell Hammett's *The Thin Man*: a "first-rate murder story," but by writing a more conventional detective tale outside his "gangster-political" milieu, "perhaps Mr. Hammett is coasting."

1949 There are few more evocative accounts of the writing of a book than the notes, terse but full of sentiment, that appear at the end of Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian.* Her "Reflections on the Composition of *Memoirs of Hadrian*" reecounts the story of a love affair—taken up in youth, abandoned, and taken up again in maturity—between a writer and her subject, the Roman emperor Hadrian. Possessed by his character in the 1920s, Yourcenar worked fitfully on the story in the '30s and then put it aside as impossible through most of the '40s until, while sorting through a trunk stored during the war in Switzerland, she came across yellowed sheets from her lost manuscript, which she immediately took up again in a passion that consumed her for the next three years until *Hadrian* was complete.



1954 In a safari plane crash, Ernest Hemingway ruptured his kidney, spleen, and liver and suffered a concussion, burns, and two crushed vertebrae.

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January 25

BORN: 1882 Virginia Woolf (*To the Lighthouse*, *Mrs. Dalloway*), London
1950 Gloria Naylor (*The Women of Brewster Place*), New York City
DIED: 1640 Robert Burton (*The Anatomy of Melancholy*), 62, Oxford, England
1855 Dorothy Wordsworth (*Grasmere Journals*), 83, Rydal, England

1533 It's the most storied and significant marriage in European history, but in Hilary Mantel's telling the wedding between Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, the second wife for whom he rebelled against the pope, takes place "almost in secret, with no celebration, just a huddle of witnesses, the married pair both speechless except for the small admissions of intent forced out of them by the ceremony." Among the witnesses, Thomas Cromwell exchanges threats with his fellow courtier William Brereton, who three years later will be executed, at Cromwell's bidding, along with the new queen. As often as their tale has been told, Mantel gave it new life—with a surprisingly sympathetic Cromwell, one of history's villains, at its center—in the Booker Prize–winning *Wolf Hall* and its Booker-winning sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*.

1836 Chasing promises of payment for writing he'd already done, Nathaniel Hawthorne moved to Boston at thirty-one to take the editorship of the *American Magazine of Useful and Entertaining Knowledge*, a hodgepodge periodical of mostly regurgitated fact and advice. Writing and editing nearly the entire magazine on his own, he enlisted his older sister, Elizabeth, to help. "Concoct, concoct, concoct," he wrote her on this day. "I make nothing of writing a history or biography before dinner. Do you the same." Promised $500 for a year's work, he lasted half the year and only received $20. Giving up in exhaustion and dismay, he realized, as he wrote his younger sister, "this world is as full of rogues as Beelzebub"—his cat—"is of fleas."

1851 The *Spectator* on the poems of Elizabeth Barrett Browning: "Like all bad artists, she never knows when she has said enough, and does not spend sufficient time upon her poems to make them

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short. She labours under the mistake that two-hundred-and-forty pence make a pound in the coinage of Parnassus."

1973 Mary McCarthy, in the *New York Review of Books*, on David Halberstam's *The Best and the Brightest*: "Despite the tone of concern and commitment, the book has less to contribute to the public interest . . . than to consumer appetites for unauthorized prowls down the corridors of power."

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January 28

BORN: 1873 Colette (*Chéri*, *Claudine at School*, *Gigi*), Yonne, France
1936 Ismail Kadare (*The General of the Dead Army*), Gjirokastër, Albania
DIED: 1939 W. B. Yeats (*The Tower*, "The Second Coming"), 73, Menton, France
1996 Jerry Siegel (*Superman*), 81, Los Angeles

1728 On this evening Jonathan Swift received a message he had been dreading, announcing the death of Esther Johnson and, with it, the end of the great friendship of his life. They met when he was twenty-one and she just eight: he tutored her as a child, nicknaming her Stella, and when she reached maturity she followed him to Dublin. Biographers doubt the rumors they were married in secret and generally trust Swift's assertions of their celibacy, but the passion between them was unmistakable: as Swift wrote to a friend, "Believe me that violent friendship is much more lasting, and as much engaging, as violent love." After her death, Swift confessed in "On the Death of Mrs. Johnson" that he was too heartsick to attend her funeral, and indeed had to move away from a window through which he could see the light from the church where it was being held.

1856 In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison made a ghost story out of one of the most haunting public episodes in the history of American slavery. On a snowy January night, a family of eight slaves in Boone County, Kentucky, took horses and a sled from their masters and broke for freedom across the frozen Ohio River to Cincinnati. Just hours later, though, a posse tracked them down to the house where they were hiding and entered to find Margaret Garner, having cut the throat of her two-year-old daughter, threatening to kill her other children to keep them from being returned to slavery. Garner's dramatic trial became a cause célèbre, and her story was retold by Harriet Beecher Stowe in *Dred*. Morrison discovered the story in a newspaper clipping when editing two documentary books in the early '70s, but chose to learn no more about Garner as she imagined her characters Sethe and Beloved. "The rest," she said, "was novel writing."

1913 A long morning trip by train and elephant, after an exhausting night in which he made his last declaration of love to his friend Syed Ross Masood, left E. M. Forster susceptible to the echoes of the Barabar Caves, an experience he'd turn during the next decade into the pivotal Marabar Caves scene in *A Passage to India*.

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January 30

BORN: **1912** Barbara W. Tuchman (*The Guns of August*, *A Distant Mirror*), New York City
1931 Shirley Hazzard (*The Transit of Venus*, *The Great Fire*), Sydney, Australia
DIED: **2006** Wendy Wasserstein (*The Heidi Chronicles*), 55, New York City
2007 Sidney Sheldon (*The Other Side of Midnight*), 89, Rancho Mirage, Calif.

1890 Not every battle on the American frontier was bloody. The historian Angie Debo, who was born on this day near Beattie, Kansas, before moving with her family at age ten to Oklahoma, where she spent the balance of her ninety-eight years, made a specialty of what she called "the second stage of dispossession of the Indians," when the rifle "was replaced by the legislative enactment and court decrees of the legal exploiter, and the lease, mortgage and deed of the land shark." With few academic jobs open to a woman, Debo worked mainly as a freelance historian, digging through bureaucratic archives to write a series of books including *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes*, which pointed enough fingers at prominent, living Oklahomans that the University of Oklahoma Press dropped its contract for the book, which had to be published out of state.

1913 Leaving poultry farming and teaching behind at thirty-eight, Robert Frost, a self-described "Yank from Yankville," moved his family to England and set about a poetic career with new ambition. On this day, the same day the page proofs for his first book, *A Boy's Will*, arrived, a new British friend sent the calling card of a fellow American he ought to see, Ezra Pound. By March Pound was writing with pride to the editors of *Poetry*, "Have just discovered another Amur'kn. VURRY Amur'k'n, with, I think, the seeds of grace." Frost began by calling Pound his "dazzling friend" but soon chafed against his "bullying" patronage, resisting, unlike T. S. Eliot, Pound's strong editorial hand and resenting Pound's portrait of him as a fellow poor and bitter exile.

1935 The day Richard Brautigan died is shrouded in mystery, since his body wasn't found until more than a month after he shot himself at the age of forty-nine, but the day of his birth is not exactly brightly illuminated either, by himself least of all. Brautigan was born on this day to a waitress in Tacoma, who never told the man she had left months before that he had a son. Known as Dick Porterfield, after his stepfather, for much of his childhood, Brautigan left the Northwest for California at age twenty-one and never looked back, writing great quantities of poetry and fiction before striking the generational mother lode with the idiosyncratic bestseller *Trout Fishing in America*, after which he spent two decades alternately chasing after and rejecting the success he had improbably found.

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Among Wolves, was “a super book.” Taken up by Goebbels, Fallada spent the rest of the regime in a delicate and miserable negotiation with the Reich, reluctantly altering his next novel toward a pro-Nazi storyline and then spending the war years in an insane asylum, acquiring scarce supplies in the guise of writing an anti-Semitic novel but composing instead a condemnation of life under the Nazis, published after the war as *The Drinker*.

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February 4

BORN: **1921** Betty Friedan (*The Feminine Mystique*), Peoria, Ill.
1925 Russell Hoban (*Turtle Diary*, *Bread and Jam for Frances*), Lansdale, Pa.
DIED: **1975** John R. Tunis (*The Kid from Tomkinsville*, *Iron Duke*), 85, Essex, Conn.
2006 Betty Friedan (*The Second Stage*), 85, Washington, D.C.

1818 Sir Walter Scott, whose wildly popular historical romances created a vogue for Scottish culture in modern Britain, took on a real-life quest with some of the romance, though little of the danger, of his heroic tales of *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe*. The Scottish crown jewels, known as the Honours of Scotland, had been unseen for a century and were feared lost or transported out of the kingdom until, on this day, Scott and a dozen officials unlocked doors of iron and wood to reach the depths of Edinburgh Castle, where, in a chamber covered six inches thick in dust, they raised the lid of a chest to find intact the crown, sword, scepter, and mace of Scotland.

1882 Oscar Wilde's cheeky tour of America set the good people of Boston against each other. Colonel T. W. Higginson, reformer, soldier, and Emily Dickinson's patient patron, criticized on this day the local ladies who had welcomed into their homes this author of "mediocre" poems whose "nudities do not suggest the sacred whiteness of an antique statue, but rather the forcible unveiling of some insulting innocence." In reply, Julia Ward Howe, already famous for her "Battle Hymn of the Republic," defended Mr. Wilde—"a young man in whom many excellent people have found much to like"—as well as her own hospitality: "If, as alleged, the poison found in the ancient classics is seen to linger too deeply in his veins," the cure was not scolding "but a cordial and kindly intercourse with that which is soundest, sweetest and purest in our own society."

1882 The death, in Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, of Ivan Ilyich.

1906 Following the death of Charles Tyson Yerkes, the scandal-courting streetcar magnate whose unapologetic malignity shocked even that robber-baron age (his reply to payoff allegations: "Why not give us the fifty-year franchise we ask for and thus stop the bribery?"), the *New York World* declared on this day that only the late Balzac could have captured his life in fiction: "The tale is too intricate and various and melodramatic for any living novelist who writes the English language." Theodore Dreiser, though, had been keeping a file on Yerkes for years and soon used the arc of his career as the basis for his Trilogy of Desire—*The Financier*, *The Titan*, and *The Stoic*—which traced the horrifying and fascinating rise and fall of streetcar king Frank Cowperwood.

1938 Sixteen years before *The Lord of the Rings* was published, J. R. R. Tolkien sent "A Long-expected Party," the first chapter "of a possible sequel to *The Hobbit*," for his publisher and, more importantly, his publisher's teenage son, an early fan of *The Hobbit*, to read.

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February 6

BORN: 1898 Melvin Tolson (*Harlem Gallery*, *Dark Symphony*), Moberly, Mo.
1955 Michael Pollan (*The Omnivore's Dilemma*), Long Island, N.Y.
DIED: 1989 Barbara W. Tuchman (*The Guns of August*, *The First Salute*), 77, Greenwich, Conn.
1994 Jack Kirby (*Fantastic Four*, *X-Men*), 76, Thousand Oaks, Calif.

1853 According to his first biographer, February 1853 was a momentous time for Horatio Alger Jr. Living in Paris, the timid Harvard grad was introduced to the sinful pleasures of the body by a plump café chanteuse named Elise. "I was a fool to have waited so long," he told his diary on the 4th, and on this day he added, "She says she knows I wanted to." But in truth there was no diary, no Elise, and no trip to Paris: his French initiation, like nearly everything else in *Alger: A Biography Without a Hero*, was concocted by its author, Herbert R. Mayes, in 1927. Mayes planned the book as a spoof, but he kept quiet as it was taken seriously by reviewers and became the authoritative source on the life of the once-popular master of juvenile uplift stories. Only fifty years later did he confess, as Gary Scharnhorst and Jack Bales detailed in their own Alger biography, that he had invented almost everything in what he called a "miserable, maudlin piece of claptrap."

1910 Writing was rarely easy for Joseph Conrad, and his health was often poor, but his struggles with both peaked with the novel he called *Razumov* (after its main character) until settling on *Under Western Eyes*. In December 1908 he told his agent the novel was complete, but a year later, with the book still not done, the agent threatened to stop the weekly £6 checks he sent the heavily indebted author. Furious, Conrad submitted the full manuscript in late January and immediately broke down, overcome by a nervous breakdown and his chronic gout. By this day, his wife, Jessie, wrote to friends, "he lives mixed up in the scenes and holds converse with the characters." The novel's sales did little to relieve his debt; not until his next book, *Chance*, did he find the success and relative security he had struggled toward for years.

1964 Ralph Ellison, in the *New York Review of Books*, on LeRoi Jones's *Blues People*: "The tremendous burden of sociology which Jones would place upon this body of music is enough to give even the

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February 7

BORN: 1812 Charles Dickens (*David Copperfield*, *Dombey and Son*), Landport, England
1932 Gay Talese (*Honor Thy Father*, *Thy Neighbor's Wife*), Ocean City, N.J.
DIED: 1958 Betty MacDonald (*The Egg and I*, *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*), 49, Seattle
1995 James Merrill (*The Changing Light at Sandover*), 68, Tucson, Ariz.

1584 Someone must have denounced Domenico Scandella to the authorities, because he was arrested by the Holy Office and on this day was interrogated by the Inquisition for his blasphemy. Scandella was just a poor miller of fifty-two, but he had long been known in his town for the scandalous, self-taught ideas he'd argue to anyone who'd listen, among them that the Virgin Mary could not have been a virgin and that the earth had formed out of a mass of chaos like cheese out of milk, after which "worms appeared in it, and these were the angels." The records of his interrogations and of the trial fifteen years later that resulted in his execution provided Carlo Ginzburg a rare chance, in his influential and entertaining microhistory *The Cheese and the Worms*, to piece together one of the lower-class lives that were often unrecorded and largely untouched by the Renaissance.

1968 At the center of Michael Herr's *Dispatches*, his immersed, anguished, and stylish book about the Vietnam War, is a long chapter called "Khe Sanh." Khe Sanh was a combat base in the mountains near the border with Laos, an outpost, surrounded by North Vietnamese, that grew in strategic importance as the war continued until, in Herr's words, it "became like the planted jar in Wallace Stevens' poem. It took dominion everywhere." For some time the feeling of an uneasy, bunkered truce held there, while reporters like Herr read *The Battle of Dienbienphu* and *Hell in a Very Small Place* to prepare for the siege they expected, but on this day the mood got darker. A nearby Special Forces camp called Langvei had been overrun, with "weapons and tactics which no one imagined" the North Vietnamese had. And now all Khe Sanh was consumed by the terrible thought: "Jesus, they had tanks. Tanks!"

1980 A basketball fan with a hazy sense of NBA history, when told that one of the great basketball books was written about a season with the late-'70s Portland Trailblazers, might assume that David Halberstam's *The Breaks of the Game* is about the Blazers' 1977 championship team. But it isn't, or rather it's about that team three years later, as they succumbed to the entropic forces of injury, age, success, and the business of professional basketball, which all came to a head on one late-season road trip to San Diego, when two of the title team's stalwarts, Maurice Lucas and Lionel Hollins, were traded away as the Blazers prepared to play against their former star, Bill Walton, hobbled himself by a broken foot. "We were pretty good once, weren't we, Bill?" Hollins asked Walton after the trades. "Yeah," Walton replied. "We were pretty good."

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June 7

BORN: **1952** Orhan Pamuk (*The Black Book*, *My Name Is Red*, *Snow*), Istanbul
1954 Louise Erdrich (*Love Medicine*, *The Round House*), Little Falls, Minn.
DIED: **1967** Dorothy Parker (*Enough Rope*, *Here Lies*), 73, New York City
1970 E. M. Forster (*Howards End*, *A Passage to India*), 91, Coventry, England

NO YEAR The death, in *Little Women*, of Pip the canary.

1909 "I'm no bum," Richard Marquard told the firemen who found him, asleep and penniless after five days riding the rails, in their Chicago firehouse. "I'm a ballplayer." They believed him enough to chip in $5 to help him get home from a failed tryout in Iowa, and Marquard, just sixteen, vowed he'd pay them back when he made it big. Two years later, when his Giants came to town to play the Cubs on this day, Marquard, known by then as Rube, the nickname he'd carry to the Hall of Fame, did as promised, part of the story of his fast rise to the big leagues he told Lawrence Ritter, the baseball-loving economics professor who tracked down the sport's aging early stars to record their stories in 1966's *The Glory of Their Times*, a landmark book whose first appearance now stands as far in the past as Ritter's subjects were from the ancient games they recalled.

1943 Malcolm Cowley, in the *New Republic*, on T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*: "*Four Quartets* is one of those rare books that can be enjoyed without being understood."

1967 Hubertus Bigend, the Belgian proprietor of Blue Ant, a mysterious ad agency that traffics in cool, may not be the main character of any of William Gibson's novels *Pattern Recognition, Spook Country*, and *Zero History*, but he presides over them all as a ubiquitous and vaguely malign presence, looking like "Tom Cruise on a diet of virgins' blood and truffled chocolates." The Bigend Trilogy, as Gibson has called the books, marked the first time that the science fiction visionary wrote about the present, so it's fitting that Bigend may be the first character in literary history whose fictional Wikipedia entry (which appears in *Spook Country*, from which his birth on this date was gleaned) was later quoted in his actual Wikipedia entry.

NO YEAR A few hours before, she was a person. Now she's evidence. Once a Harvard grad and once a doctor, Lori Petersen is now just a body for another doctor, Dr. Kay Scarpetta, to work on with forceps and thermometer, already considering how this murder scene resembles the other three "Mr. Nobody," her serial strangler, has left behind. Patricia Cornwell was working in the state medical examiner's office in Richmond (as a writer, not a doctor) when she created Scarpetta, the chief medical examiner of Virginia, in *Postmortem*, an award-winning mystery debut that opened the door both to crime series led by strong-willed professional women and to the ongoing fascination with forensics in fiction, film, and television.

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June 8

BORN: **1903** Marguerite Yourcenar (*Memoirs of Hadrian*, *The Abyss*), Brussels
1947 Sara Paretsky (*Blood Shot*, *Blacklist*), Ames, Iowa
DIED: **1876** George Sand (*Indiana*, *Mauprat*, *Consuelo*), 71, Nohant, France
1889 Gerard Manley Hopkins ("The Wreck of the Deutschland"), 44, Dublin

1290 We know little more about Beatrice Portinari than that she was the daughter of one wealthy Florentine banker and the wife of another, and that she died on this day at the age of twenty-four. After her death, though, she gained a kind of immortality as the "Beatrice" of the poems of Dante Alighieri, who claimed to have loved her since he met her as a child (though he had met her only once since, when she greeted him on the street while walking with a friend). In his *Vita nuova*, he courted sacrilege by worshipping this earthly woman, concluding, "After she had departed this life, the whole city was left as though widowed, shorn of all dignity." And in his *Divine Comedy* she rises again, to take over from the pagan Virgil as Dante's immortal guide through the heavens of Paradise.

1949 Published: *1984* by George Orwell (Secker & Warburg, London)

1977 Marilynne Robinson has often mentioned the PhD dissertation she wrote at the University of Washington on Shakespeare, but only to say it was the task she stole time away from to experiment with "extended metaphors," written for no purpose but the freedom of their thought. Those metaphors turned into her first novel, the singular, visionary *Housekeeping*, but she didn't entirely neglect her schoolwork, turning in a 257-page thesis on this day called "A New Look at Shakespeare's *Henry VI, Part II*: Sources, Structure, Meaning," which can still be found in the stacks of the UW library, and which makes the rather unambitious argument, with little sign of the elegant ferocity of her later essays, that this neglected work was actually a "good, sound play."

1978 Invited to give the commencement address at Harvard after two years of living in exile in the United States, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn proclaimed that the West, with all its material abundance, was weakened by cowardice, decadence, mediocrity, and spiritual exhaustion.

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June 9

BORN: 1954 Gregory Maguire (*Wicked*, *Confessions of an Ugly Stepsister*), Albany, N.Y.
1956 Patricia Cornwell (*Postmortem*, *Body of Evidence*), Miami, Fla.
DIED: 1870 Charles Dickens (*Great Expectations*, *A Tale of Two Cities*), 58, Higham, England
1974 Miguel Angel Asturias (*Men of Maize*, *The President*), 74, Madrid

1865 The inattention of a work crew on this day caused six of the seven first-class coaches in the express train from the English Channel to plunge into a gap in the rails in Staplehurst, England. Left dangling over the abyss in the seventh were the young actress Ellen Ternan, her mother, and her secret paramour, Charles Dickens, who crawled out through a window and spent the next few hours ministering to the victims below with water he carried from the river with his top hat and brandy he retrieved from the carriage. He also retrieved the manuscript of the latest installment of *Our Mutual Friend*, and when the novel was published later that year, Dickens rather light-heartedly mentioned the rescue of his book in a final note, but the carnage of the crash, in which ten died and two score were seriously injured, haunted him the rest of his life, as did the near-discovery of his relationship with Miss Ternan.

1941 At the time, neither Vladimir nor Vera Nabokov knew how to drive, so when Stanford University offered Vladimir a summer teaching position, they accepted the suggestion of one of his Russian-language students, Dorothy Leuthold, that she drive them from New York to California in her new car. At a stop at the Grand Canyon, Vladimir, never without a butterfly net, had the thrill of his lepidopteral career when on a trail just under the canyon's rim Dorothy disturbed into flight an unknown brown butterfly. Bringing two specimens back to the car, he found Vera had caught two of the same, and in a paper the following year he named the new species, the first he had identified, after their traveling companion, *Neonympha dorothea.*

1976 The mud came from somewhere. When Dana Franklin disappears from her California apartment and then reappears a few seconds later, wet, muddy, and frightened, having spent the time in between on a riverbank she doesn't recognize, where she saves a drowning boy and is nearly shot by his father, she and her husband try to hold to the facts of what, unbelievably, has happened: the mud had to come from somewhere. And when it happens again and again, she adds to her facts: she travels when the boy is in danger, she returns when *she's* in danger, and the place she goes to is on Maryland's Eastern Shore in 1815, where, as a black woman, she must live as a slave. Most of Octavia Butler's fiction was set in the future, but with *Kindred* she brought her readers bodily into the past in a story that grounds the fantastic, uneasily, in the matter-of-fact.

Copyrighted material

Charlie Chan (Huang), 221
Charlotte's Web (White), 133
Charques, R. D., 89
Charterhouse of Parma, The (Stendhal), 160, 278
Chase, Rev. Frank, 101
Châtelet, Marquise de, 160
Chatterton (Ackroyd), 267
Chatterton, Thomas, 96, 267, 355
Chatwin, Bruce, 23, 53
Chaucer, Geoffrey, 37–38, 103, 105, 123, 128, 336
Cheese and the Worms, The (Ginzburg), 46
Cheever (Bailey), 83
Cheever, John, xiii, 73, 116, 122, 166, 174, 189, 191, 193
Chekhov, Anton, 22, 53, 93, 99, 210, 219, 288
Chemical History of a Candle, The (Faraday), 379
Chéri (Colette), 65, 214, 390
Cherry-Garrard, Apsley, 121, 151, 208
Cherryh, C. J., 278
Cherry Orchard, The (Chekhov), 22
Chesnut, Mary, 102
Chesnutt, Charles W., 151, 360
Chesterton, G. K., 187, 268, 363
Cheyenne Autumn (Sandoz), 188
Chick, Jack T., 118
Child, Harold Hannyngton, 246
Child, Julia, 108, 116, 256, 313
Childe Harold's Pilgrimage (Byron), 81
Childers, Erskine, 290, 369
Child of the Century, A (Hecht), 186, 211
Children of Gebelaawi (Mahfouz), 325
Children of Men, The (James), 3, 5
"Child's Christmas in Wales, A" (Thomas), 378
Chilly Scenes of Winter (Beattie), 379
Chimes, The (Dickens), 348
"Chipmunk Song, The," 179
Chomsky, Noam, 386
Chopin, Kate, 47, 167
Chopping, Richard, 244
Christabel (Coleridge), 175
Christie, Agatha, 17, 225, 251, 292, 382
Christmas Carol, A (Dickens), 348, 377–78, 403
Christmas Story, A, 378
Christopher, Nicholas, 395
Chronic City (Lethem), 349
Churchill, Winston, 158, 178
Cibber, Colley, 390
Cimino, Michael, 199
Cinnamon Shops (Schulz), 121

Copyrighted material

Cioran, E. M., 193
Cisneros, Sandra, 249, 375, 399
Cities of the Plain (Proust), 80, 118
Citizen Kane, 140
City of Night (Rechy), 58
Clampitt, Amy, 287
Clancy, Tom, 117
Clark, Tom, 386
Clarke, Arthur C., 17, 90, 228
Clarke, Susanna, 191, 282, 346
Clavell, James, 283
Cleary, Beverly, 117
Clemenceau, Georges, 18
Clemens, Samuel. *See* Twain, Mark
Clifton, Lucille, 200
"Clink" (Orwell), 398
Clockers (Price), 173
Clockwork Orange, A (Burgess), 90, 153
Clotel (Brown), 355
Cloud Atlas (Mitchell), 67, 76, 222
Clough, Brian, 229
Cloutier, T. J., 157
Clowes, Daniel, 63, 119
Coates, Robert M., 118
Coben, Harlan, 9
Cocteau, Jean, 224, 322
Codman, Ogden, 382
Coe, Jonathan, 44, 215
Coetzee, J. M., 48, 149
Cole, Teju, 297
Coleridge, Samuel Taylor, 62, 116, 175, 212, 221, 233, 281, 332, 358, 381, 406
Colet, Louise, 131, 319
Colette, 33, 65, 173, 174, 214, 389, 390
Colfer, Eoin, 153
Collected Poems (Brodsky), 294
Collected Stories (Dahl), 382
Collier, John Payne, 36
Collier's, 338
Collins, Jackie, 315
Collins, Suzanne, 147, 253
Collins, Wilkie, 234, 300, 366
Colonel's Dream, The (Chesnutt), 151
Color of Money, The (Tevis), 252
Colwin, Laurie, 335
Combat, 146
Combe, George, 360
Comédie humaine (Balzac), 317
"Come On-a My House," 179

Copyrighted material

Comfort, Alex, 174
Comforters, The (Spark), 402
Coming of Age in Samoa (Mead), 17
Common Sense (Paine), 15
Compton-Burnett, Ivy, 193, 270, 317
Concrete Island (Ballard), 127
Condon, Richard, 220
Confederacy of Dunces, A (Toole), 76, 386
Confessions (Augustine), 130, 131
Confessions of an English Opium-Eater (de Quincey), 318
Confidence-Man, The (Melville), 105, 106
Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, A (Twain), 194
Connell, Evan S., 260
Connelly, Michael, 159
Connolly, Cyril, 371
Connors, Philip, 238
Conover, Ted, 410
Conquest, Robert, 86
Conrad, Joseph, 20, 36, 45, 53, 57, 74, 90, 93, 121, 246, 270, 382
Conroy, Frank, 111, 195
Conroy, Pat, 337
Conspiracy of Pontiac, The (Parkman), 168
Conversations with Children on the Gospels (Alcott), 250
Conway, Jill Ker, 320
Cookson, Catherine, 184
Cooper, Dennis, 15
Cooper, James Fenimore, 292, 357
Cooper, Merian C., 222
Coover, Robert, 21, 173
Copernicus, Nicolaus, 163
Cop Hater (McBain), 232
Coppola, Eleanor, 233, 326
Cornwell, Patricia, 180, 182
Corpse Had a Familiar Face, The (Buchanan), 65
Corrections, The (Franzen), 301, 375, 392
Corsair, 15
Cortázar, Julio, 51, 403
Corvo, Baron, 337
Cosmicomics (Calvino), 47
Cosmopolitan, 90
Cottin, Letty, 90
Cotton-Pickers, The (Traven), 248
Count of Monte Cristo, The (Dumas), 67, 75
Country Driving (Hessler), 372
Coupland, Douglas, 409
Courlander, Harold, 328
Cousteau, Jacques, 198
Coward, Noel, 124, 395

Copyrighted material

Cowen, Tyler, 26
Cowley, Malcolm, 98, 142, 180, 252, 265, 293
Coxe, Harold, 244
Crais, Robert, 125
Crane, Hart, 112, 132, 150, 229
Crane, Stephen, 70, 178, 293, 298, 393
crashes: bicycle, 289; car, 127, 157, 193, 256, 346; motorcycle, 135, 248, 256; plane, 131, 409; train, 182
Crawdaddy!, 42
Crazy Horse (Sandoz), 188
Creeley, Robert, 160
Crichton, Michael, 334
Crime and Punishment (Dostoyevsky), 208, 315
Criterion, The, 72
Critical Essays (Orwell), 55
Cromwell, Thomas, 30
Cronin, Anthony, 190
Cronkhite's Clocks (Wilson), 20
Crosby, Richard, 113
Cross, John, 201
Crouse, Timothy, 177
Croves, Hal, 97
Crowley, Aleister, 300, 380
Crowther, Bosley, 332
Crumb, Robert, 273
Crumley, James, 323
Crying of Lot 49, The (Pynchon), 80
Culture of Cities, The (Mumford), 9
Cummings, E. E., 325
Cunningham, Michael, 199, 351, 367
Cunningham, Valerie, 154
Curious George (Rey), 229
Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time, The (Haddon), 266
Custer, George Armstrong, 257, 260
Czyżewska, Elżbieta, 186

Dahl, Roald, 39, 40, 131, 290, 312, 368, 382
Dahlberg, Edward, 66
Daisy Miller (James), 385
d'Alembert, Jean le Rond, 293
Damascus (Beard), 346
Damned Utd, The (Peace), 229
Dana, Richard Henry, 78, 244
Dance to the Music of Time, A (Powell), 214
Dance with Dragons, A (Martin), 151
Dangerous Liaisons, The (Laclos), 383
Dangling Man (Bellow), 94
Daniel Deronda (Eliot), 286

Copyrighted material

Danielewski, Mark Z., 97
d'Annunzio, Gabriele, 305
Danny the Champion of the World (Dahl), 312
Dante Alighieri, 81, 139, 181, 291
Danticat, Edwidge, 340
Dark Legend (Wertham), 385
Darnton, Robert, 149
Darwin, Charles, 16, 38, 51, 88, 99, 124, 186, 209, 263, 294, 312, 368, 369
"Darwin Among the Machines" (Butler), 186
Darwin Among the Machines (Dyson), 186
Darwish, Mahmoud, 252
Daudet, Alphonse, 108, 395
Daughter of Time, The (Tey), 214
Davenport, Guy, 9, 305
David Boring (Clowes), 63
David Copperfield (Dickens), 59, 71, 410
Davie, Donald, 77
Davies, Robertson, 381, 406
Davies, Russell, 28
Davis, Amanda, 85
Davis, H. L., 342
Davis, Natalie Zemon, 289
Davis, Stephen, 236
Dawkins, Richard, 97
Day, Dorothy, 374
day jobs: advertising, 19, 112; airline ticket agent, 404; architectural assistant, 144; bank secretary, 369; cargo shipping, 340; cruise staff, 54; custom house, 14, 256; detective, 374; factory manager, 14; fire lookout, 238; gentleman's companion, 352; handicrafts teacher, 114; insurance, 128; label-pasting, 59; lawyer, 18, 44; legal stenography, 151; lens grinder, 325; librarian, 13, 149, 168, 169, 391; medicine, 53, 60, 288, 297; mine supervisor, 372; perfume extraction, 340; postal inspector, 234; prep chef, 40; prison guard, 410; public relations, 338, 373; real estate clerk, 68; screenwriter, 146, 229, 270, 303, 319, 333, 347, 384, 401; spy, 249, 306; steamboat pilot, 75; stenographic manager, 122; teacher, 166, 237, 253, 291, 295; treasure recovery, 340; wholesale hosiery, 340; window trimmer, 156
"Day Lady Died, The" (O'Hara), 190
Day of the Locust, The (West), 401
"Dead, The" (Joyce), 105
Dead Cert (Francis), 95
Dead Souls (Gogol), 235
Dean, John, 192
Dear Abby. *See* Phillips, Pauline
de Assis, Machado, 340
Death and Life of Great American Cities, The (Jacobs), 9
Death Comes for the Archbishop (Cather), 210
Death in the Afternoon (Hemingway), 254
Death in the Family, A (Agee), 157
Death in Venice (Mann), 139, 165
Death of Ivan Ilyich, The (Tolstoy), 43, 345

Copyrighted material

Death of Jim Loney, The (Welch), 345
"Death of the Author, The" (Barthes), 97
Death Ship, The (Traven), 248
de Beauvoir, Simone. *See* Beauvoir, Simone de
Debo, Angie, 35, 60
debt, 45, 49, 59, 82, 91, 115, 161, 249, 271, 286, 311, 315, 340, 381, 388
Debussy, Claude, 60, 187
December (Kluge and Richter), 379
"Declaration of the Rights of Women" (de Gouges), 348
Decoration of Houses, The (Wharton and Codman), 382
Deepness in the Sky, A (Vinge), 6
Defense, The (Nabokov), 303
Defoe, Daniel, 120, 129, 155, 340
d'Églantine, Fabre, 205–6
de Gouges, Olympe, 348
Deighton, Len, 57
de Jaucourt, Chevalier, 293
Delany, Samuel R., 106
Deleuze, Gilles, 23
DeLillo, Don, 277, 304, 314, 324, 365
de Lint, Charles, 401
Deliverance (Dickey), 277, 291
de Man, Paul, 297
Democracy (Adams), 385
Democracy in America (Tocqueville), 150
Demolished Man, The (Bester), 54
Dennis, E. S., 328
de Quincey, Thomas, 318, 387
Derrida, Jacques, 320
de Sade, Marquis, 381
Desai, Anita, 197
Descartes, René, 21, 50
de Selby, 78
Desert Solitaire (Abbey), 106
Desire Caught by the Tail (Picasso), 90
de Staël, Madame, 218, 222
Deux Magots, Les, 122, 356
Devil and Sherlock Holmes, The (Grann), 98
Devil in a Blue Dress (Mosley), 198
Devon Loch, 95
DeVoto, Avis, 108, 313
DeVoto, Bernard, 108, 358
de Waal, Edmund, 307
Dewey, John, 174
Dewey, Melvil, 405
DeWitt, Helen, 91
Dharma Bums, The (Kerouac), 295
Dialogue Concerning the Two Chief World Systems (Galileo), 61

Copyrighted material

Diamond, Jared, 287
Dianetics (Hubbard), 148
Di Piero, W. S., 184
di Prima, Diane, 249
Diary of Anaïs Nin, The, 233
Diary of a Young Girl, The (Frank), 100, 188, 198
Dias, Selma Vaz, 350
Díaz, Junot, 169, 410
Dibbell, Carola, 410
Dick, Philip K., xiv, 5, 8, 54, 59, 73, 173, 213, 290, 395
Dickens, Charles, 46, 59, 71, 92, 120, 140, 182, 185, 214, 234, 298, 301, 328, 343–44, 345, 348, 366, 377–78, 379, 402, 403, 410
Dickey, James, 24, 217, 277, 291
Dick Gibson Show, The (Elkin), 407
Dickinson, Emily, 11, 26, 43, 69, 103, 120, 134, 145, 154, 389
Dictionary of the English Language, A (Johnson), 135
Diderot, Denis, 28, 239, 293
Didion, Joan, 115, 375, 384, 402, 409
Dietrich, Marlene, 203, 339, 340
Dilke, Charles Wentworth, 406
Dillard, Annie, 135
Dinesen, Isak, 122, 148, 274, 284
Dingbat Family, The (Herriman), 234
Dinnage, Rosemary, 375
Disch, Thomas M., 41
diseases: ALS, 19; cancer, 12, 93, 122, 149, 288, 298, 354, 355, 366, 367, 393; chicken pox, 93; heart failure, 140, 183, 196, 222, 288, 301, 356, 409; lockjaw, 16; scarlet fever, 32, 85; stroke, 99, 114, 253, 393; tuberculosis, 50, 79, 93, 109, 116, 118, 245, 324, 374; yellow fever, 243, 268
Disgrace (Coetzee), 149
Disney, Walt, 152, 163, 253, 384
Dispatches (Herr), 46
Disraeli, Benjamin, 80, 388
Ditko, Steve, 347
Ditzen, Rudolf. *See* Fallada, Hans
Divine Comedy (Dante), 81, 181
Divine Invasions, The (Dick), 59
Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep? (Dick), 5, 8
Doctorow, E. L., 11, 28, 70, 93, 114
Dodgson, Charles. *See* Carroll, Lewis
Doerr, Harriet, 369
Dog of the South, The (Portis), 311
Dolphin, The (Lowell), 92
Dombey and Son (Dickens), 378
Domestic Manners of the Americans (Trollope), 49
Don Juan (Byron), 142
Donleavy, J. P., 223
Donoghue, Denis, 83
Donoghue, Emma, 335

Copyrighted material

Don Quixote (Cervantes), 21, 285, 307, 335, 342, 386
Doors of Perception, The (Huxley), 143
Dopefiend (Goines), 330
dord, 67
Dos Passos, John, 112, 155, 305, 346, 364
Dostoyevsky, Fyodor, 99, 161, 208, 217, 311, 315, 341, 387, 401
Double Down (Barthelme and Barthelme), 391
Double Helix, The (Watson), 52
Double Indemnity (Cain), 176, 333
Douglas, James, 361
Douglas, Lord Alfred, 107
Douglass, Frederick, 38, 39, 59, 280
Dowd, Siobhan, 264
Doyle, Arthur Conan, xiv, 92, 98, 161, 200, 215, 222, 252, 268, 297, 320, 327, 382
Drabble, Margaret, 178
Dracula (Stoker), 165, 254, 310
Dreamer (Johnson), 109
"Dream Song #149" (Berryman), 333
Dred (Stowe), 33
Dreiser, Theodore, 20, 31, 43, 111, 185, 270, 354, 404
Drew, Nancy, 303
Dreyfus, Alfred, 18, 177
Drink Before the War, A (Lehane), 202
Drinker, The (Fallada), 36
Drinking Coffee Elsewhere (Packer), 327
Dr. Strangelove, 20, 347
Drucker, Peter, 356, 383
drugs: cocaine, 283, 297; 350; gelselminum, 297; L-DOPA, 233; LSD, 367; marijuana, 362; mescaline, 143; opium, 318; sleeping pills, 11, 231
Drum-Taps (Whitman), 361
Drury, Allen, 279
Dryden, John, 140, 397
Dryden, Ken, 32
Dubliners (Joyce), 98
Du Bois, W. E. B., 62, 245
Dubus, Andre, 63, 231
Dubus, Andre, III, 288
Du Camp, Maxime, 337
Ducasse, Isidore. *See* Lautréamont, Comte de
Ducornet, Rikki, 124
duels, 32, 299, 372
Duke of Deception, The (Wolff), 367
Dumas, Alexandre, 67, 75, 135, 206, 232, 384
du Maurier, Daphne, 152, 383
Dunbar, Paul Laurence, 48
Duncan, Robert, 42
Dunciad, The (Pope), 187
Dunne, John Gregory, 409

Copyrighted material

Dunnett, Dorothy, 354
Durade, François d'Albert, 329
Duras, Marguerite, 109
du Tilh, Arnaud, 289
Dyer, Geoff, 178, 282
Dylan, Bob, 135, 267

"Easter, 1916" (Yeats), 129
Eastman, Max, 254
Eastman, Monk, 262
Eastman, P. D., 370
East of Eden (Steinbeck), 335
Eastward Ho! (Jonson), 278
Ebert, Roger, 109, 112
Ecce Homo (Nietzsche), 8
Eco, Umberto, 10
Eddy, Mary Baker, 382
Edel, Leon, 282
Edmonds, David, 336
Education of Henry Adams, The, 352, 385
Edward III, 128
Edwards, Jonathan, 93
Edwards, Thomas R., 350
Effi Briest (Fontane), 372
Egan, Jennifer, 153, 284
Eggers, Dave, 83, 274
Eggleston, William, 235
Egoist, The, 41
Ehrenreich, Barbara, 269
Eichmann in Jerusalem (Arendt), 116
Eidinow, John, 336
Eighner, Lars, 25
"Eight or Nine Words About Letter-Writing" (Carroll), 340
1876 (Vidal), 383
84, Charing Cross Road (Hanff), 316
Eiseley, Loren, 217
Eisenstein, Sergei, 73
Eisner, Will, 8
Either/Or (Kierkegaard), 59
Election (Perrotta), 126
Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test, The (Wolfe), 406
Elegy for Iris (Bayley), 399
Elementary Particles, The (Houellebecq), 364
Elements of Style, The (Strunk and White), 107
Eliot, George, 8, 155, 201, 210, 252, 286, 313, 329, 336, 360, 367, 368, 401
Eliot, T. S., 29, 35, 74, 103–4, 105, 180, 261, 303
Elizabeth I, 60, 107, 371
Elizabeth II, 133

Copyrighted material

Elkin, Stanley, 76, 170, 230, 407
Elkind, Peter, 54
Ellis, Bret Easton, 78
Ellis, Havelock, 216
Ellison, Ralph, 45, 72, 100, 110, 119, 121, 124, 172, 286, 373, 374, 406
Ellmann, Richard, 86, 366
Ellroy, James, 75, 195, 363
Elman, Richard, 398
Emerick, Geoff, 281
Emerson, Ralph Waldo, 58, 85, 132, 144, 145, 212, 227, 271, 351, 355
Emigrants, The (Sebald), 101, 409
Emma (Austen), 117
Emmett Lawler (Tully), 329
Emperor, The (Kapuściński), 394
Emperor's Children, The (Messud), 170
Encyclopædia Britannica, 84, 102, 270, 387
Encyclopédie, 28, 293
Endless Love (Spencer), 255
Enduring Love (McEwan), 131
Endymion (Keats), 319
Engels, Friedrich, 248
English, Thomas Dunn, 56
English Patient, The (Ondaatje), 288
English Review, The, 121
Enigma of Arrival, The (Naipaul), 244
Enright, Anne, 322
Entertaining Mr. Sloane (Orton), 133
Ephron, Nora, 158
Ephrussi, Charles, 307
Epstein, Barbara, 40, 189
Epstein, Jason, 40
Epstein, Joseph, 22
Equiano, Olaudah, 102
Erasmus, 220
Erdrich, Louise, 123, 180
Erewhon (Butler), 186
Erickson, Steve, 125
Ernie Pook's Comeek (Barry), 248
"Errand" (Carver), 93
Esquire, 106, 112, 286, 328, 354
Essays (Montaigne), 235, 339
Esther (Adams), 385
Esty, William, 396
Eugene Onegin (Pushkin), 32
Eugenides, Jeffrey, 13, 79
Evans, Marian. *See* Eliot, George
Evans, Walker, 122, 191, 348
Evelina (Burney), 245

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