

■ memoir

# BACK ON THE HORSE

A ONCE-PROLIFIC WRITER OVERCOMES THE CACOPHONY OF SUCCESS

by Amy Rosenberg



In the title story of Elizabeth Gilbert’s short story collection, *Pilgrims* (Penguin), 19-year-old Martha Knox leaves her home in rural Pennsylvania and finds work as a ranch hand in Wyoming. She saves her money to buy a scrawny horse and, when a co-worker dares her to ride away to Mexico with him, she calls his bluff. She begins to ride off, until he awkwardly climbs onto the saddle with her and they both tumble to the ground. As they lie there, unhurt, he watches a shooting star fall across the sky. But Martha is undistracted. “If [she] saw this,” Gilbert writes, “it was only as she was reaching up already with one hand for her horse’s reins, and it wasn’t something she mentioned.”

The story may have autobiographical elements—like her protagonist, Gilbert (WSUC ’91) grew up on a Christmas tree farm, and she spent a year working on a ranch in Wyoming—but that final image says the most about her:

*tic Makes Peace With Marriage* (Viking Adult). When she sat down to compose this one, she had those familiar reins in hand. But then she looked at her 500-page draft and knew that there was a problem. “The voice didn’t

For the first time in her life, Gilbert was trying to satisfy millions of readers.

a young woman reaching for the reins while everyone else is still catching their breath. That same unhesitating determination has carried Gilbert through the stages of her career. Or at least it did until she attempted to write her newest book, *Committed: A Skep-*

sound like me,” she explains. “The voice didn’t sound like anybody.” And she had no idea how to fix it—how to “write naturally.”

Gilbert buried the manuscript in a drawer and asked her publisher for more time. She went to work in her tomato garden, dig-



PHOTO © LAURA PEDRICK/THE NEW YORK TIMES/REDBUX

Book, and National Book Critics Circle awards), it was *Eat, Pray, Love* that introduced her to the greater public. With 57 weeks at No. 1 on *The New York Times* paperback nonfiction best-seller list, translation into more than 30 languages, and international praise, the book made Gilbert famous in a way that she never anticipated.

Needless to say, she was happy about its reception, but she also found her popularity somewhat perplexing. After all, she had been writing stories steadily since high school, refusing to stop despite accumulating five years of magazine rejection slips. When she was finally published in the pages of *Esquire*, she landed an agent and a job as a journalist, but she thought she was launching a literary career that might appeal to a small circle of readers. As she embarked on *Committed*, with five million copies of *Eat, Pray, Love* in print, expectation reared its head for the first time. Gilbert knew her next book would be subjected to an avalanche of attention—"probably more than anything else I'll ever write," she says.

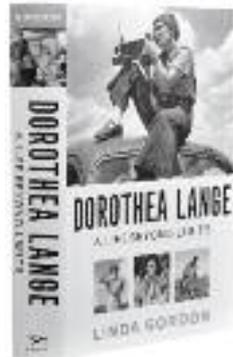
*Committed* truly deserves attention. It elegantly combines Gilbert's personal story about her decision to remarry with an exploration of the history of marriage and the ideas that have shaped the institution. And it's written with the same warm intimacy that drove the voice in *Eat, Pray, Love*, which is how she finally conquered the creative barrier that fame produced. "I discovered that the only way I could write again was to vastly limit, at least in my own imagination, the number of people I was writing for," says Gilbert, ticking off the names of about 25 family members and friends who have offered her love and support and conversation "over many cups of tea and booze." And then she let the conversation flow again—naturally. ■

ging in the dirt for a few months while she puzzled out what was stymieing her. She meditated for a long time before realizing the problem: For the first time in her life, she was trying to satisfy millions of readers.

Those throngs were the devoted fans of *Eat, Pray, Love* (Viking Adult), Gilbert's memoir about a year she spent exploring cuisine in Italy, finding God in India, and seeking equilibrium in Indonesia after a devastating divorce. Though Gilbert had published three books before it (*Pilgrims*, a novel, and a biography), and though those books had won acclaim (a Pushcart Prize, two *New York Times* Notable Book designations, and nominations for the Pen/Hemingway, National

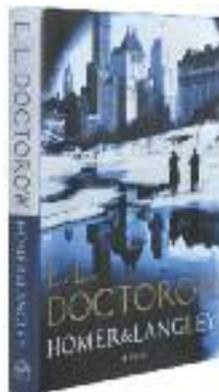
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**DOROTHEA LANGE:**  
**A LIFE BEYOND LIMITS**  
(W.W. NORTON)  
**LINDA GORDON**  
**PROFESSOR OF HISTORY**



This vivid biography trains an eye on Dorothea Lange, the demanding yet sensitive woman who visually defined the Depression by documenting its most desperate victims. Marked by her parents' separation and a childhood bout of polio, the photographer headed from a middle-class, East Coast upbringing to bohemian San Francisco. There she married famed Western painter Maynard Dixon and—as her social conscience awakened—later left him for progressive economist Paul Schuster Taylor. Interspersed with this tale are selections from her oeuvre—a black girl studiously churning butter, a son on his father's shoulders at a Japanese internment camp—as well as portraits of the artist herself. Though Linda Gordon's affection for Lange is palpable, she doesn't whitewash a personal life as raucous as the times. —Nicole Pezold

**HOMER & LANGLEY**  
(RANDOM HOUSE)  
**E.L. DOCTOROW**  
**LEWIS AND LORETTA**  
**GLUCKSMAN PROFESSOR**  
**IN AMERICAN LETTERS**



In his latest novel, E.L. Doctorow reimagines the real-life Collyer brothers, recluses who rose to fame for their compulsive hoarding in the first half of the 20th century in New York City. Homer, the novel's sightless narrator, recounts with sensitivity how he and Langley come to fill their Fifth Avenue mansion with all manner of things "bought or salvaged in expectation of their possible usefulness." Eventually the brothers grow besieged by the cascading walls of "collectibles" (and filth)—including an eclectic array of pianos (from their childhood Aeolian to an electronic keyboard), a Model T Ford parked in the salon, and ceiling-high piles of newspapers—and an isolation-induced hostility toward the outside world. With this yarn, *The New Yorker* noted, "Doctorow has evoked an American folk-myth writ small."

—André Tartar

## What I'm Reading: Poet and Author Stephen Haven

**S**tephen Haven (GSAS '95) doesn't fit the poet stereotype. He's just as happy talking about the Boston Celtics as he is Byron. And in addition to holding an MFA in poetry from the University of Iowa, he went on to earn a PhD in American Civilization at NYU, which helps him write with both poise and intimacy about everything from abstract expressionists Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman to his time spent touring China as a Fulbright lecturer.

The author more recently penned *The River Lock: One Boy's Life Along the Mohawk* (Syracuse University Press) about his conflicted adolescent years with a minister father in an Upstate New York mill town. The memoir was nominated for a National Book Award in 2008, and Haven, currently an English professor and director of the MFA program at Ashland University, was named Co-Ohio Poet of the Year in 2009.

### WHAT ARE YOU READING?

I recently finished a book by [artist and writer] Nicolai Cikovsky about George Inness [American painter known for his nature studies].

### WHY GEORGE INNESS?

I'm writing a poem about his painting *Summer Landscape 1894*, so I decided to read a critical biography of his life. I believe it was one of the last paintings he completed before his death. I'm also reading about 10 pages an



PHOTO © ALLISON HOOVER

hour of this thick philosophy book, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth*, by theologian David Bentley Hart, and I'm holding my breath to see if it will influence my writing in about 10 years.

### DO YOU HAVE ANY HOBBIES THAT INFLUENCE WHAT YOU READ?

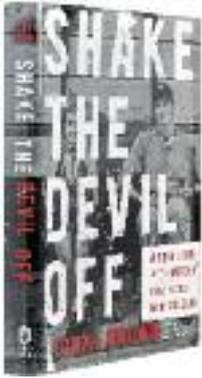
I'm an NBA basketball fan. Bill Russell [Celtics center from 1956–69] was a hero in my childhood, so I read everything I could about the Boston Celtics. In graduate school at the University of Iowa, I took a class with a Melville scholar who was also a rabbi, Jay Holstein. He loved basketball, and he gave me biographies of Russell with all the savory details [of Russell's wild personal life] that I wasn't allowed as a child. So I was studying Melville with a rabbi who knew more about basketball than I did. —Lori Higginbotham

**F**or centuries, American Jewry had rightly seen itself as a net importer of Judaica from Europe and had self-critically believed that in terms of Jewish culture, religious or secular, the Europeans did it better than the Americans, occupants of the backwater of the Jewish world. [Post-WWII] the denizens of the Jewish hinterland, the United States, had no one to rely on. If they sought a vibrant Jewish life, they had to do it themselves.... Reform Rabbi William Berkowitz, in a 1961 book...opened with “A Message to the Twentieth Century Jew,” articulating a common sentiment of the postwar years: “We, today, have witnessed one of the darkest chapters in our long history. Our mighty centers of culture have been destroyed, the Yeshivoth of Poland, of Austria, of Hungary are no longer on the map.... In the span of our lifetime we have witnessed the massacres of one third of our nation.” He then asked, “Are we,” the Jews of the United States, “prepared and willing to assume a dominant role in Jewish cultural activities?”

EXCERPTED FROM HASIA R. DINER'S *WE REMEMBER WITH REVERENCE AND LOVE: AMERICAN JEWS AND THE MYTH OF SILENCE AFTER THE HOLOCAUST, 1945-1962* (NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2009). USED WITH PERMISSION.

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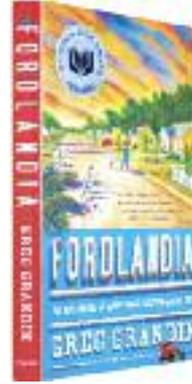
**SHAKE THE DEVIL OFF: A TRUE STORY OF THE MURDER THAT ROCKED NEW ORLEANS (HENRY HOLT)**  
**ETHAN BROWN**  
 GSAS '98



“Please help me stop the pain” were the words spray-painted on the ceiling above the bed of 28-year-old Zackery Bowen, who committed suicide by jumping from the roof of a New Orleans hotel in 2006. Soon after, police found the charred, dismembered body of Bowen’s girlfriend, Addie Hall, in his oven. New York journalist Ethan Brown was vacationing there with his wife when the story broke and moved to New Orleans the following summer to investigate why a charming young bartender, so beloved in the French Quarter, would commit one of the most gruesome crimes in city memory. Brown’s harrowing portrait of Bowen’s life as an Iraq war veteran suffering from untreated PTSD is just as startling as the author’s firsthand account of a deteriorating post-Katrina New Orleans.

—Renée Alfuso

**FORDLANDIA: THE RISE AND FALL OF HENRY FORD’S FORGOTTEN JUNGLE CITY (METROPOLITAN BOOKS)**  
**GREG GRANDIN**  
 PROFESSOR OF HISTORY



In 1927, Henry Ford founded Fordlandia, a vast plantation on a fork of the Amazon River, to provide rubber for his automobiles. If one person could bring “white man’s magic” to the Brazilian jungle, as the *Washington Post* declared, it was the magnate synonymous with efficiency. Anti-intellectual, anti-dairy (he was obsessed with soy), and anti-Semitic, Ford dreamed of building a model Midwestern town, which his cars were ironically transforming back home. Plagued with corruption, Fordlandia instead became a lawless frontier town, its overseers failing to grasp basic Amazonian ecology. A National Book Award finalist, the work was called “Conradian” and a “reflection of one man’s personality—arrogant, brilliant, and very odd” by *The New York Times*. —N.P.



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