

TONY JUDT'S LAST LESSON

BEFORE HIS DEATH, THE HISTORIAN OFFERED UP A FUTURE FOR SOCIAL DEMOCRACY

by Nicole Pezold / GSAS '04

Chances are you've heard of Tony Judt. Perhaps it was his encyclopedic masterpiece *Postwar: A History of Europe Since 1945* (Penguin) that first put him on your map or his public sparring over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Whatever the introduction, he was one of a handful of academics who has earned an unusual degree of celebrity. Remarkably, the intellectual agility that made him famous remained undiminished despite his

recent affliction with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, or ALS, a degenerative neuromuscular disorder also known as Lou Gehrig's disease. Though paralyzed from the neck down the last year-and-a-half of his life, the University Professor who spent more than two decades at NYU, held forth on "What Is Living and What Is Dead in Social Democracy" at last fall's Remarque Lecture. He memorized the entire two-hour address and delivered it with characteristic flair, gasping from a breathing tube he jauntily

referred to as "facial Tupperware."

Even Judt could not have predicted the reaction, not just to the physical feat of his performance but to the central idea he put forth—that government can still be a force for collective good. Afterward, young people in particular approached him curiously. "They sense something deeply amiss in the way we live but don't quite know how to describe it or what they should be doing about it," explained Judt, founder of NYU's Remarque Institute, which promotes the study of Europe, in an interview before his death in August. The interest was so great that his colleagues at *The New York Review of Books*, whose pages have hosted many of his reviews and more recently a string of mini-memoirs, decided to reprint it as an essay. This led to a whirlwind book, his 14th, titled *Ill Fares the Land* (Penguin), which he composed in his mind and then dictated to an assistant.

The book's title comes from Oliver Goldsmith's poem *The Deserted Village*—"Ill fares the land/To hast'ning ills a prey/Where wealth accumulates/And men decay"—and Judt viewed today's dogged pursuit and praise of immense personal wealth as an erosive force to all of the positive public goods of the 20th century, from public transportation to Social Security. With an historian's eye, he detailed the advent and subsequent disintegration of these programs, and how we may still salvage them. "The whole point is not to give up in the face of disap-

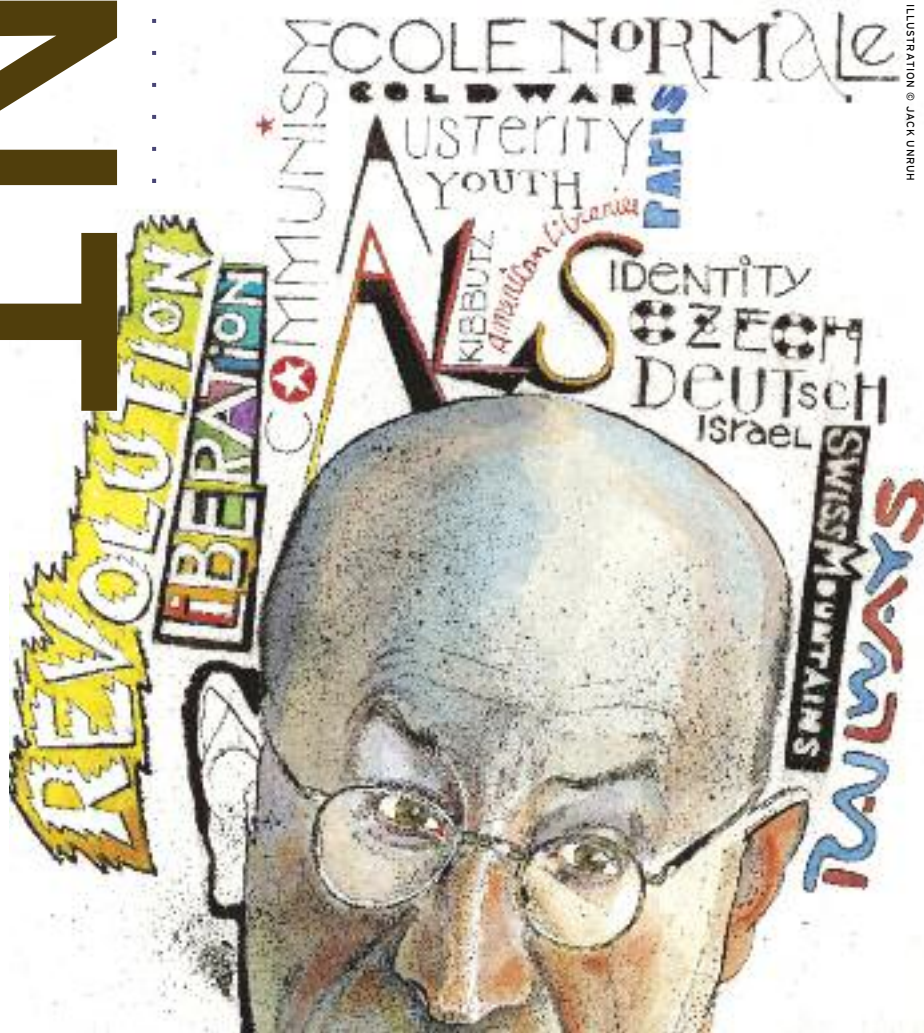


ILLUSTRATION © JACK UNRUH

IN
PRINT

pointments of the past generation, but use them to show alternative paths," he said.

"I'm not especially optimistic,"

Judt admitted, nonetheless he hoped the book would spark "at least a small conversation, out of which bigger ones might grow."■

THE FOLLOWING IS AN EXCERPT FROM *ILL FARES THE LAND*:

Liberation is an act of will. We cannot hope to reconstruct our dilapidated public conversations—no less than our crumbling physical infrastructure—unless we become sufficiently angry at our present condition. No democratic state should be able to make illegal war on the basis of a deliberate lie and get away with it. The silence surrounding the contemptibly inadequate response of the Bush administration to Hurricane Katrina bespeaks a depressing cynicism towards the responsibilities and capacities of the state: we expect Washington to under-perform. [...]

Meanwhile, the precipitous fall from grace of President Obama, in large measure thanks to his bumbling stewardship of health care reform, has further contributed to the disaffection of a new generation. It would be easy to retreat in skeptical disgust at the incompetence (and worse) of those currently charged with governing us. But if we leave the challenge of radical political renewal to the existing political class—to the Blairs and Browns and Sarkozys, the Clintons and Bushes and (I fear) the Obamas—we shall only be further disappointed.

Dissent and dissidence are overwhelmingly the work of the young. It is not by chance that the men and women who initiated the French Revolution, like the reformers and planners of the New Deal and postwar Europe, were distinctly younger than those who had gone before. Rather than resign themselves, young people are more likely to look at a problem and demand that it be solved.

But they are also more likely than their elders to be tempted by apoliticism: the idea that since politics is so degraded in our time, we should give up on it. There have indeed been occasions where "giving up on politics" was the right political choice. In the last decades of the Communist regimes of Eastern Europe, "anti-politics," the politics of "as if" and mobilizing "the power of the powerless" all had their place. That is because official politics in authoritarian regimes are a front for the legitimization of naked power: to bypass them is a radically disruptive political act in its own right. It forces the regime to confront its limits—or else expose its violent core.

However, we must not generalize from the special case of heroic dissenters in authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the example of "anti-politics" of the '70s, together with the emphasis on human rights, has perhaps misled a generation of young activists into believing that, conventional avenues of change being hopelessly clogged, they should forsake political organization for single-issue, non-governmental groups unsullied by compromise. Consequently, the first thought that occurs to a young person seeking a way to "get involved" is to sign up with Amnesty International or Greenpeace, Human Rights Watch or Doctors Without Borders.

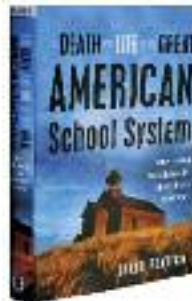
The moral impulse is unimpeachable. But republics and democracies exist only by virtue of engagement of their citizens in the management of public affairs. If active or concerned citizens forfeit politics, they thereby abandon their society to its most mediocre and venal public servants.

From Ill Fares the Land by Tony Judt. Reprinted by arrangement of Penguin Press, a member of Penguin Group (USA), Inc. Copyright © 2010 by Tony Judt.

■ bibliofile

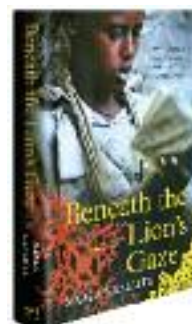
THE DEATH AND LIFE OF THE GREAT AMERICAN SCHOOL SYSTEM: HOW TESTING AND CHOICE ARE UNDERMINING EDUCATION (BASIC BOOKS)

**DIANE RAVITCH
RESEARCH PROFESSOR
OF EDUCATION**



In the 1990s, Diane Ravitch jumped on the bandwagon for a business-like overhaul of America's flailing public schools. The logic went that troubled schools required restructuring and buzzwords—such as merit pay, accountability, and testing—infiltrated educators' lexicons. In her latest book, Ravitch reexamines these ideas through the prism of her four decades of education research—and does an about-face, admitting, "I too had drunk deeply of the elixir that promised a quick fix." After watching reforms fail in New York, Denver, and elsewhere over the past decade, she decided the "invisible hand" could never tackle problems, like how best to teach reading. Ultimately, Ravitch advocates creating a rigorous national curriculum and paying teachers more competitive salaries, adding, there are "no shortcuts, no utopias, no silver bullets" for curing our classrooms. —Nicole Pezold

**BENEATH THE LION'S GAZE (W.W. NORTON)
MAAZA MENGISTE
GSAS '07**



Maaza Mengiste's devastating debut chronicles the mid-1970s revolution that overthrew Haile Selassie's four-decade reign of Ethiopia and ushered in a brutal communist regime. Though broad in scope, the novel offers an intimate glimpse into characters' psyches. Real historical figures are interwoven alongside a fictional Addis Ababa family that provides the story's emotional center. Father Hailu, a respected doctor, makes a controversial medical decision with inadvertent consequences while sons Yonas and Dawit's opposing political ideologies result in deceit and conflict. In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* noted Mengiste's ability to juxtapose "emotionally delicate moments" with "tense and grim historical material." Even peripheral characters are fully imagined in this compelling and lucid account of a terrifying chapter in Ethiopian history. —Sally Lauckner

Vampires Bite Back

SCOTT SNYDER AND STEPHEN KING BREATHE LIFE INTO THE FATIGUED PHENOMENON

by Renée Alfuso / CAS '06

Between the teen heartthrobs of *Twilight* and the soap opera sexpots on HBO's *True Blood*, "vampire" has become a word that elicits groans and eye rolling instead of fear. But vampires were once sickening monsters, like Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, before they became the latest pop-culture craze, and finally there's a new blood-sucker bringing some horror—and dignity—back to the genre.

In the comic book series *American Vampire* (Vertigo), which has a special hardcover edition hitting bookstores this month, Skinner Sweet is a vampire who actually

similar blurb for the *Vampire* series, King went a step further and offered to pen Skinner's origin story.

The idea for a new breed of bloodsuckers actually struck Snyder during the previous vampire glut, in the early 2000s, with movies such as *Underworld*, *Queen of the Damned*, and the sequel to *Blade*. "I just got so sick of seeing the same kind of vampire over and over again with the leather trench coats and always going off to some glamorous club or Gothic party," says Snyder, who became nostalgic for the creatures he grew up with in *The Lost Boys*, *Near Dark*, and King's *Salem's Lot*. Those characters were frightening for their fa-

Snyder's creation looks more like a rabid Nosferatu than the sparkly skinned pretty boys of *Twilight*.

scared other vampires, a sociopathic outlaw terrorizing the Old West even before he gets his fangs. This killer antihero is brought to life by Scott Snyder, who teaches a fiction workshop on genre, literature, and comic books called "The Monster Under Your Story" at the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, and the master of horror himself, Stephen King, who is making his first foray into comic script writing. Snyder initially caught the author's eye when his short story collection, *Voodoo Heart* (Dial Press), debuted in 2006 to critical acclaim, including from King, who said it "just blew me away." So when Snyder asked him to write a

miliarity rather than exoticism. So his vampires are American icons—starlets, cowboys, rock stars—whom the story follows through different decades, starting with 1920s-era Hollywood and moving into Las Vegas in the '30s. The series imagines that vampires have been evolving over time as the bloodline creates new strains, each with their own abilities and weaknesses. In the story, the traditional stake-through-the-heart nocturnal species consists of European nobility who are "as interested in bucks as blood," and who have been unrivaled for centuries. That is, until Skinner Sweet takes the next evolutionary step to become the first



THE AMERICAN VAMPIRE COMICS SPAN DECADES, FROM THE WILD WEST TO SILENT FILM-ERA HOLLYWOOD AND BEYOND.

of his kind: an advanced American vampire powered by the sun who no one knows how to kill. With an unhinged jaw, rattlesnake fangs, and elongated claws, Snyder's creation looks more like a rabid Nosferatu than the sparkly skinned pretty boys of *Twilight*.

The first five issues of the series feature back-to-back stories that alternate and intersect between King's background on Skinner in 1880s Colorado and Snyder's sto-

ry line about an aspiring silent-film star named Pearl Jones, who meets Skinner nearly half a century later. King was only supposed to contribute one issue but ended up writing more because, he says, the story "really lit up my imagination." Vertigo accommodated his extensive writing with extra-large issues, and King has expressed interest in returning to contribute when the series reaches the 1950s and '60s. "The bar was so high

with his stuff that it was intimidating,” says Snyder, who’s been a huge fan of King since childhood. “He could’ve easily phoned it in and it would’ve been really good anyway, but he really went to the mat for each issue.”

Snyder says the horror maestro easily adjusted to the new medium and the only occasional prob-

lem he had was a case of premature decapitation—tearing the heads off characters before they were supposed to die. But such dark inclinations bring real chills to the pages, as when a hidden opening in the wall reveals bloodied bodies hanging by hooks through their mouths, still begging for mercy. The book is drawn by the artist Rafael Albuquerque, whose previous work includes the comics *Superman/Batman* and *Blue Beetle*. To capture the dual eras of the Jazz Age and the Old

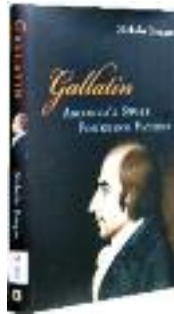


West in the first cycle, Albuquerque used two styles in each issue: sharp inks and contrasting black and whites for the theatrical feel of Hollywood, and pencil with paint-like washes for the gritty, antiquated texture of a Sergio Leone Western. “I feel like I could write a terrible script and it would still be good on the page

because of his art,” Snyder says. In addition to the series, Snyder is working on a novel that’s due out next year. But for the lifelong comics fan, who attended conventions back when they were just a bunch of guys with foldout tables, he’s happily contracted to write *American Vampire* for another two years and is now exclusive to DC—home to both Batman and Superman. He says: “I’m constantly bugging them to see if I can come into the office because it really is geek heaven.” ■

■ bibliofile

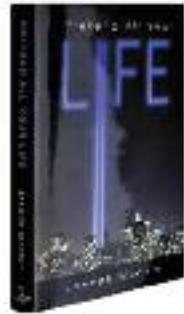
■ GALLATIN: AMERICA'S SWISS FOUNDING FATHER (NYU PRESS)
 ■ NICHOLAS DUNGAN



Around Washington Square, most people know the name Gallatin as an NYU school. But history remembers Albert Gallatin as the longest-serving secretary of the U.S. Treasury, founder of the House Ways and Means Committee, and a fiscally conservative public servant who helped finance the Louisiana Purchase and negotiate the Treaty of Ghent. The Swiss native (1761-1849) also found time to assist in establishing New York University in 1831 and served as the inaugural president of its governing council as he aimed to make higher education more accessible for the masses. With this first full-scale Gallatin biography written in nearly half a century, author Nicholas Dungan traces Gallatin’s pedigree back to 1258 AD and maps, in straightforward detail, how a Genevan aristocrat became a Greenwich Village legend.

—Jason Hollander

■ PRETEND ALL YOUR LIFE (PERMANENT PRESS)
 ■ JOSEPH MACKIN
 ■ GSAS '91



Lives unravel in this dark drama set in post-9/11 Manhattan. Richard Gallin, a shallow, miserable plastic surgeon, struggles to cope with the loss of his only son in the attack on the Twin Towers. But it’s the surrounding characters that animate Joseph Mackin’s debut novel—from the facially scarred Nicaraguan soldier looking for a fresh start to the red-headed reporter out to avenge his HIV-stricken lover. The inevitability of death runs through the pages like a current, and over the course of six days the constellation of characters, with their secrets and tragedies, collide, letting blood and cash. Early on, Mackin aptly references Yeats: “Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

—Renée Alfuso