

fiction

MEN ON THE BRINK

AUTHOR JONATHAN TROPPER CHANNELS WEARY SUBURBANITES TRYING TO MAKE AMENDS

by Jason Hollander / GAL '07

On the plane from New York to Los Angeles, Jonathan Tropper (GSAS '93) didn't even talk to Robert Downey Jr. He just noticed him from afar, which wasn't hard to do. It was the late 1990s, and the actor's struggle with drug addiction was a near-regular feature on the news. Throughout those six or so hours in the air, Tropper—who was working in the jewelry-display-case design business at the time—was mostly struck by how very alone Downey Jr. seemed. He remembers, "It made me think: Where are his friends?"

The observation provided Tropper with more than just a celebrity story to tell his clients

when he landed. It became the premise for his first book, *Plan B* (St. Martin's Press), in which former college friends gather to help a movie-star classmate who is battling drugs. So one might partially credit (the future) Iron Man for inspiring Tropper, who had spent years unable to follow through on the stories he kept starting. And since that day, the New Rochelle, New York, native hasn't stopped. Between 2000 and 2012, Tropper produced six novels, including the *New York Times* best-seller *This Is Where I Leave You* (for which he's also writing the screenplay for Warner Bros.) and his latest, *One Last Thing Before I Go* (both Dutton Adult).

That's enough to make any

struggling writer hop a flight to L.A. hoping for a burst of inspiration. But the years since that plane ride have been equally vital. Tropper—like Tom Perrotta, Richard Russo, and Nick Hornby before him—has tapped into the minds of mostly suburban male protagonists who have "screwed up their lives or for whom circumstance has screwed [them] up." And he always channels this literary state with a biting humor amidst the heartache. In *One Last Thing Before I Go* (recently optioned by director J.J. Abrams for Paramount), the protagonist—known simply as Silver—crashes his daughter's friend's bat mitzvah, takes the mike from the MC, and proceeds to make a tear-streamed apology to his little

PHOTO © EFIGUE/LEMAZ/WRITER PICTURES



TROPPER HAD ALMOST GIVEN UP ON WRITING AS A CAREER, UNTIL A FATEFUL PLANE RIDE WITH ACTOR ROBERT DOWNEY JR.

girl before he breaks into an impromptu song. Tropper calls the book perhaps his bleakest work, because much of the emotional damage done by Silver is irrevocable. But he believes that "with all the sadness and depression of being alone...there is a certain Zen that comes. I don't know if you want to go to Buddha or Bob Dylan, but when you've got nothing, you've got nothing to lose. It can be liberating."

Tropper certainly had nothing to lose as his writing career stalled throughout his twenties. Fresh out of Yeshiva University in 1991, he enrolled in the creative writing MFA program at NYU while simultaneously holding down his first day job, as a PR man at Ketchum Communications, where he touted products ranging from Evian water to Chlor-Trimeton allergy medication. He soon found office culture "suffocating" and, in school, discovered that something was missing from his prose. "You need some life experience to inform your writing," Tropper says. "I didn't really have anything to write about."

dreams, and a track record of bad decisions. "It felt like a good engine to drive a book about a very early midlife crisis," he recalls. "As I was approaching 30, I just felt like I've got to really give this a shot."

The results were not overwhelming. While *Plan B* earned good reviews, his publisher wasn't sure how to market his work, and it took him four more novels before he gained a significant following. Things shifted when he published 2009's *This Is Where I Leave You*, about a dysfunctional Westchester, New York, family pushed together to sit shivah for their dead father. The Associated Press called it "artful and brilliant"; *Publishers Weekly* found it a "deliciously page-turning story"; and the *Los Angeles Times* pronounced the book "hilarious and often heartbreaking." The hefty sales that followed were finally confirmation that he had not only found something to write about but, equally important, had connected with an audience. (Counted among them is *Six Feet Under* and *True Blood*'s Alan Ball, with whom Tropper is now writing and executive producing *Banshee*, a new action series premiering on Cinemax in January 2013.) The

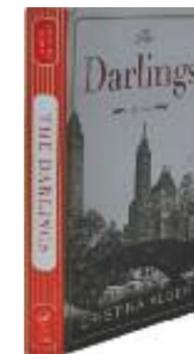
"There's an element of wish fulfillment in writing about characters who get to say what they mean and break the rules."

Disenchanted with both pursuits, he switched gears after grad school and devoted himself to designing jewelry display cases, which offered more independence. He was also fairly certain by then that he would never earn a living as a writer. But it was after that fateful L.A. trip that he finally found his voice—that of a man, around his age, dealing with the trials of a complicated family, fading

attraction for many readers may be that humor and pain circulate simultaneously throughout all of Tropper's books; funerals, dangerous operations, and family meltdowns never go long without a few wisecracks thrown in. "There are moments of real darkness, but it's just never gonna stay there with me," he says. "I guess I just find the human condition kind of funny." ■

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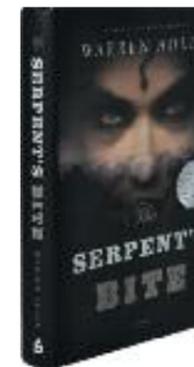
THE DARLINGS (PAMELA DORMAN BOOKS) CRISTINA ALGER LAW '07



In her addictive, adrenaline-pumping debut, Cristina Alger exposes the inside workings of New York high society—just as the financial world collapses on its house of cards in 2008. Paul Ross, husband to Merrill Darling (and also a new attorney at the Darlings' hedge fund firm), must navigate an increasingly blurred line between innocence and guilt as he is checked by the unfolding crisis, family loyalties, scandal, and betrayal. A former employee of Goldman Sachs and a corporate law firm, and daughter to a mutual fund manager, Alger credibly recalls the rarefied world once inhabited by the Madoffs and the Corzines. *Booklist* pronounced the book: "Probably the most compulsively readable fiction to come out of the Wall Street financial scandal so far."

—Naomi Howell

THE SERPENT'S BITE (STONEHOUSE PRESS) WARREN ADLER ARTS '47



The latest offering from Warren Adler, the prolific 84-year-old author of *The War of the Roses*, traces a doomed attempt by a wealthy septuagenarian to reconcile with two estranged adult children more eager for his inheritance than his love. When George Temple assembles his progeny for a horse trek through the Yellowstone wilderness, Courtney, a struggling actress, seizes her father's nostalgic gesture to secure her share of the family fortune. Caught in his sister's web, Scott, a failed entrepreneur, finds himself quietly complicit in—and powerless to thwart—Courtney's treachery. Add to this tortured trio an aging alcoholic outfitter, an opportunistic grizzly bear, and a liberal dose of incest, and the book—Adler's 33rd—is part saucy Western adventure, part psychological thriller. As Courtney coolly observes, "Out there in no-man's-land, anything can happen."

—Eileen Reynolds

Back in the Band

THE ACCORDION REFUSES TO BE SQUEEZED OFF STAGE

by Eileen Reynolds / GSAS '11

Mention the accordion and many Americans will recall images of TV impresario Lawrence Welk playing the instrument in a leisure suit, or Gary Larson's *Far Side* cartoon with the cruel caption: "Welcome to Hell. Here's your accordion." But the

much-maligned squeezebox wasn't always so uncool—and, after decades of exile from American pop culture, it just may be making a comeback.

In *Squeeze This! A Cultural History of the Accordion in America* (University of Illinois Press), ethnomusicologist Marion Jacobson (GSAS '99, '04) singles out 1908, the year of the first piano-accordion performance in the United States, as the start of a craze that would last for much of the 20th century. Brought to this country on a wave of Italian immigration, the instrument found a home on the vaudeville stage, where it was featured in everything from ethnic comedy sketches to performances of classical works. At the height of its popularity in the 1940s and '50s, middle-class parents signed up their children for lessons, radio stations hired staff accordionists to play pop songs on the air, and girls in bobby socks swooned at the feet of Dick Contino, a handsome virtuoso of Italian-American descent. When slim-trousered heartthrobs ushered in the guitar-driven rock 'n' roll era, Jacobson argues, the accordion didn't die—it simply went off into a long hibernation.

NYU *Alumni Magazine* recently caught up with Jacobson to talk about the accordion's storied past and its current status as a decidedly ungeeky part of everything from world music ensembles to pinup calendars and indie rock bands.

ACCORDIONIST DICK CONTINO HAD ROCK-STAR POTENTIAL. HE DREW DEAFENING SCREAMS FROM TEENAGE GIRLS WHEN HE WON THE RADIO TALENT CONTEST THAT LAUNCHED HIS CAREER IN 1946. WHAT WENT WRONG?

It's such a tragic American tale. We were on the cusp of bringing out an accordion-playing sex symbol, but there were two major problems. The first problem was Dick's draft record—his inexplicable dodge from army service [during the Korean War]. But had he stayed on track, I'm not sure that he would have crossed over into rock, because his repertoire—"Flight of the Bumblebee," "Lady of Spain"—was the kitschiest, schmaltziest music. The critics would have killed him, even if his army record hadn't.

MAYBE THERE WAS JUST NO PLACE FOR THE ACCORDION IN ROCK 'N' ROLL.

Hey, accordions can rock! I mean, couldn't you imagine Queen with an accordion? Freddie Mercury's rock was symphonic and epic in its melodic shapes. And who wouldn't want to hear an accordion with heavy metal? Or think of the ballads of the Beatles. "Rocky Raccoon" has an accordion, for example. In fact, John Lennon played accordion on a couple of songs.

PUNK MUSICIANS TOOK A SHINING TO THE ACCORDION. WHY?

By the 1980s, there was an oversaturation of techno. The synthesizer sound had pretty much played itself out. There was a feel-

ing that the accordion made a visceral sound. It's produced by reeds—metal tongues vibrating—not by a machine. And that feeling was refreshingly human in a way that techno music was not. Flogging Molly, a boisterous Celtic-rock group, really raised awareness of the accordion and its potential to be punk.

WHAT WOULD YOU PUT ON A "NOT YOUR GRANDPA'S ACCORDION" PLAYLIST?

I would recommend *Planet Squeezebox*, an anthology of accordion music from around the world. It's everything from Basque trikitixa to blues shuffle. For a quick snapshot of indie bands with accordion, there's an interesting project called the *Accordion Babes Album & Pin-Up Calendar*, put out by a collective of West Coast artists every year since 2009. These women are reclaiming the idea of the accordion as sexy, rescuing it from its 1960s and '70s nadir.

OKAY, I'VE GOT A HAND-ME-DOWN ACCORDION AND AM READY TO START MY BAND.

Chances are that the accordion in your uncle's closet will not be in playable condition if it's more than 40 or 50 years old. The reeds tend to deteriorate. Accordions are quite weather sensitive. They don't like humidity or moisture. That's why you see so many beautiful vintage instruments out on the West Coast, because their weather is much more favorable there. That and vintage clothes—accordions and vintage clothing go hand in hand.

IS THE WORLD FINALLY READY FOR AN ACCORDION-PLAYING POP IDOL?

There's an accordionist out there named Cory Pesaturo who's got all these plans to play with big stars like Lady Gaga. And he's handsome, with that tanned Italian-American look. Who knows? ■

PHOTO © JOHN CLAYTON

BEJEWELED OR BE GONE



TOP: MARY MAGDALENE COURTESY THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF FINLAND; BOTTOM: THE ARMADA PORTRAIT, GEORGE GOMER, CA. 1588/WOBBURN ABBEY, BEDFORDSHIRE, UK/COURTESY THE BRIDGEMAN ART LIBRARY

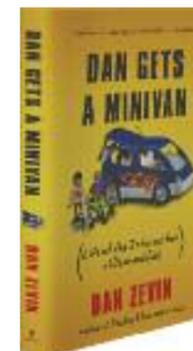
In *Ornamentalism: The Art of Renaissance Accessories* (University of Michigan Press), Bella Mirabella turns her gimlet eye to that period, spanning the 14th to the 17th century, when a brooch or fan were not merely embellishments but rather essential cultural statements. The portrait of Elizabeth I below marks the height of fashion as excess.

Mirabella, an associate professor of literature and humanities in the Gallatin School of Individualized Study, devotes an entire chapter to the handkerchief. Used above by Mary Magdalene, it could paradoxically symbolize honor or promiscuity, romance or bodily filth, depending on the context. Women (and men) across all classes owned them, and a new bride would often receive several from her groom. However, a young woman who frequently gave out her handkerchiefs to men in flirtation was considered wanton and vulgar. Mirabella notes that Mary Magdalene's expression implies ambiguity in how she means to use hers.

—Naomi Howell



DAN GETS A MINIVAN: LIFE AT THE INTERSECTION OF DUDE AND DAD (SCRIBNER)
DAN ZEVIN
WSUC '86



In his latest offering, humorist Dan Zevin chronicles the hilarity and occasional misery of fatherhood. He begins his tour in Brooklyn, as a moderately hip stay-at-home dad of two, who finds the odds and ends of modern child rearing—the baby backpacks, "schools of Pepperidge Farm goldfish," and a king-size bed to fit the whole family—creeping into his life. And he gives into its delights, eventually moving to the suburbs of New York like so many before him. ("I'd recommend the captain's chairs without hesitation," he advises would-be buyers of minivans.) As with his previous books on life-changing events—exiting college, getting married—Zevin relentlessly pokes fun at his new reality, all while admiring his van's collapsible third row of seats.

—Nicole Pezold

DREAMLAND: ADVENTURES IN THE STRANGE SCIENCE OF SLEEP (W.W. NORTON)
DAVID K. RANDALL
GSAS '07



After years of tossing and turning, journalist David K. Randall's inquiry into the mysteries of sleep started with a literal bang when he awoke sprawled on the floor after running into a wall while sleepwalking. He found no remedy at a sleep lab—only more questions when his neurologist admitted that, as vital as sleep is to life, we don't really understand it. The experience sent Randall into research mode and, with humor and clarity, he chronicles what little we do know, from the insidious nature of artificial light to circadian rhythms' effect on *Monday Night Football*. He also examines a grisly murder where the defendant pleaded guilty by way of sleepwalking—and was freed. In a starred review, *Publishers Weekly* proclaimed: "This is one book that will not put you to sleep."

—N.P.