

■ memoir

TALK OF THE TOWN

A FORMER RECEPTIONIST REFLECTS ON LIFE AT *THE NEW YORKER*

by Andrea Crawford

GROTH AND JOSEPH MITCHELL, AT *THE NEW YORKER*'S 50TH-ANNIVERSARY PARTY, WERE CLOSE FRIENDS DURING THE LATTER'S YEARS OF WRITER'S BLOCK.

PHOTO © JILL KREMENTZ

Arthur Getz (who used her likeness in one of his *New Yorker* cover illustrations), shared “stiff Manhattans” with Pauline Kael, gave directions to Woody Allen who was always getting off on the wrong floor, and dyed Easter eggs with Calvin Trillin’s daughters. But Groth also turns a critical but kind eye upon her youthful struggles, grappling with her own reticence, personal missteps, and the “shame of the writer who doesn’t write.”

The reaction from the crowd to which she once aspired has been celebratory: *The New York Times* covered her book launch last summer, a packed affair at the National Arts Club on Gramercy Park. Writers Trillin, Rebecca Mead, and Mark Singer of *The New Yorker* have interviewed her at events in bookstores and li-

In 1957, when Janet Groth walked into the offices of *The New Yorker* magazine on West 43rd Street for the first time, she was a 19-year-old, Iowa-born, Minnesota-bred college graduate with literary ambitions. During her interview—with no less an interlocutor than E.B. White himself—she said that she wanted “to write, of course, but would be glad to do anything in the publishing field.” The magazine granted that meager wish by installing Groth at the reception desk, where she stayed for the next two decades. The position gave her an un-

common vantage on the lives of the legendary figures she encountered during that time. Now Groth (GSAS ’68, ’82) has gathered her stories into a new book, *The Receptionist: An Education at The New Yorker* (Algonquin), published last summer and to be released in paperback in June. With graceful prose and rich details gleaned from years of copious journal keeping, she writes of attending cocktail parties with “a crowd that had learned to drink in the twenties and...was hard at it still”—and, at one such occasion, of being subjected to the infamous scorn of Dorothy Parker. She modeled for

baries around New York City. Garrison Keillor appeared with her in St. Paul, Minnesota, calling the memoir the best of an impressive lot of such books. “It really does feel like some kind of validation, some late graduation from something or other into—well, I’m terribly afraid there’s no place else to go except the angelic choir,” says Groth, from her Upper East Side studio apartment. On this particular day, she was surrounded by flowers that had arrived for her 76th birthday. She spoke with the husky voice of a mid-century film siren, laughing often at herself.

That same warmth and humor is well on display in her memoir, when she tells of the poet John Berryman proposing marriage and of how she lost both her heart and virginity to an unnamed *New Yorker* cartoonist who misled her about marital intent. In one highly evocative chapter, Groth details her “innocent yet not quite innocent” relationship with the writer Joseph Mitchell, whose acquaintance began one evening on the F train, when she was headed to a graduate seminar on Elizabethan lyric at NYU and he to his Greenwich Village home. Soon thereafter the two forged an intimate connection, sharing lines from James Joyce’s story “The Dead” over drinks at a writers’ hangout called Costello’s. From 1972 until 1978, Mitchell took her to lunch every week, typically on Fridays, where they often discussed his writing—a significant topic in these years when he struggled with writer’s block and published nothing. But the relationship, launched over Joyce, would ultimately end, its demise foretold in a disagreement over E.L. Doctorow’s *Ragtime*, which

cation, six months into the job, she abruptly found herself back at reception. The art director never warned to her, she knew at the time; only later did she realize her lack of success might also have had to do with the unexpected return of a former favored assistant, “a woman I shall call Brenda, who...thought nothing of going to bed with the boss,” Groth writes. A measure of melancholy as well as mature acceptance and gratitude pervades the text. Yet redemption, both personal and professional, did come for Groth—and long before publication of this memoir. She left *The New Yorker* in 1978 to start what would become a successful academic career. While at the magazine, she had pursued a doctorate in English literature at NYU, a degree that required 15 years to complete as she took one class at a time. A professor emeritus at SUNY Plattsburg, Groth has authored or co-authored four previous books, including an award-winning critical assessment of Edmund Wilson. Academic life brought its own challenges,

Groth turns a critical but kind eye upon her youthful struggles, missteps, and the “shame of the writer who doesn’t write.”

she liked and he did not. While full of such anecdotes, Groth’s memoir is also a forthright appraisal of young ambition, pretense, and disappointment. Groth aspired to but never got to write for the magazine. After a year and a half behind the receptionist’s desk, she received a promotion as an assistant in the art department, following in the footsteps of Truman Capote. But the promotion, her last, was short-lived. Upon returning from a va-

but she avers, “There’s nothing more noble, more wonderful, and more rewarding than a professorial career.” Nevertheless, the publication of her first nonacademic book has been heralded as a late-in-life literary debut. And Groth has found such delight in her newfound celebrity that the angelic choir may just have to wait. She hints that a sequel to *The Receptionist*, taking readers beyond her *New Yorker* years, may well be on the horizon. ■

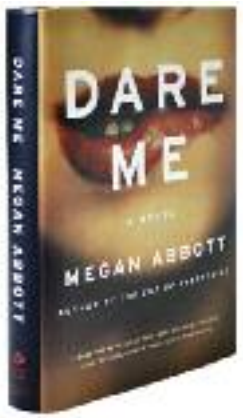
■ bibliofile

INSUBORDINATE SPIRIT: A TRUE STORY OF LIFE AND LOSS IN EARLIEST AMERICA, 1610-1665 (GLOBE PEQUOT PRESS)
MISSY WOLFE
SCPS ’12



In 1631, Elizabeth Winthrop landed in Boston—widowed, with an infant in arms. Niece and daughter-in-law of John Winthrop, governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, she lived at the center of hostilities between the English and Dutch, their brutal attacks on the Munsees, and the natives’ reprisals. Testing the boundaries for Puritan women, she would go on to birth eight children from three different marriages, help found Greenwich, Connecticut, as a rare female landowner, serve as apothecary and midwife, and somehow find time for all those 17th-century chores—from tanning hides to churning butter. In matrimony, she variously suffered a drunk and a madman—and was nearly executed for adultery. Missy Wolfe’s richly detailed account, drawn from research in regional archives, should appeal to scholars and amateur historians alike. —Nicole Pezold

DARE ME (REAGAN ARTHUR BOOKS)
MEGAN ABBOTT
GSAS ’96, ’00



Don’t be fooled by the pom-poms and ponytails: Megan Abbott’s latest novel unravels the knotted truths in the lives of high school girls and the often cruel world of cheerleading. Team captain Beth Cassidy and her loyal sidekick, Addy Hanlon, rule the squad until new coach Colette French arrives. When the coach dethrones Beth, a string of risky, power-hungry behavior engulfs the team and their new leader—and a suspicious suicide leaves the town in shock. Touching upon readers’ memories of tender, turbulent adolescence, Abbott’s newest story is heart-racing and raw. *Publishers Weekly* called it “a gut-churning tale of revenge, power, desire, and friendship...in which even the perky flip of a cheerleader’s skirt holds menace.” *The New York Times* review gushed: “It’s *Heathers* meets *Fight Club* good.” —Naomi Howell

FOUND IN TRANSLATION

A NEW SERIES BRINGS THE ARABIC CLASSICS TO ENGLISH READERS

by Eileen Reynolds / GSAS '11

“And nearness brings no boredom to my longing, / nor does the love for her leave me when she has left,” an anguished poet declares. “She is my cure and sickness, and her memory my care; / but for the painful distance, passion dies.”

Oh, woe is he!

The poet’s affliction is a familiar one, but his identity—to English readers, at least—might come

on tribal politics, the rigors of desert life, and, of course, the agonies of love, Dhu l-Rummah and his predecessors—beginning in the 6th century, with an oral tradition stretching back even earlier—developed a system of meter and rhyme as complex as anything within the European literary canon.

But owing to the difficulty of translation, this poetry has remained, like most premodern Arabic works, virtually unknown to

tastes are hardly representative of a rich literary tradition that includes everything from theological treatises to ribald tales. Now, a group of scholars led by Philip F. Kennedy, associate professor of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, has set out to fill that gap by building a comprehensive library of classical Arabic works. The Library of Arabic Literature (LAL)—an NYU Abu Dhabi Intitute project—will present some 35 volumes ranging from pre-Islamic po-

Geert Jan van Gelder, was released in December. Two others—*A Treasury of Virtues*, a collection of sayings and teachings attributed to ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the prophet Muhammad, and 9th-century legal scholar Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi’i’s *The Epistle on Legal Theory*, believed to be the oldest surviving document on Islamic jurisprudence—followed in February. “Part of our aim for the series is to publish broadly in the

Rossetti, managing editor of the series, which is being published by NYU Press.

The series may be read as a response in part to a recent uptick in interest among English readers, post-9/11, in the language and culture of the Arabic world. Kennedy and Rossetti envision that one day it may serve as a kind of Arabic analogue to Harvard University Press’s renowned Loeb Classical Library of Greek

be included in the LAL series date from before the dawn of printing in Arabic, producing new editions involves the painstaking work of tracking down and studying original manuscripts. An eight-member editorial board of Arabic and Islamic studies scholars from various universities meets twice a year to oversee the selection, editing, and translation of these texts. Some stories might seem familiar: “A Visit to Heav-

Producing new editions involves the painstaking work of tracking down and studying original manuscripts.

and Latin literature—the idea being that future generations of English readers will now be able to study the Arabic classics alongside Homer and Cicero.

The first offering, van Gelder’s anthology, *Classical Arabic Literature*, provides a sampling of the wide array of themes and genres that will be covered in the larger series, including wine poems, popular science, and even erotica. Though the authors of the pieces in the anthology lived hundreds of years ago, Rossetti notes that their chosen “topics are also very recognizable: love, petty annoyances, human relations.”

Some of the works, such as Egyptian writer Ahmad al-Tifashi’s “The Young Girl and the Dough Kneader,” which van Gelder describes as a “moderately pornographic” story designed to “simulate the girl’s breathless monologue,” will no doubt raise eyebrows—which the editors paused to consider. “Some readers might prefer not to encounter the bawdy and erotic in a representation of Arabic literature,” Kennedy says. “We just want, and feel obligated, to be honest.”

Because most of the works to

en and Hell,” an excerpt from the satirical *The Epistle of Forgiveness* by 11th-century writer Abu l-‘Ala’ al-Ma‘arri, is considered by some as a forerunner to Dante’s *Divine Comedy*.

Al-Ma‘arri’s work has contemporary resonance as well. The writer’s Syrian homeland has been in the news a lot lately. “We hear about the Arab Spring, but it’s important to balance political news with more of this,” Kennedy says. That’s not to say that Arabic literature can provide easy answers to thorny 21st-century questions about power and peace. Rossetti warns against the tendency to “read Arabic as sort of a sociological text—as something that can inform contemporary politics.” Instead, he says, the series will have succeeded when people begin reading Arabic literature the way they read Russian or French poetry and prose in translation—“as real literature with its own merits.” Kennedy shares the sentiment: “I envision the series being a physical thing, where you can walk into a bookstore and see those rows of books—and people can see that there’s this huge tradition.”■

■ excerpt



PRINT

From *Baseball as a Road to God: Seeing Beyond the Game* by NYU President John Sexton with Thomas Oliphant and Peter J. Schwartz:

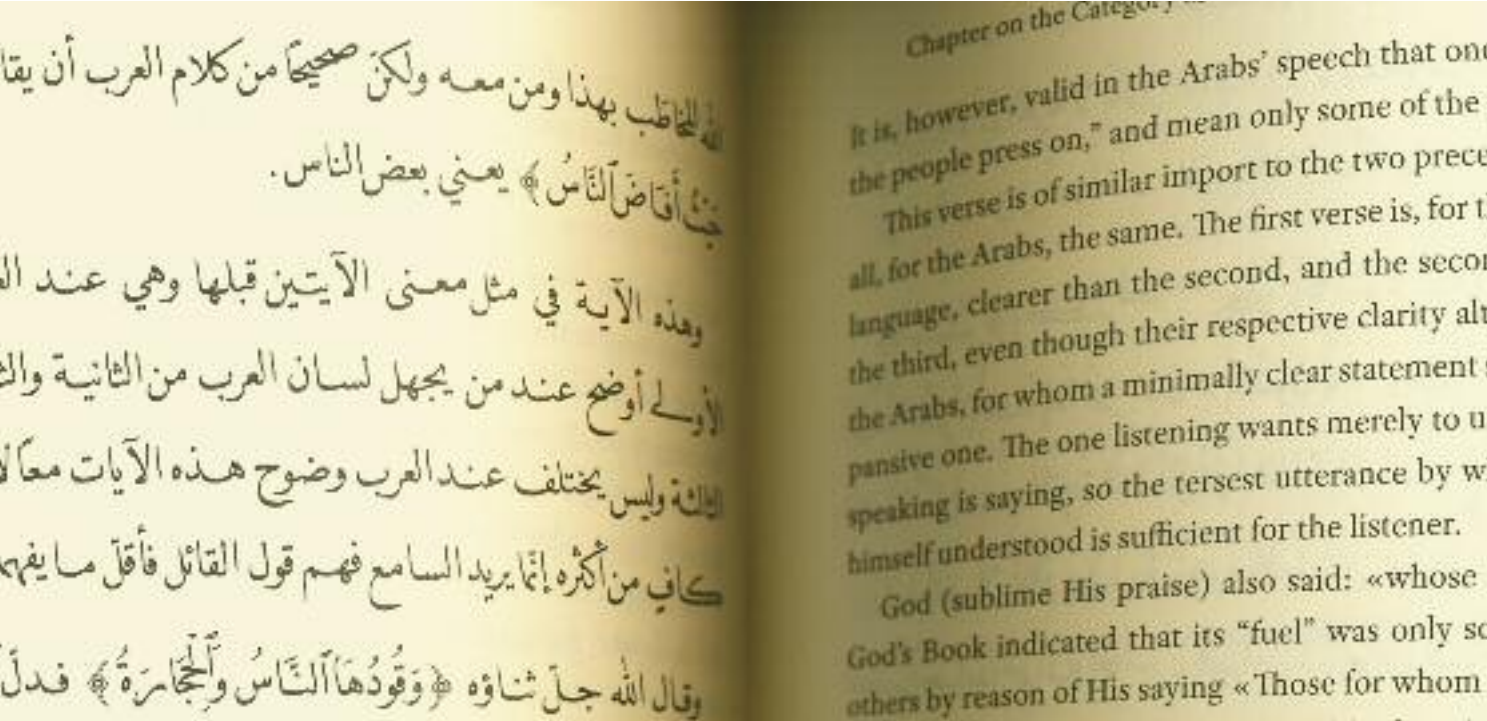
A student in my class once asked [eminent historian] Doris [Kearns Goodwin], “Given your experience and knowing what you know now, if it all played out again, would you want the Dodgers to remain in Brooklyn?” At first, the question struck me as ridiculous. Dodger fans were devastated by the move, an open wound that more than half a century later still pains many in the borough and beyond.

But upon reflection, I realized that the question is profound. As did Doris, who considered the ripple effect. Assuredly, if the Dodgers had stayed, she would not have converted [to an ardent Red Sox fan], and therefore she would not have forged the connection with her sons that the Red Sox delivered. The great memories of Red Sox Nation—celebrating dramatic October wins—would be wiped away. Then, the Dodgers themselves would be seen differently—as today’s team rather than as the special team that left (our team that left); for the leaving is part of what made New York’s Golden Age of baseball special.

After a long pause, Doris answered.

“No,” she said, with equal parts certitude and regret. Then, ever the historian, she added, “The nostalgia and memories are purer this way.”

PUBLISHED BY ARRANGEMENT WITH GOTHAM BOOKS, A MEMBER OF PENGUIN GROUP (USA), INC. COPYRIGHT © 2013 BY JOHN SEXTON.



AN EXCERPT FROM JOSEPH E. LOWRY’S EDIT AND TRANSLATION OF *THE EPISTLE ON LEGAL THEORY* BY AL-SHAFI’I.

as a surprise. He was not a chivalrous Arthurian knight or lovesick Elizabethan dandy, but rather the 8th-century bard Dhu l-Rummah, considered by Arabic scholars to be the last of the great Islamic Bedouin desert poets. Reflecting

English readers. For the nonfluent, fleeting encounters with Arabic literature have historically come in the form of translations of the Koran or, perhaps, hackneyed adaptations of stories from *One Thousand and One Nights*. But these small

etry to a 19th-century proto-novel with Arabic alongside the English translation on facing pages.

The first book in the series, an anthology of classic works selected and translated by University of Oxford Arabic professor emeritus

various different fields that constitute Arabic heritage: literature, belles lettres, law, history, biography, travel literature, geographical literature, theology—a broad array of what was written back in the premodern era,” says Chip