BOOK REVIEWS

Cynthia Ozick, *Antiquities*
New York: Knopf, 2021
192 pages, $28, ISBN 9780593318829

The frontispiece of Cynthia Ozick's novella *Antiquities* features a photograph of British archaeologist Sir Flinders Petrie. In the midst of a desert excavation, the Egyptologist appears out of place, mainly because of his layers of Victorian attire—a dark suit covered by a cloak or cape whose folds suggest both the layers in the landscape and the hidden meanings and irony in Ozick's story. Identified as "Cousin William," Petrie enters the text in a roundabout way that is both central and tangential to the themes and plot of historical fact and fiction.

Antiquities is narrated by an octogenarian: "My name is Lloyd Wilkerson Petrie, and I write on the 13th of April, 1949, at the behest of the Trustees of the Temple Academy for Boys, an institution that saw its last pupil thirty-four years ago." The narrator belongs to New York's WASP establishment, while his family name hints at the petrification of gentrification as well as the connection to an archaeological dig. That Petrie pens and types his memoir or deposition in the legalese prose of the period is a tribute to Ozick's ventriloquial ability to capture the flavour of his arch, upper-crust rhetoric, which she deflates in passing.

The numbers game corroborates and undercuts antiquities: "I must unfortunately report that of the remaining Trustees, only seven (of twenty-five) survive." Noticeable throughout is Ozick's long-standing habit of inserting parentheses as an act of defiance against American literary critic Lionel Trilling, who had admonished her for using them early in her career. Ever since she has studded her prose with these brackets as a means of pausing, breathing, and reconsidering thought. Her highbrow prose also imitates the style of Henry James, whom she initially worshipped but later critiqued and who appears in *Antiquities* as a cousin of the Temple family. Family ties and

trees are of utmost importance, but the introduction of the ancient Jewish Elefantin family undercuts Temple pretense and ancestry. Affinities and repulsions figure repeatedly throughout the novella.

Aside from the characters, there are certain recurrent objects that add to the atmosphere of antiquity. Petrie relies on his Remington typewriter, which originally belonged to his secretary, "Miss Margaret Stimmer (now deceased)." While the parentheses remind us of her death and the decline of other characters of advanced age, the name Peg Stimmer (which means "tuner") reminds us of the intimate relationship between Petrie and Peg. In turn, their harmony points to other affinities between Petrie, Hedda the Austrian cook, Ben-Zion Elefantin, Ned Greenhill, and other Jews. The Remington is also a metafictional marker that illustrates the process of composition and the difficulties of writing at an advanced age. The sounds of its hammer and tongs disturb the other residents, who retaliate by spilling ink. Ozick spills some ink on these elderly vandals, who participate in the dialectic between harmony and discord. The first paragraph ends with the outdoor setting of "old maples newly in leaf," the contrast reinforcing the theme of old and new, the changing of seasons, and the difficulties of turning a new leaf in life and literature.

The key mystery involves the "friendship" between Petrie and Ben-Zion Elefantin—one of the few Jewish students admitted to the Temple Academy, where Jews are considered a pariah. Just as Ozick has a conflicted relationship to Henry James, so Petrie displays his genteel philo- and antisemitism towards Jews in general and to Ben-Zion in particular. This complication revolves around Ben-Zion's Elefantin lineage, which goes back millennia, and Petrie's father's infatuation with "Cousin William," who excavated the Elefantin area around the Nile. Petrie's father brings back a stork-like figurine that belonged to the Khnum civilization, as competing heirlooms form the basis of *Antiquities*.

The final section remains somewhat inconclusive ("I give this writing no date") partly because the tale is timeless and partly because the teller has lost any sense of time from antiquity to modernity. "I think I know the significant thing. Ben-Zion Elefantin too knows the significant thing. Only the two of us know." The reader is presumably excluded from this enigma. "A temple in a lost kingdom of storks on the Nile, is that what it is?" A temple within a Temple, a kingdom that gets lost in transition as storks deliver myths and messages of a Son of Zion to a Cousin William. Fathers and sons

abound, as do Ben-Zion's myriad uncles—those displaced father figures throughout the diaspora. In addition to these avuncular antiquities, another significant thing is the mother-daughter relationship between Ozick and her daughter, the archaeologist Rachel Hallote. Ozick acknowledges her debt to her daughter, "from whom I learned that though stories can never generate pots, pots will always tell stories." This reversal is a Yiddish rendering of *mamaloshen*, where mothers and daughters counter-narrate and check two kings.

Various containers in the book, such as a cigar box and a china bowl, are themselves significant things meant to contain the wandering digressions of an octogenarian. Tucked into the middle of *Antiquities* are Ben-Zion Elefantin's papers, which chronicle the history of Elephantine Jews. Also contained within this pocket-sized novella are references to Shylock, Heinrich Heine, Alfred Dreyfus, Martin Buber, and Sigmund Freud. Hedda, the Jewish-Austrian cook, quotes and sings Heine's poem "A Pine Tree Stands Lonely" (1827):

> A pine tree high in the North he lonely stands.
> Under snow and wind he sleeps.
> A palm tree he dreams a land to the East,
> *traurig* on the desert sand.

The compass needle fluctuates between North and East, pine and palm. A one-eyed beaker winks at the blindness of the Temple Academy, where surnames and identities conflate Temples, Petries, and Greenhills, as the Reverend Greenhill teaches the Jewish student Ned Greenhill. The stork's eye beholds irony: elephant, stork, petri dish, and beaker all belong to the sedimented psyche of philo- and antisemitism. Storied pots rest alongside mythological chalices and Holy Grails on the shelves of fiction.

—Michael Greenstein

Chris Arthur, *Hidden Cargoes*
Rochester, MA: EastOver Press, 2022
232 pages, $20, ISBN 9781958094037

The essay as a distinct literary form has gained increasing recognition in re-

cent years, both among its creative practitioners and among academic critics. Earlier it was seen mainly as an adjunct to other genres in the oeuvre of major writers like Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, or George Orwell, and it was valued for the light it could shed on their novels or poetry. Rarely has a writer received wide recognition for a life's work only in the essay form. But this could be changing, and one example could be the work of the Irish essayist Chris Arthur. The essay has provided him with the perfect vehicle to express his world view, and he has adhered to that form through many collections over many decades.

Arthur was born in 1955 in Lisburn, near Belfast, and grew up there during the "Troubles"—the conflict that started in 1969 between Nationalist and Loyalist groups claiming to represent the Catholic and Protestant populations, respectively. Like many young Protestants, Arthur left Northern Ireland to go to university on the "Mainland"—the term given to the island of Great Britain by many Protestants. Many never returned. In Arthur's case, years in Scotland were followed by a decade of teaching in Wales and a return to Scotland, where he currently resides. Despite this long absence (interrupted of course by many visits across the Irish Sea), he has focused most of his work on Ireland, and this is reflected in the title of many of his essay collections, such as *Irish Nocturnes* (1999), *Irish Willow* (2002), *Irish Haiku* (2005), and *Irish Elegies* (2009). Relatively little of his work concerns Scotland or Wales, and this gives a retrospective cast to his view of Ireland. The "Troubles" only figure on the margins of the essays, such as an accidental encounter with a terrorist hiding in a bookshop or a bomb explosion that he narrowly missed.

The centre of the essays is not political violence but personal experiences of nature or ordinary life, and the focus is often on specific objects that are preserved as keepsakes or relics for their personal significance (including a leaf, a clock, a photograph, and even an old Scrabble set). These objects have "hidden cargoes" of meaning, and from this centre a typical essay spreads out in several directions like the spokes of a wheel rather than developing a "line" of thought. For example, a patch of woodland near his old home, which he haunted in his early teens, comes to represent a Wordsworthian closeness to nature that an adult cannot recover. Now the place is invaded by housing and busy roads, yet Arthur keeps relics of this sacred time and place, such as the skull of a dead owl that he found there and still possesses fifty years later, which he describes as the accidental victim of a

mass shooting of crows that prefigures the violence of the sectarian conflict and symbolizes human disrespect for the natural world.

A religious sensibility pervades much of Arthur's writing, but without an explicit affinity, certainly not with Protestantism or Catholicism. There is a perceptible interest in Buddhism through his work, perhaps resulting from a desire to move beyond the "divide" in Christianity in Ireland, but Arthur's spiritual practice is largely of his own creation, and it is shared through writing. The key spiritual experience that he wishes to share with readers is a shift of consciousness from everyday perfunctory noting of what surrounds us to a sense of the wondrous or even miraculous quality that an object or event can have. This quality stems from the infinite connections a particular moment or thing can suggest, such as the immense genealogical background to a particular individual human or the millions of years of evolution that have produced a particular natural form. Significance radiates outwards to infinity from any centre, if only we can open to it. In his introduction to the collection, Arthur refers to the essays as "twelve exercises in paying attention," as they embody a process akin to what the Russian Formalist critics called "defamiliarization." One metaphor he uses for this is "the electricity of wonder that runs through everything." In another formulation, he claims that "almost all the particles of our experience have the potential to shape-shift out of the garb of the ordinary in which we clad them, into raiment that dazzles and amazes." This sounds like a Biblical "epiphany"—a term also taken up by writers like James Joyce (to give an Irish example), which perhaps shows that a (non-sectarian) Christian influence is present after all.

Arthur's writing touches on many fields (autobiography, nature, philosophy, history), and his range of reading is equally broad. One of the delights of his essays is hearing about books one might otherwise not encounter, with titles ranging from *The Ancestor's Tale: A Pilgrimage to the Dawn of Life* (2004) to *Particle Metaphysics: A Critical Account of Subatomic Reality* (2007) to *Raptor: A Journey through Birds* (2016). This breadth of scientific, philosophical, and literary references reflects Arthur's ability to take us on a journey into many dimensions of reality of which we are normally not conscious. In the process, he provides a powerful example of what the essay form is uniquely able to accomplish.

—Graham Good, University of British Columbia

Peter Richardson, *Savage Journey: Hunter S. Thompson and the Weird Road to Gonzo*
Oakland: University of California Press, 2022
271 pages, $37.99, ISBN 9780520304925

While reading Peter Richardson's *Savage Journey: Hunter S. Thompson and the Weird Road to Gonzo*, I remembered a personal encounter with Thompson's masterpiece *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971). Summoned for jury duty in 1984, I entered the jury room one morning to join the other prospective jurors. One was killing time reading *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and later that morning he was called to serve on the trial of a man accused of drunk driving! The defendant could hardly have had a more sympathetic juror than one whose attitude toward the legal system had been shaped by Raoul Duke—Thompson's alter ego in the book—and his sidekick Dr. Gonzo, who represent a world where drugs and alcohol form an integral part of daily existence.

Since *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is the foremost example of Thompson's "gonzo journalism," Richardson's opening chapter flashes forward to relate the term's origin. Paired with British illustrator Ralph Steadman, Thompson went to Louisville (his hometown) to cover the 1970 Kentucky Derby for *Scanlan's Monthly*. Instead of concentrating on the race itself, Thompson chronicled his impressions of the drunken revelry surrounding the race, writing in the first person with an edgy tone. Thompson worried that he might have gone beyond the bounds of acceptable journalism, but when his piece was published under the title "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," it was celebrated as a *tour de force*. A friend used the word "gonzo" to describe its outrageous style, and the name stuck.

Richardson set out to trace the literary and cultural origins of Thompson's style. Though his introduction says he will concentrate on Thompson's writing, *Savage Journey* is not a work of literary criticism per se. Rather, it is a thesis-driven biography. After starting the book *in medias res*, Richardson reverts to a more conventional organization in chapter two, which begins with Thompson's birth in Louisville in 1937. Despite Thompson's ties to Kentucky and his admission that he always felt like a southerner, however, Richardson gets Thompson from Kentucky to California as quickly as possible, as he argues that Thompson's time in San Francisco determined

the writer he would become.

Every biography is part autobiography, and Richardson's emphasis on California clearly reflects his own experience, as the history of California journalism during the 1960s and 1970s is his specialty. He has previously written *American Prophet: The Life and Work of Carey McWilliams* (2005), a biography of the *Nation* editor who encouraged Thompson to write the article that lead to his first book, *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1967), and *A Bomb in Every Issue: How the Short, Unruly Life of* Ramparts *Magazine Changed America* (2009), and *Savage Journey* devotes a disproportionate amount of space to both McWilliams and *Ramparts*. As a result, it sometimes seems more like a survey of Richardson's career than Thompson's.

To bolster his thesis about California's influence on "gonzo" journalism, Richardson also discusses two earlier California writers—Bret Harte and Jack London—whose works prefigured Thompson's. His use of Harte and London is typical of other aspects of *Savage Journey,* as Richardson has carefully selected and shaped his materials to serve his thesis, and he slights aspects of Thompson's literary life that are irrelevant to it. For example, he says little about Thompson's military service at Eglin Air Base in Florida, where he entered journalism as a sportswriter for the airbase newspaper and as a freelancer for a local newspaper. Richardson also says little about Thompson's work in South America as a foreign correspondent for *The National Observer*, and his discussion of this period is largely derived from Brian Kevin's travel narrative *The Footloose American: Following the Hunter S. Thompson Trail across South America* (2014).

One could write a book like *Savage Journey* with a very different thesis by focusing on his southern roots. Instead of stressing Thompson's time in California, for example, one could emphasize his Louisville upbringing, his Florida connections, and the Kentucky Derby. Instead of citing California writers as precedents, one could cite the importance of southern writers. Indeed, Augustus Baldwin Longstreet's humorous newspaper sketches share much with Thompson's journalism. Attempting to stop a fight between outlaw motorcyclists and war protesters, Allen Ginsberg is as hilarious in *Hell's Angels* as Ransey Sniffle—Longstreet's greatest creation—is in "The Fight" (1835), as he incites a mock epic clash between two brawny pugilists. Thompson's sense of doom and his use of dark humour also have ties to Edgar Allan Poe's fiction. And just as Thompson's "gonzo" style represents

a new approach to journalism, Poe also invented new genres of short fiction to suit the journals of his day. The "weird road to gonzo" could be the Dixie Highway.

Readers will enjoy *Savage Journey* if they understand that it is only one possible avenue of exploration. After all, Richardson really does offer much to enjoy. Though his weighty tone clashes with his subject's uproarious humour, it suits the serious nature of studying Thompson's life and writings. Richardson's discussion of Henry Miller's influence on Thomson is also excellent, and he tells an amusing story of Thompson's interview with Jean-Claude Killy, the Olympic skier turned corporate shill. Though the 1968 Democratic Convention in Chicago does not suit Richardson's California thesis, it is an episode he cannot ignore, as it was a watershed event in the development of Thompson's political awareness.

Most importantly, Richardson emphasizes the vital role that editors played in the development of Thompson's literary career, as they were the ones who motivated him to write and who shaped his works for publication. Raoul Duke's consumption of drugs and alcohol in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is an exaggeration, but it is not much of an exaggeration, and Thompson's substance abuse often made it difficult for him to write, especially in his waning years. Were it not for his patient and dedicated editors, he would have never written the works that have made him a major voice in American literature.

— Kevin J. Hayes, University of Central Oklahoma

Sheila Murray, *Finding Edward*
Toronto: Cormorant Books, 2022
320 pages, $24.95, ISBN 9781770866263

Sheila Murray's *Finding Edward* tells the story of Cyril Rowntree, an immigrant from Jamaica who meets a homeless woman and becomes interested in the story of her struggle with the need to give up her biracial baby, whose name was Edward. As he learns more about Edward's life through letters and photographs that date back to the Great Depression, he gradually develops a sense of kinship with him, as both men share the same family dynamic of being abandoned by a white father and raised by a black mother. *Finding Edward* is thus both a celebration of and a harsh education about the

lives of biracial Canadians, and it presents the protagonist with adversity, rendering the young man an outcast, uprooted from his home country and wandering alone through his adopted one.

Cyril experiences many instances of racial tension throughout the novel. As a child growing up in the hot sticky island of Jamaica, he is taught by his adopted grandpa to "speak good," which means that he speaks with an academic formality that doesn't sound recognizably Jamaican. Although this gives him an advantage when entering Canada, the novel shows that it is still racist to associate accents with educational level and that acknowledging this type of everyday bias is the first step to changing.

In Toronto, Cyril is told that "Black folk are pathologically disposed to failure," and he is encouraged not to believe that "we have the same opportunities because we don't." This is the trigger event that gets Cyril involved in educating not only himself but also us (the readers) on Canada's racist history. Little by little, he unveils more of Edward's past and more of the injustices against black people in this country's dark history. He is also told that "the term 'Black on Black violence' is a white convenience. A concept created by racists and perpetuated by Canadian society." This is Murray's way of connecting us to the present day, injecting political themes into the story of her characters' lives.

Cyril also encounters "severe othering"—a term that refers to the process of attributing negative characteristics to individuals or groups in order to set them apart. When talking with a peer about keeping daughters away from the streets, for instance, he is told that "all those horny Jamaican men are bastards." This damaging, sweeping statement is repeated and acted out by fathers telling their daughters to stay away from men of colour. As a result, Cyril starts to look at himself differently in the mirror, as he thinks that he is a threat even when he has done nothing wrong.

In this time of absolute confusion, he seeks refuge in Edward's life and even thinks of him as a companion. As Cyril repeatedly dreams about him, they form an imaginary bond that provides comfort in times of loneliness: "When Cyril woke in the morning he thought of Edward; on some days, Edward stayed with him, close as a friend. He appreciated his company, especially now, when things were not going well."

Cyril's search for information about Edward eventually leads him to Pier 21 in Halifax, where many immigrants arrived by ship to Canada. As he walks the carpeted floors, he is sure Edward has physically been there

and is reminded of the many black men who slept there in hammocks or on tabletops after they were called to defend the country during WWII. Cyril then learns about the history of Africville, which Edward was astonished to discover was a "black town" within Halifax that housed many black settlers, who helped to build Citadel Hill. Although it thrived for years, Africville did not have basic living amenities, such as proper sewage or garbage disposal, and many residents fell ill. Because of this prejudice, it began to crumble, forcing people out of their homes and into more affluent white areas, where they were met with even more prejudice. However, Edward manages to overcome the many barriers he faces, and he eventually finds a new home and a new life on his own terms. He thus embodies the strength and resiliency of Africville, and his example helps to inspire Cyril to make good on his own life.

Through the process of uncovering Edward's history, this character comes to stand for much more than just one man, as he also represents all the hidden figures who helped to make history, which is a beautiful way of shedding light on the lost stories of this community. And by interweaving the stories of Edward and Cyril with one another, the novel effectively exposes and critiques the racial injustices and misinformed prejudices experienced by two different biracial men in two different time periods (the 1920s and the 2010s). *Finding Edward* is thus both a serious look at societal stagnation and change as well as a tender tale of what it means to be biracial in Canada in two different eras and provinces, which makes this redemptive, intimate, and special novel well worth reading.

—Victoria Gibson-Billings