To Protect and Serve



A couple of randomesque news items today that are not so random as all that.

First, a community activist in Ft Myers, Florida, was arrested for stepping into the street to sidestep a pile of debris blocking the walkway. The whole thing stinks, it was clearly a lo-grade harassment bust, and the guy will no doubt get off. But not until he has to appear in court, hire a lawyer, etc. We can be certain that Joshua McKnight did not catch this shakedown because he was a Black man who just happened to be well known to five-oh due to his constant video recording of police activity in his neighborhood. Perish the thought. The officer was simply citing this scofflaw for obstructing the duties of a police officer who was trying to execute an lawful stop for a non-crime. After all, explained the supervising officer:

> *…anytime an officer conducts a lawful stop that it's the law to obey every command an officer gives you.*

Even if that lawful stop wasn't really. Lawful, that is.

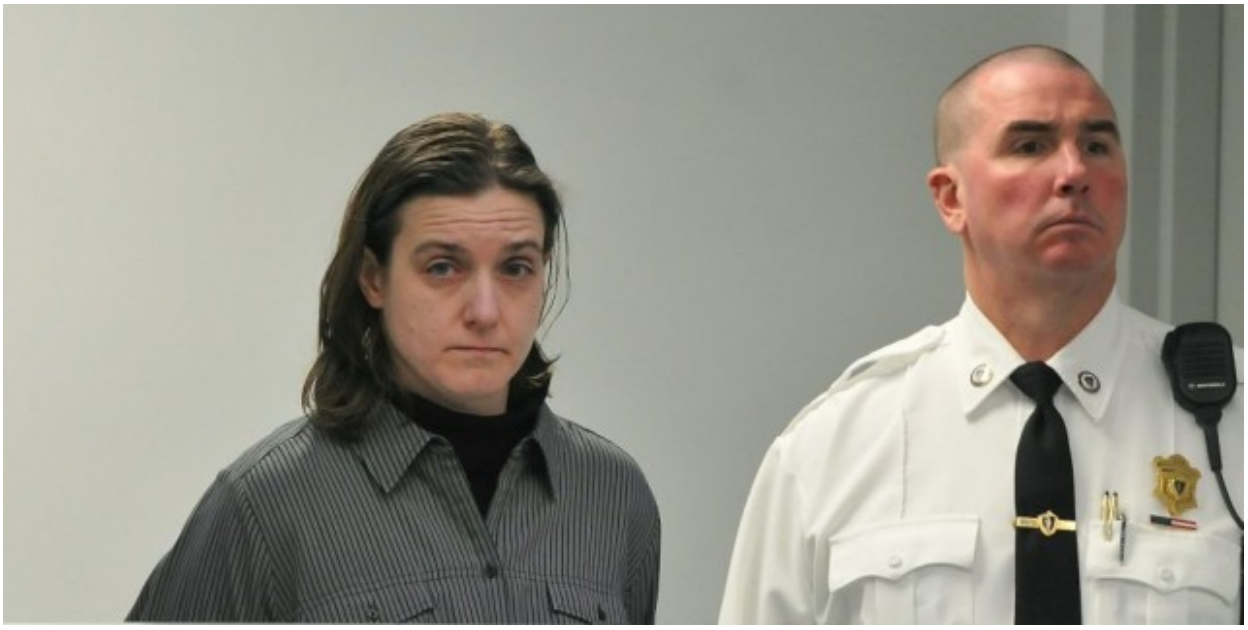
Then on NPR today, a discussion about municipalities that are jailing people for failure to pay simple fines, and then charging a daily fee for their incarceration, leading to prisoners amassing enormous debt with no way to pay. (This was one factor in the post-shooting unrest in Ferguson and elsewhere last year.) This is our version of Dickens' debtor prisons. No different, really. People with no resources are

penalized for having no resources, then penalized further for having no resources. Never mind the people held on flimsy charges who cannot afford bail who are then assessed for their food and lodging. It's like a Kafka nightmare after an ibogaine binge.

And let's not even get started in the asset forfeiture plague, a form of legalized gangsterism under the banner of fighting the war on drugs. And frankly, thinking about the rash of police homicides and the way they are covered up and excused (and the citizenry that helps excuse them) fills me with a more-than-exhausting sense of despair. Let's forget I said anything.

Also yesterday, an article about a chemist in a Massachusetts State Police drug lab:

> *Investigators for the attorney general's office found that chemist Sonja Farak had tested drug samples or testified in court between about 2005 and 2013 while under the influence of meth, ketamine, cocaine, LSD, and other drugs…*



A once-eminent soldier in the war on drugs. She worked hard to to try to rid her lab of ALL the drugs.

On top of that, she was stealing cocaine from the evidence

locker and cooking crack IN THE FREAKING STATE DRUG LAB.

> *She also used many other reference drugs, she testified, and consumed her coworkers' samples, as well as samples police brought in as evidence. When cocaine samples coming into the lab dwindled, she testified, she began doing crack cocaine. She cooked it in the lab after hours starting in 2012, she testified. She used crack throughout the building and at her work station, she said — even when other employees were at the lab.*

There was evidence as far back as 2013 that Farak was Lebowski-ing her way through the workday, but since she was pretty efficient at helping put away the bad guys it must have been easier to turn a blind eye. Thousands of convictions based on the testimony of a chemist who was tripping balls. But justice is served! She got 18 months.<fn>Simple possession in Mass. calls for a one-year minimum; possession with intent to sell, minimum 5 years. Reckon she was cooking for personal use only.</fn>

<fn>N.B. This case follows on the case of chemist Annie Dookhan, also of Massachusetts, who was convicted of essentially writing up lab results the way the police wanted, often never even bothering to run a test on a substance at all. As with Farak, her let-us-say lax standards were well known among the prosecuting community, but her *effectiveness* at putting baddies in the hoosegow made her a popular and highly productive employee all the same.</fn>

But it's not just crusaders in the war on drugs and certain people who use them that enjoy a little leeway.<fn>For the sake of sanity and blood pressure, we'll skip over the criminals of the Crash of '08, the torture enthusiasts of our waronterror, &c. I'm trying to cut down on my drinking.</fn> Flash back to March, 2014, and enjoy the sight of law-abiding citizens aiming their rifles at Federal employees at the Bundy

ranch in Nevada.



Is that his wife along to enjoy the fun?

The Feds backed down. Didn’t want to cause too much trouble. Scoot ahead to January, 2016, when the Bundy spawn decided to occupy a Federal facility in Oregon.



Defending the Constitution. Yeah, that’s the ticket.

Eventually, this became too much to bear, and the Feds dropped on these bunch of misfits and deadbeats, killing one and sending many others away for what is likely to be a very long stretch. But really, it took the Feds two years to move on them, a decision that likely cost the taxpayers millions of dollars in law enforcement costs and damage to the Malheur Wildlife Refuge, not to mention the ongoing refusal to pay the millions in back fees and taxes owed by Bundy that started the whole *mishigas* in the first place.

I’m not saying the Bundy’s needed to meet the same fate as Koresh or the Ruby Ridge loonies. But it is more than passing strange that a Michael Brown or Eric Garner will find themselves dead in the blink of an eye while people like the domestic terrorists of the Bundy Gang<fn>Whose crimes on the monetary scale alone are exponentially greater, never mind the implicit threat of violence that far exceeded any threat represented by Garner/Brown/et al.</fn> managed to skate for nearly two years and were only arrested after a ridiculous escalation of destruction and threat of violence.

And certainly, one would be cynical to think that the tacit support offered the domestic terrorists by allegedly responsible people like state and federal legislators, media organizations, and even the occasional Presidential candidate was anything but sincere and well-considered. Certainly there was nothing cynical about offering support to this gaggle of goofballs, and I’m sure it had nothing to do with scoring points among the rubes and marks of Idiot America.



A few months late for Halloween and at least two cans short of a six-pack.

But as with the ongoing reality show starring T-rump, if someone gets a microphone often enough and repeats borderline-psychotic rantings often enough – under the guise of patriotism or defending the Constitution – we the people are expected to demonstrate “tolerance” and “respect” for the wide range of thought and belief in our polity. You might even – as did Nevada Congressional Candidate and Friend of the Bundys – announce that if any law enforcement officer pointed a weapon at her she would not hesitate to start firing.



The next Congress Critter from Las Vegas. Really. I cannot even….

Unsettled in our understanding of our justice system is confusion over whether the police are supposed to "protect and serve" versus conduct "law enforcement". And maybe the distinction is not that important, though I do think emphasizing service over "force" might be a good place to begin.

But it certainly goes deeper than that, and like too many other problems facing our society, finds its roots in our Original Sin of slavery and the ongoing attempts to maintain whatever octane of racial and social purity prevails at any

given moment. That Eric Garner can die in a minute while wannabe Rambos point automatic weapons at Federal cops paints the ugly truth in a way few people want to acknowledge. That too many people can see Tamir Rice as an obviously dangerous threat while Cliven Bundy can foment an armed standoff with the police and be seen as a patriot.<fn>I'm certain there are mis-apprehensions among people on "my side" that are equally egregious. Mea culpa.</fn>

I got no answers, just a bundle of aggravating threads of misbehavior that lead to more stories of frustration. And, to be fair, more than a few awful stories about police who are killed in the line of duty. And to be further fair, more than a few stories about police who go way out of their way to truly protect and serve.

This isn't an anti-cop rant. More than anything, it's a rant at the separations and divisions that slice our nation up into littler and littler pieces. And I don't see it getting better. There are too many 'leaders' who correctly understand the effectiveness of stoking the resentments and fanning the flames. It won't stop, no matter who controls the White House or the state house.

As Trump said today: "You win the pennant and now you're in the World Series – you gonna change?"

Until we get serious as a society about refusing to pretend that people like Fiore or Trump are actually responsible members of society, worthy of holding elected office, this madness will continue.

Whaddya gonna do?

I Like Big Books



A quick update to my pining legions.

The Reader is on a roll. Seventeen books read since Christmas, and almost every one of them a real corker. Two more underway, plus a fourth sojourn through *Infinite Jest*.<fn>Somebody come pull me out if you don't hear from me for a while. I've tied a rope around my waist just in case.</fn> Here's a quick consumer guide to fuel your bibliophilistic indulgence.

I've already told you about Jane Mayer's superb *Dark Money: The Hidden History of the Billionaires Behind the Rise of the Radical Right*. I'll say this again: if you hope to understand the current political divide in the U.S., you have to read this book. For example: if someone introduces himself as the Distinguished Professor of Prosperity and Individual Freedom<fn>Which I actually experienced recently.</fn> and your Koch-radar doesn't start ringing alarm bells, you need this book. Desperately. Just read it already.

Alert fans of the blog have also "enjoyed" my take on the latest Don DeLillo, *Zero K*. His best since *Underworld.*

Given the drought of original thoughts in my head, you'll get a chance to "enjoy" my musings about many of these books in the coming weeks. Here are the potential victims of analytical spasm:

Brief History of Seven Killings, Marlon James

All the King's Men, Robert Penn Warren

Down and Out in Paris and London, George Orwell

The Orphan Master's Son, Adam Johnson

The Dream of Perpetual Motion, Dexter

The Invisible Knight, Italo Calvino

The Sellout and *Tuff*, Paul Beatty

If Beale Street Could Talk, James Baldwin

Wind Up Bird Chronicles, Haruki Murakami

Essays, Wallace Shawn

Creative Clash/Rise of the Creative Class: These were homework for my super-secret work as a double-naught. Provocative, but who cares about neo-urbanism?

Sense of Ending, Julian Barnes

First up will be *On Immunity: An Inoculation*, by Eula Biss. I just finished this one, and it sent me scurrying back to the shelf to pull down and re-read Woolf's *On Being Sick* and Sontag's *Illness as Metaphor*. Biss's meditation begins in the vax/anti-vax conflict and moves outward into broader ruminations on how the ways we think about disease – and the language we use to describe it – have implications that go beyond physical health itself. It fits in well in the long lineage of which Woolf and Sontag are a part. Look for this one later this week.

And yeah, sure, a naggling concern about illness and disease is probably also connected to Your Narrator's incessant propulsion towards decrepitude, disintegration, and senescence. Get off my lawn.

Zero K



Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rave at close of day;
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

We've been on a roll here in the vineyard. So far this year, the Writer has read 18 books<fn>Perhaps explaining the paucity of postings here!</fn>, many of them worthy of considered comment. But you're stuck with me. Alas. Here's the first of a series of chin-strokers inspired by the readings.

Let's start with the last one first. Don DeLillo's 16th novel hit the stores yesterday, but diligent groveling put a copy in my hands on Friday. This makes me almost as timely and important as Kakutani.<fn>No. But I am more trustworthy.</fn>

Opinion: This is the best DeLillo since *Underworld* in 1997. It ranks right up there with *White Noise* from 1985. At the age of 79, DeLillo continues to produce some of our most vital fiction.

He's always had a penchant for pondering mortality – and notions of immortality – and with *Zero K* he pretty much goes all in. Our hero, Jeffrey, is the semi-aimless son of a billionaire father who abandoned him at age 10 in the middle of a math homework problem. More or less reconciled as adults, Jeffrey steadfastly avoids any life choices that might fix him

as “like” his father, who he only calls by his first name, Ross. The relationship is not without a certain level of affection and admiration – and approbation.

Ross has invested billions into creating a cryogenic preservation facility in the vast wilds of the mid-Asian desert, a place where the very rich can go to suspend themselves in hopes of being revived in a world where there is a cure for their ailment, which really mostly comes down to reversing the aging process. And where a select few choose to go to suspend themselves while still perfectly healthy with the idea that they will be revived in a world that is better, more rational, more complete.

The compound is claustrophobic and hallucinatory and really smacks of certain culti-ish mind control techniques. (The Heaven’s Gate crew comes to mind.) It also doubles as an all-encompassing art installation, with every detail carefully programmed by the Stenmark twins, who I visualized as Kraftwerk-ish euro hipsters, very thin, translucent, and dressed in all-black skin tights. Even when their clothing is described otherwise, they always look like Dieter to me.



Welcome to Sprockets

There are multitudes of semi-lifelike mannequins stationed throughout. Days can pass without seeing another human. Video screens appear from nowhere with images of global devastation, poverty, war, plagues; the Earth, it seems, is no longer fit

for living; better to suspend and come back at a happier moment.

Food, a bland gruel designed, it seems, to relieve one's affection for life's simple pleasures, is generally taken in isolation, though occasionally another person appears at Jeffrey's mealtime, presumably at the behest of those running the show. Jeffrey's conversations with various residents and staff resemble the kinds of exchange you might endure with someone handing out Jack Chick cartoons or Scientology pamphlets. The lights are on, but it's unclear whether there is anybody home.

And then there are the endless hallways of doors leading – perhaps – to nowhere. Jeffrey decides to test the theory by knocking.

> *I did this six times and told myself one more door and this time the door opened and a man stood there in suit, tie and turban. I looked at him considering what I might say.*
>
> *"I must have the wrong door," I said.*
>
> *He gave me a hard look.*
>
> *"They're all the wrong door," he said.*

Much of this material reminded me of David Foster Wallace crossed with Philip K. Dick: funny, somewhat terrifying, with construction of language that somehow manages to evoke both feelings at once. Nobody builds a sentence with as much style and impact as DeLillo; in some of his books, the sheer scale of the language makes it seem as if "plot" is purely incidental. But not here.

Jeffrey is called to this secret compound to witness the suspension of his step-mother, who is dying. As the moment approaches, perfectly healthy father Ross decides he can't go on without her, declaring, "I'm going with her." What follows

is examination of conceptions of life and death, what it means to be a human being, what our responsibilities are to ourselves, our loved ones, to others. And as we wait to discover whether Ross goes gently into that dark night, Jeffrey finds ample time to examine himself, his choices and non-choices, his affable passivity, all of which adds up to "…the soporifics of normalcy, my days in middling drift."

Jeffrey suspects that his refusal to commit to, well, anything really, is his reaction against the standards of his father. He's perfectly "happy" with his drift, yet too smart to accept that contentment at face value. Maybe he should be doing something more. Maybe he is squandering…something.

> *"The long soft life is what I feel I'm settling into and the only question is how deadly it will turn out to be.*
>
> *"But do I believe this or am I searching for effect, a way to balance the ease of my everydayness?"*

And yet, he is fierce in his opposition to his healthy Father choosing to suspend himself while he still has much life to live. The idea that one could just choose to check out for a while repels him.

Jeffrey is fairly obsessed with language, with naming, with defining. "Cherish the language," he says. It is his shield:

> *This is what I do to defend myself against some spectacle of nature. Think of a word.*

The question of who, or what, will revive in the distant future is unclear. Will consciousness maintain itself? Will the suspended brain experience thought, loneliness? If there is a soul, and it ascends to heaven, what happens when the body is revived? Who are we?

> *Am I someone or is it just the words that make me think I'm*

someone?

And so: the plot has its grip on you. Will he or won't he whatever? But the heart of this is the way the two protagonists draw you into their point of view, leading the reader to wonder about his own beliefs and fears. What is this life for? Am I giving it all I can? What is success and failure? Is there an absolute standard for either, a simple test that can tell us whether we are living up to our potential, or casting it away by "suspending" ourselves or settling into the long, soft life?

We witness Jeffrey's struggle with these questions through his constant interrogation of meaning and definition. And even though he sometimes uses that way of thinking to avoid grappling with his emotions, in the end his obsessions circle back on him to force him to examine the uncomfortable.

Why was I doing this to myself?
Because the mind keeps working, uncontrollably.

The unceasing drive of mind, and what happens in the mind after going (gently or not) into the good night, creates one of the most awe-ful scenes in the book.

There's plenty here to make the reader uncomfortable, and plenty of very funny moments. The plot moves you along with more pace than most DeLillo novels.

But my favorite moment is the ending, which takes place on a crosstown bus in Manhattan. I held my breath for the last several paragraphs and sat motionless for several minutes after.<fn>Same thing happened to me at the climax of *Underworld.*</fn> There is no neatly wrapped payoff here, no tied-in-a-bow resolution. But the ending is glorious, the simplest pleasure expressed nearly incoherently, but with meaning crystal clear to anyone paying attention. Sunlight

does not shine in any underworld. Rage, rage against the dying of the light.