The Big Band Golden Age is Now

The Swing Era of the 30s and 40s is commonly remembered as the golden age of the jazz big band. Ellington. Basie. Miller. Shaw. Goodman. Calloway. Eckstine. Dizzy. And dozens more, busloads of troupers riding town to town to play at venues ranging from high school gyms to roller skating rinks to any venue that could accommodate a few hundred people dancing their asses off.

The economics and logistics of keeping a dozen or more musicians on the road were never sustainable. Add in the fact that dance music – and the big bands were first and foremost dance bands – was drifting towards the burgeoning rock'n'roll sound, and the demise of the big band was inevitable. Ellington and Basie kept going well into the 1970s, but big bands became less important as the small ensemble ethos of be- and post-bop became the prominent vehicles for jazz.

The idea of the large ensemble never really went away, with artists as varied as Miles (with Gil Evans), Coltrane (*Africa Brass* and *Ascension*), and Charles Mingus flirted with expanded instrumentation through the 50s and 60s. But these cats and a few others (e.g., Buddy RichFun fact: Buddy Rich Big Band is the first concert I ever attended alone., Maynard Ferguson) aside, the big band became something of a relic.

A few NYC-based big bands kept the flame alive. The Thad Jones/ Mel Lewis Jazz Orchestra kept up a pretty good run,

thanks to a weekly gig at the Village Vanguard. Now known as the Vanguard Jazz Orchestra, only the COVID era has shut down their 50 year-plus Monday night run. Here's hoping they – and the Vanguard – will pick up and keep. fucking. going. once the vaccine does its work.

Gil Evans kept his vision alive with a similar Monday night regular gig in New York, Mondays being the night that the best pro musicians were "off" and thereby available to play for very little money. People so wanted to play with Gil Evans that there would be as many cats in the audience with horns (or harmonicas: Toots Thielemans sat in one night I was there and played for three hours) at the ready as there were on stage.

Sam Rivers enjoyed a similar situation after he retired to Orlando, where the various theme park gigsters were hungry for some real music to play. He kept up a weekly gig with that gang almost until his death in 2011. A limited edition 3-cd set of the Rivbea All Star Orchestra from this period will run you around $950 if you can find a copy.

Carla Bley kept the large ensemble vibe running across a variety of orchestras, most notably the Liberation Music Orchestra led by Charlie Haden. Quietly and consistently, Carla Bley remade the jazz orchestra in her own image and likeness: beautiful, lithe, forward, kind, ferocious, and gently idiosyncratic. Along with Evans, every composer/arranger working today owes a deep debt to Bley, most especially the several women who have followed in her path that we'll look at today.

A few others took up the challenge of standing up a big band along the way. Joe Henderson launched a one-off big band recording in '95 that was superb and un-tourable. In the 80s-90s, a smattering of razor sharp European big bands – the Vienna Art Orchestra and Willem Breuker Kollektief chief among them – leveraged the government arts funding on tap in Europe

(long since eliminated by the bastards of the Reagan raj in the U.S.) to withstand the immense challenges of taking a large ensemble on the road.

In the U.S., institutional support made possible the Carnegie Hall Jazz Orchestra (for a while) under Jon Faddis and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra under Wynton Marsalis (still rolling strong). With the cachet and endowment heft of Lincoln Center behind them – along with Wynton's massive media profile and considerable talents – the Lincoln Center crew has toured extensively, alternating between their mission as a repertory ensemble and their function as a vehicle for Wynton's more ambitious projects.

One notable exception to this pendulum arc between feast (via institutional support) or famine (due to the nature of economic reality) was the Sun Ra Omniverse Solar Myth Science Heliocentric Arkestra (among so many recombinant naming possibilities – let's just call it The Arkestra), formed in the mid-50s and, remarkably, still alive today. How Sun Ra managed to keep this group together for so long is a mystery and a marvel, especially when one considers the fact that he kept A-plus blazers like John Gilmore, Marshall Allen, and many others on board when they could have gained more money and fame striking out in their own small ensembles. And those who did move on to greater fame often made their way back to the Arkestra. Such was The Sun's gravitational pull.

Even after Ra's death in 1993 – and the subsequent passing of the great Gilmore and June Tyson – the Arkestra continues to thrive under the direction of Marshall Allen, who last year celebrated his 96th birthday by launching the first new Arkestra recording in 20 years. *Swirling* is a complete delight, mixing old Ra favorites like *Angels and Demons at Play, Rocket #9,* and *Sea of Darkness* with previously unrecorded Ra material and one Allen original. (Allen claims there are hundreds of unrecorded Ra compositions, some of them Ra felt too dangerous to ever be played outside of rehearsal.)

Add in a boodle of archival Arkestra recordings spanning 40 years of angels and demons traveling the spaceways, and Our Year of Quarantine was a very good year for diving into one of the greatest big bands of all time. Keep traveling; Sun will wait for you.

Rob Mazurek's Exploding Star Orchestra derives a great deal of its ethos and energy from Sun Ra's Afro-Futurist vibe. Their 2020 release, *Dimensional Stardust*, boasts a who's who lineup of the best of Chicago's current crop of musicians, many of them associated with the legendary Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians. Among this number, flautist Nicole Mitchell and cellist Tomeka Reid stand out, as does the seems-to-be-on-every-great-album-this year guitarist Jeff Parker. It is funky and spiky, with spoken word elements weaving into the mix of composition and improvisation like the best of Ra's futuristic fantasies, yet unmistakably an entity like no other.

Norwegian drummer/composer Gard Nilssen's 16-piece Supersonic Orchestra hearkens back to the heyday of the Willem Breuker Kollektief and Vienna Art Orchestra. Bravura ensemble passages and smashing feats of derring-do from the soloists, this is the kind of big band you wish you could see live just for the thrill of leaping out of your chair every couple of minutes. *If You Listen Carefully The Music is Yours* slings its three bass/ten horns onslaught with humor, drama, and the occasional whiff of high wire dancing and trapeze heroics. Get it. (Bandcamp takes payment for this one in Norwegian Kroner. No worries. The 70 NOK digital download is eight bucks and a quarter U.S., a bargain at twice the price.)

If you crave the supersonic skronk blast of saxophones in overdrive, this is your jam.

Moving on to Those Who Owe Much to Bley/Evans.

The Vanessa Perica Orchestra's self-released *Love Is a*

Temporary Madness – her first recording – is a bold and ambitious blast from Australia. Perica cites Ennio Morricone and Joe Henderson's big band as primary influences and acknowledges her debt to Gil Evans, too. Coming this Spring, her orchestra is set to present *Love is...* in partnership with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Despite my ingrained skepticism about the ability of classical orchestras to swing, I'm really curious to hear how this expanded sonic palette changes her already sumptuous harmonic layering.

Kathrine Windfeld is another comer in the Scandinavian big band sweepstakes. This Danish composer/pianist has a quartet and sextet project, but her primary avenue is her big band work. *Orca* is her third release, and it derives heavily from the Bley/Evans vocabulary and palette. Deeply textured with rich melodies. Highly recommended.

Back to New York. The Webber/Morris Big Band released *Both Are True* to widespread critical acclaim. Anna Webber and Angela Morris act as each other's mirror in a sense. Each is a superb tenor/flute player and composer. On Webber's tunes, Morris plays while Webber conducts. And vice versa. Like the best arrangers as far back as Ellington – and everybody else mentioned on this page – they know their players and write to fit their strengths.

This Webber piece, *Rebonds*, is a terrific example of the deft mixing of composition and improvisation the band offers. And it has a wonderful skank guitar bit that makes me all tingly..

One of the most anticipated releases of 2020 came from Maria Schneider, who has been turning out magnificent large ensemble works for 27 years with a big band notable for the consistency of its membership. Let's just say she lived up to very high expectations with *Data Lords*. Landing at or near the top of most of the Best of 2020 lists, it is something of a career culmination (so far) for this one-time protégé of Gil Evans. Since her first release in 1994, *Evanescence*, Schneider has

consistently been at the top of the composer/arranger heap. She was named an NEA Jazz Master in 2019 and has collaborated with, among many, Sting, Dawn Upshaw, and this guy.

Data Lords, a double album in the OG sense of the phrase, is a musical examination of the dichotomy in our society between our digitized sensibilities and the rhythms of the analog world. With one disc of material devoted to each realm, one can apprehend a difference in mood and tone, but the difference is not dogmatic or heavy handed. Following along with liner notes fills in the picture, but it is easy enough to just let the music wash over and let the thematic considerations be.

One exception is the last track on the album – *The Sun Waited for Me*. This piece brings that combination of achingly gorgeous melody and rising action arrangement that typifies the best of the Evans/Bley canon. Donny McCaslin's tenor sax solo is deeply moving, and Frank Kimbrough's piano demonstrates the magnitude of loss his death in late December laid upon the music scene.

Based on a poem by Ted Kooser, the words behind the music are just the right tonic for this morning when we await the disposal of our recent and benighted president and hope, collectively, for a new and better day.

> *How important it must be*
> *to someone*
> *that I am alive, and walking,*
> *and that I have written*
> *these poems.*
> *This morning the sun stood*
> *right at the end of the road*
> *and waited for me.*
>
> *– Ted Kooser*

Originally written for soprano Dawn Upshaw, this instrumental arrangement is one of my favorite pieces of music in a year that was crammed full with great work. Not to mention a year that brought more than its share of challenge, grief, and terror.

Here's to the Sun, Ra and otherwise, still waiting for us all.

I Had No Reason To Be Over Optimistic

Well, now, then. A couple days back I tossed up my first post in months, brimming with ideas for the i2b joint in the coming year.

I'm still on for the commitments to the blog and to you, my fearless readers. But let's go ahead and say that title, the opening line from The Who's song *1921*, and my uncharacteristic stab at the putative power of positive thinking, may have been less than apropos. We likely would have been better served by a different line from that ditty. Like the one I copped for today's missive.

Yesterday's attempted rebellion against the United States government accomplished something that the legendary traitor Robert E. Lee failed to do 160 years ago: The flag of the Confederacy flew in the United States Capitol. This is no

small thing. The spirit of the Confederacy suffuses the MAGA movement, leavened with a soupcon of undiluted Nazism. (Granted, Hitler's world view was directly inspired by the dictates of Old South White Supremacy, so maybe it's just a case of over-egging the pudding.)

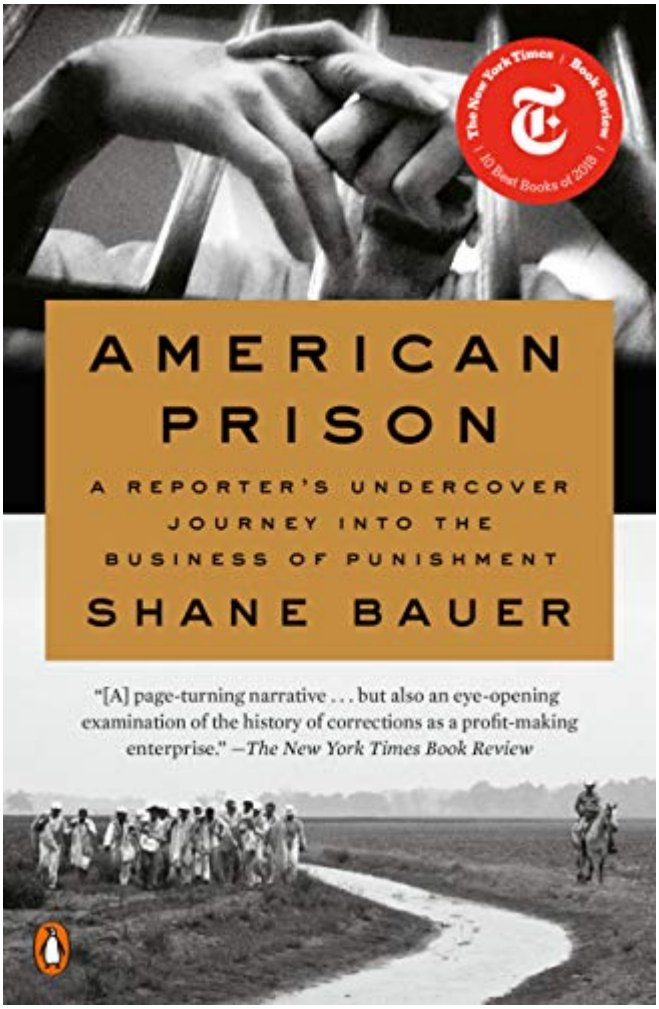
6MWE = Six Million Wasn't Enough

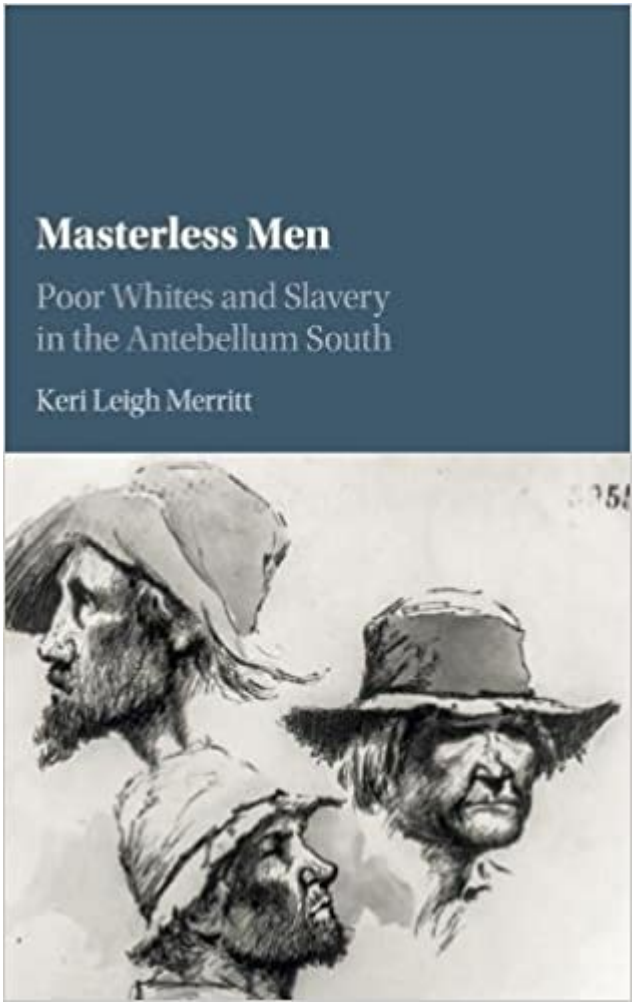
Seven months ago I forecast something along these lines. As expected, the attack on the seat of American government was abetted via complicity within the military and law enforcement community. I'm not sure I agree that the viral video that "proves" the cops threw the gates open is necessarily what the legions of re-tweeters suggest, but there is no question the overall resistance to incursion was awfully damned casual.

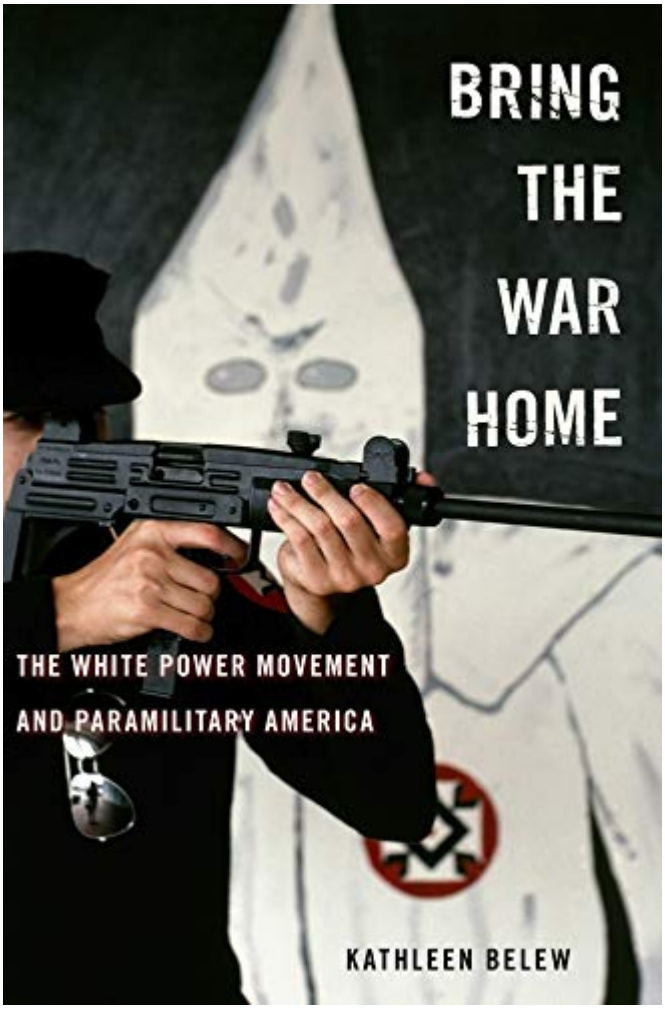
Either way, the photos of cops taking selfies with the rioters, the pitifully low number of arrests, and the video of the cops leading protesters gently out by the hand demonstrates a hard and disturbing truth: We need to be extremely wary of the idea that LEO and military personnel are defenders of a broad swath of the American public. The demonstrations of excessive force at the BLM and related protests over the past year provide a stark contrast with the gentle treatment the 99.99% white mob enjoyed yesterday. If it had been a bunch of Dirty Hippies and Those People™ storming the Capitol steps, the place would have been hip deep in blood.

I've never been comfortable with the All Cops Are Bastards formulation (hashtag #ACAB). It is a tad too easy, too facile. The poverty of nuance is on par with some of the worst shorthand about liberals, feminists, and so on. But I'm damned if every day does not deliver some piece of news that gives the meme more heft and veracity.

None of this should come as any surprise. Policing in the U.S. has long been a fundamental extension of White Supremacy, a tool for keeping Black folk in their place and exploitable as a bloc of cheap labor. (Two excellent treatments of the origins of policing and imprisonment in the U.S. are Shane Bauer's *American Prison* and Keri Leigh Merritt's *Masterless Men*.)


The New York Times Book Review
10 Best Books of 2018
AMERICAN PRISON
A REPORTER'S UNDERCOVER JOURNEY INTO THE BUSINESS OF PUNISHMENT
SHANE BAUER
"[A] page-turning narrative . . . but also an eye-opening examination of the history of corrections as a profit-making enterprise." —The New York Times Book Review


Masterless Men
Poor Whites and Slavery
in the Antebellum South
Keri Leigh Merritt

- 

Further, a revanchist/falangist presence has been long evident in U.S. military organization. Kathleen Belew's deeply researched *Bringing the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* describes in particular detail the modern roots of extremist fascism embedded in the armed services, from the foot soldiers to the upper brass. Guys like Timothy McVeigh and Mike Flynn.

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We keep hearing lots of “This is not who we are” nonsense about this insurrection. Tis a fine hope, indeed, but this is exactly who and what America is, and the people who think that’s just fine will go to extraordinary lengths to keep it that way. It beggars the imagination for most people not inside the fever swamp itself just how deep their belief in their entitlement runs, and the degree to which any deviation from that imagined social order fuels a misguided and destructive sense of victimhood.

It is time to work the imagination just a little harder.

In less than two weeks, Joe Biden and Kamala Harris will take their oaths of office. At that point, the legitimately elected government of the United States will be controlled by a slim majority of the Democratic Party (though in the Senate, the votes needed for the Dems to take a bare one seat advantage was 40 million more than those cast for Republicans). Sadly, along with their "this is not who we are" wishful thinking, there is a tendency for Democrats to urge a look-forward-not-back attitude toward Republican malfeasance.

Beginning with the Nixon pardon, through the Reagan/Bush Raj, and on through the depredations of Bush/Cheney, Democrats have been reluctant to push for accountability, never mind actual justice. Many of the malefactors of the Trump crime syndicate cut their teeth in the scandals of the Reagan-Bush-Bush administrations. The failure to prosecute their misdeeds are fundamental to understanding the Trumpian impulse to bluff their way through the most obvious corruptions. There has never been a price to pay. In the absence of any shame, our vaunted institutional norms are not worth the paper they were never printed on. When dealing with people whose definition of right action is nothing more than "whatever the fuck we wanna do", better that we not rely on these folks to do the right thing of their own accord.

There can be little debate that the members of the mob are fundamentally deranged and delusional about the basic facts of the world at hand. Nothing about their sense of grievance justifies their actions. No evidence in the real world supports their beliefs – stolen election, Soros illuminati, secret pedo cabals, antifa conspiracies – any more than the birth certificate thumpers had a legitimate claim on the nativity of Obama. What they all have in common is deep gullibility and a sense of a victimhood that leaves them at the mercy of hucksters like Trump, Limbaugh, Hannity, and so on. But even though the rabble here is largely composed of

semi-sentient fantasts – and there is a good case to be made that they are pitiable victims of an especially greedy long con – there is no reason to let them evade the consequences of their stupidity. Less than a day after the dirty deed, we are hearing calls to allow enflamed passions to subside, turn the other cheek, let bygones go unprosecuted. These people have grievances, we hear, and we should respect their need to have time to heal &c.

Fuck that noise.

Despite the almost comical bravado on display, despite their blatant publicization of their felonious deeds…

“May it please the jury to consider this photograph, helpfully provided by the defendant himself…”

…be prepared for the howls about government overreach when even the slightest law enforcement tends their way. Already, several people have been sacked from their jobs for their participation, and rightly so. Yet there are cries of First Amendment violations from wannabe constitooshunal scholarz with all the sophistication of the grade school bully who steals your lunch money and snarls “It’s a free country, man” when you protest. A movement is underway to make a martyr of

the dim bulb who went and got herself shot breaking through a Capitol window, her only claim to merit arising from demonstrating that reflexively yammering “thank you for your service” to every rando who ever wore a uniform is the height of unthinking patriot posturing.

These Karens and Kevins are unaccustomed to having their actions scrutinized, and will certainly demand to speak to the manager about this outrage. I mean, it’s not like they did something awful, like smashing a window at a Target store, or god forbid, something even worse.

Like these hooligans.

Savages. How dare they?

Got a Feeling ’21 Is Gonna Be a Good Year

Especially if you and me and these birds see it in together.

Your Narrator has been largely AWOL the past year. Mea maxima. The First Plague Year took its toll on ambition and productivity. 2021 is gonna be different.

I’m setting a few semi-ambitious goals for the year. Something doable, but challenging at the same time. And that means big ripples to this here little blog and the handful of you who still bother to read when I post. (My fault entirely. In June, my post about Anderson Cooper and Cornel West garnered around 1500 hits. By the time I got around to posting again a few months later, interest had waned and I did not even hit 100 on either post. Discouraging? Yeah, a bit, but nobody to blame but myself. KFG, yo.) Maybe I can reward you stalwart pals and draw some of my less devoted crowd back again.

So what am I up to? Here’s the plan:

- Morning Writing; Mon to Sat, first act of the day. Once the dogs are fed and coffee brewed, I will sit down and write three to four pages of long-hand in a spiral notebook. I’ve been doing this since September, and it has helped get the juice flowing again. (Sunday morning is for the NYT crossword.)
- Billy Bard Intensive; M-W-F. Beginning w Sonnet #1, read and listen along with Sir Patrick, one sonnet per session. I should complete the series of 154 sonnets by

New Years Eve.

Dig the Gillian Welch t-shirt!

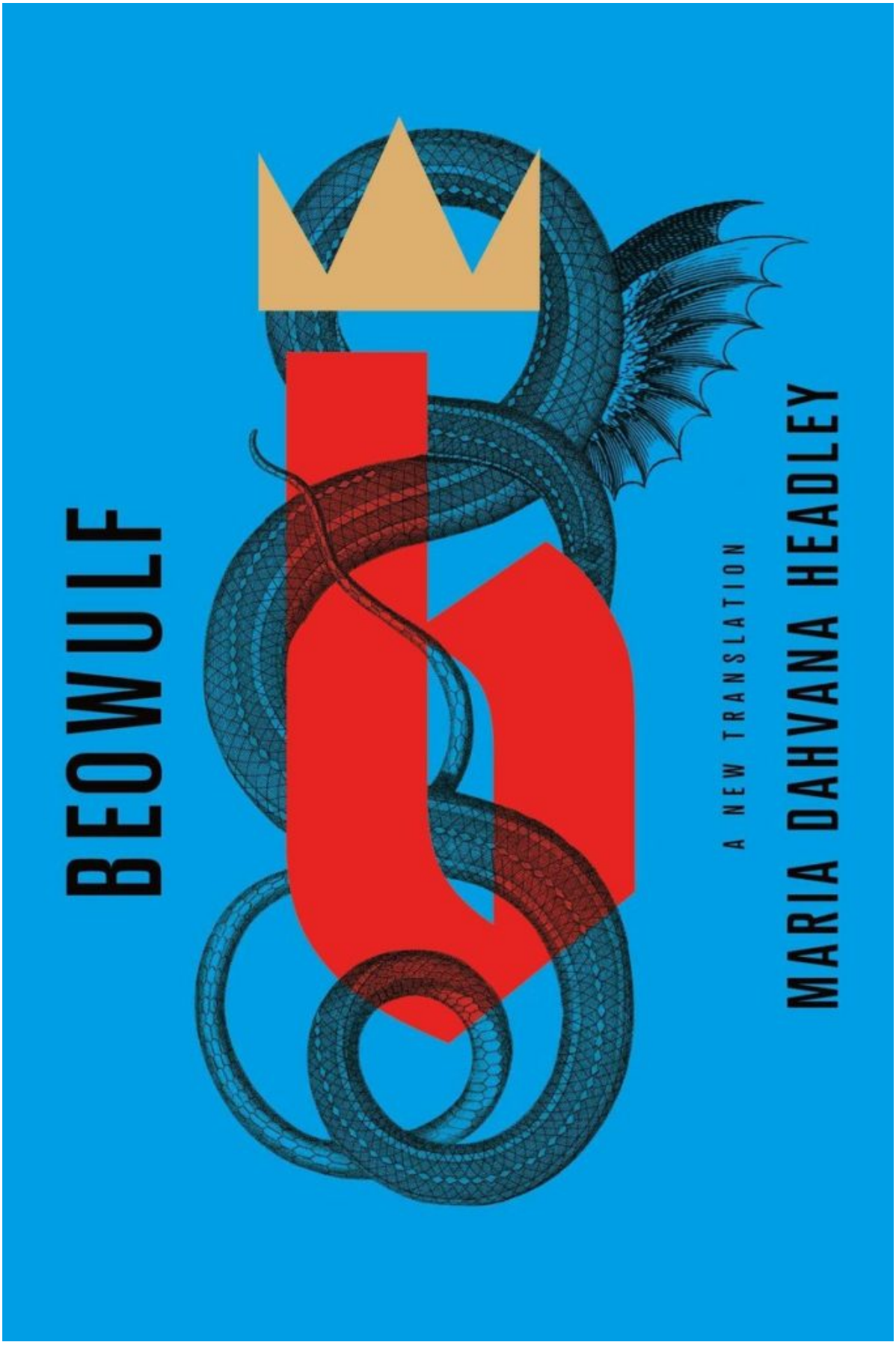
- Fiction Writing: This is the bigly ambitious piece. I will deliver (to myself) one short story draft every other Friday beginning January 15. That comes to 26 short stories in some semblance of wholeness for 2021. Perhaps this will add up to something.
- The i2b Blog: I promise, my pretties, that I will submit a substantial post every other Friday beginning this week, January 8. This is the bare minimum for i2b in 2021. There will most likely be additional posts along the way – musings about books, music, film/tv, politics, &c. – but the big work will be the alternating Fridays. I have a few larger thematic pieces I've been mulling for a while that have felt too daunting to undertake in Our Year of COVID. Time to quit fucking around, as Aristotle used to say; that was his twist on Plato's "keep fucking going". (You can look it up.)

It's not that 2020 was a complete loss, though much went missing. Look, we dumped the Trump Chump. We flipped the Senate (crowing a bit ahead of the final call on Ossoff, I know, but I am uncharacteristically optimistic this morning).

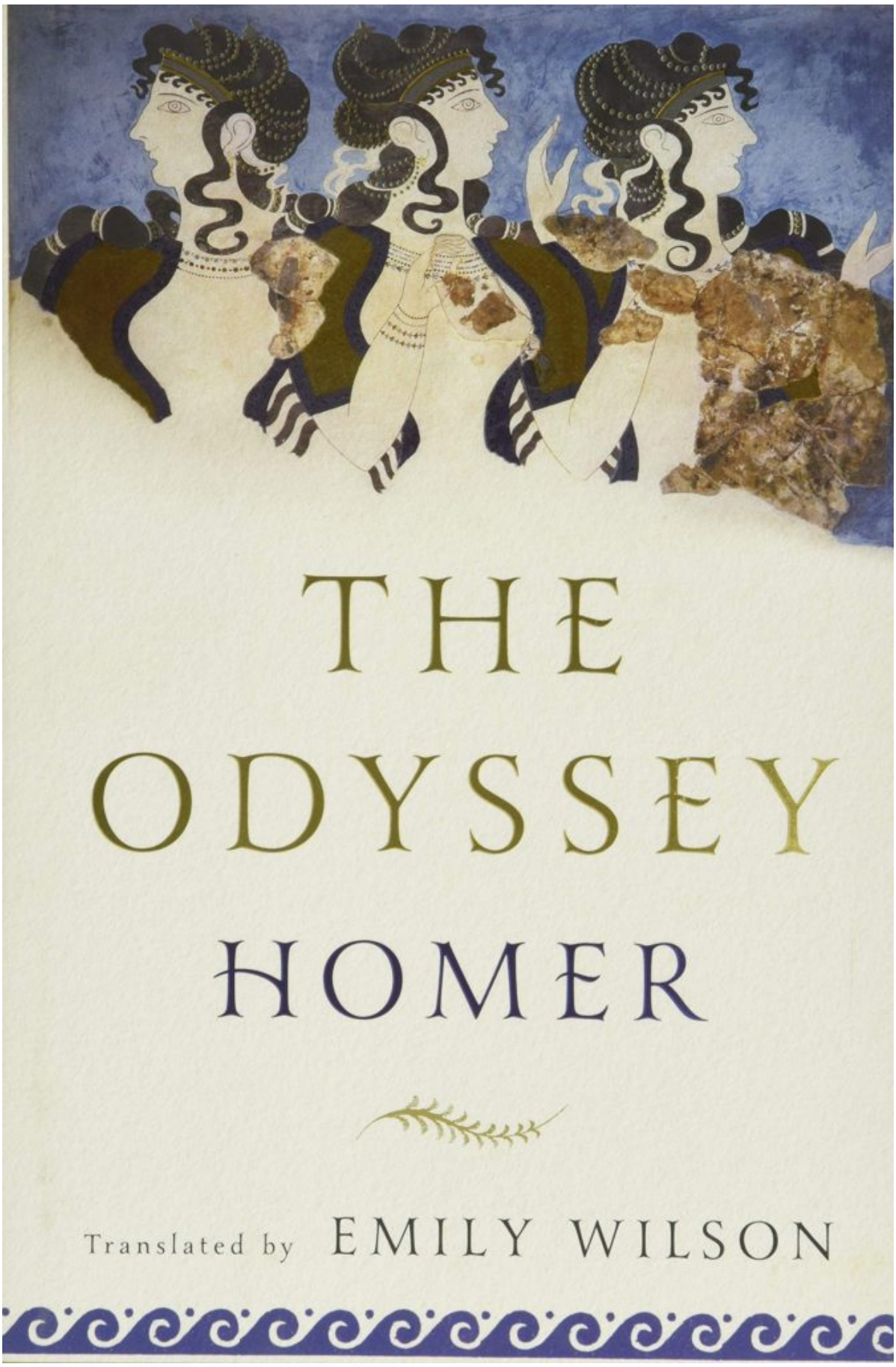
2020 was not really a year to engender optimism, but somehow, here we are. I made the best of it. Life in the bubble with Stanwyck and the dogs is damn near close to paradisiacal. We are all healthy. We have been burning fires on the patio and sitting at a distance with a few select visitors now and again. We had the kids home for Christmas for an extended stretch, all of us isolated and tested ahead of time so we could behave more or less normally.

As near as I can calculate, I read* at least 58 books last year (*five or six of these as audio books; does that count as reading?), several more than once. I went deep down the Faulkner hole. Tons of Civil War/Reconstruction history. I

listened to Alan Moore’s *Jerusalem* start to end, which marks my third journey though that epic. It took several months of dog walking to make that trip, but Simon Vance’s narration made it more than worth it. More on this later.



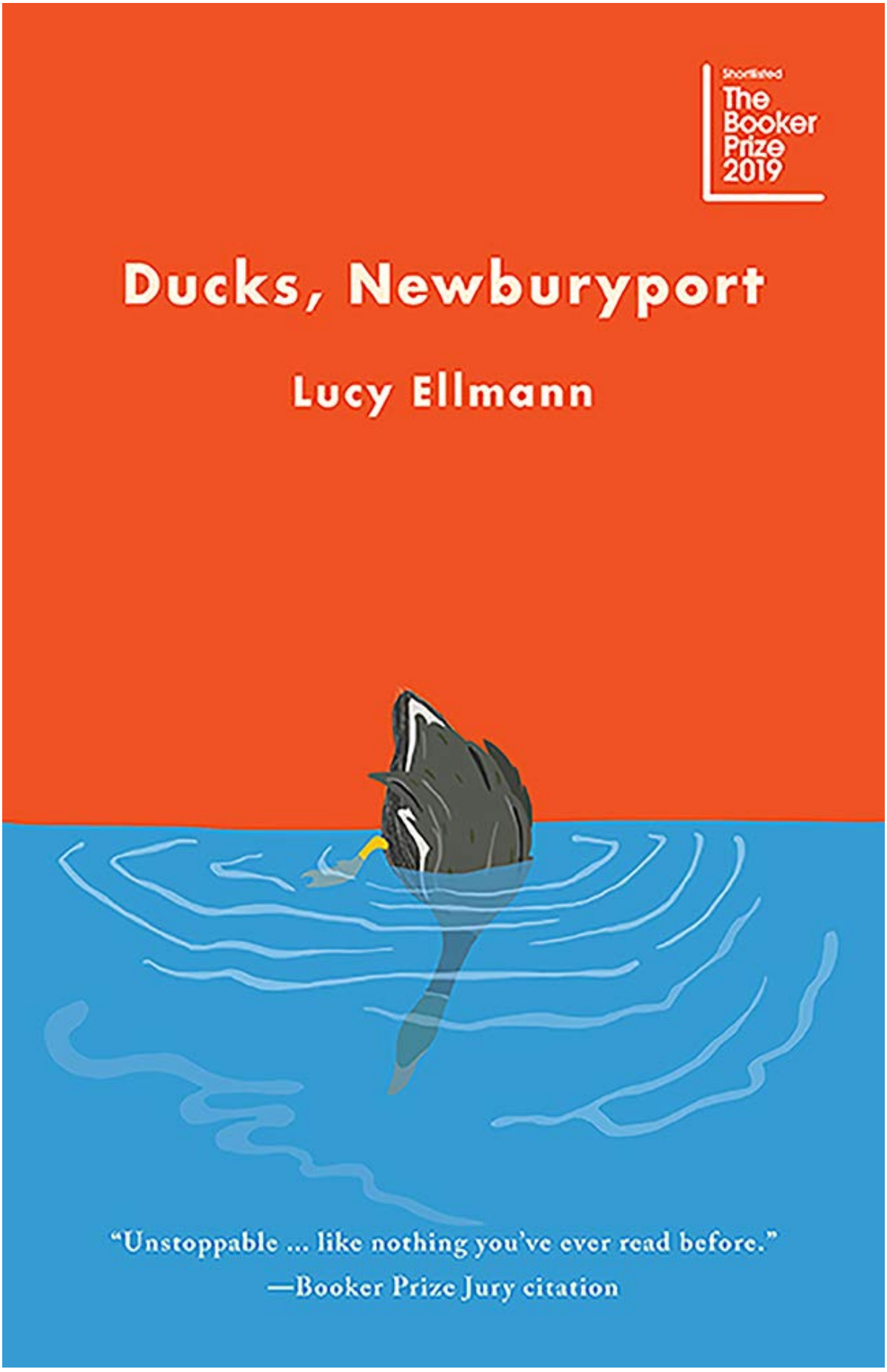
Old Stories…

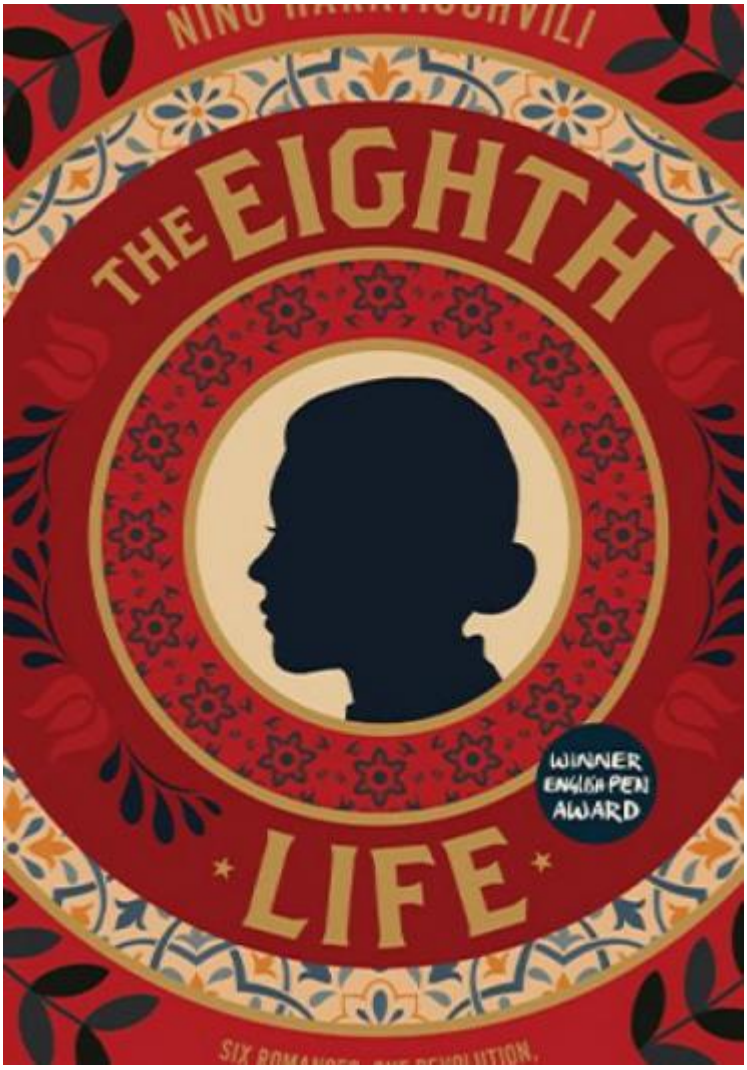


New Voices

Some fab-o time spent in the company of Beowulf and Odysseus

via new translations, both re-imagining a less male-centric attitude to the tales. And JD Jackson’s narration of *Beowulf* is killer. (Not quite as taken by Clare Dane’s recitation of Homer. Whaddyagonnado?)


Shortlisted
The Booker Prize 2019
Ducks, Newburyport
Lucy Ellmann
"Unstoppable ... like nothing you've ever read before."
—Booker Prize Jury citation

- 

A couple of other gargantuan epics. (I like big books and I cannot lie.) These were both fantastic in their way. *Ducks* is a tough sled, a little north of 1000 pages and largely a single sentence. Brilliant, Joycean wordplay and narratively as daring as anything I've ever read. Once I caught the rhythm, it was un-put-down-able. But I refuse to recommend this book to anyone. It is nothing like an easy read, and I've endured enough resentment for my advocacy of *Infinite Jest*.

The Eighth Life, otoh, is a must for anyone who loves the epic Russian narratives of Tolstoy/Dostoyevsky &c. Sprawling across a century and 950 pages, this is a tale of the Bolshevik Revolution, Stalinism, and beyond, centered in Georgia. Both *Ducks* and *Eighth Life* made the Booker Prize list.

Toss in a hefty bundle of sci-fi and apocalit, and the

occasional trifling indulgence pulper redolent with corpses and impressive gams, and I had a big year in the pages. Very little rhyme or reason to it all, just following my instincts and engaging in the occasional spasm of book review-induced buying sprees. Two books down so far in 2021 with a couple of doorstoppers (*Warmth of Other Suns* and Obama's latest) underway.

Which brings us out of the pages and into the material world.

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At Stanwyck’s instigation/inspiration (pushed along by some recently discovered wood rot across/through/under the living room floor), we have tackled some household projects, and the place has never felt better, inside and out. It was a rough two months being displaced from the primary living area (damage was way extensive), but we survived and had the place back in shape for the holidays and cold weather. At least we could live in the house, unlike the shit show of last Fall.

The neighborhood remains a tree-canopied haven for bird life – like those wood storks up top of this post. Long walks with the dogs are easy enough to manage without bumping into other people. Distancing comes pretty easy for us. We got really good at it during the cancer episode; I was due for “normal” social interaction about the time the COVID took over the world in March. We just kept on keeping on the way we’d already done since the previous March. Really hoping we wrap this up well before we hit the three-year mark, but the vax progress so far is not very impressive. I expect the critical

mass necessary for free-movement in the U.S. is at least 6 months away, and probably much longer for much of the world. Hope I’m wrong.

Hermit life suits us, it appears, though we cannot last forever this way. We miss people. I miss sitting in a pub or café and pretending to write. I miss live music. We really miss pointing the car down the road and following it wherever. We have not missed eating out that much, finding that the food we make is generally better and cheaper than the fare on offer at most eateries, but we do miss having dinner out (or in) with friends.

So here’s to being able to get together soon. In the meantime, please stay tuned to i2b and share whenever you think it is worth the distribution. I’ll be working on a new subscription/alert function and for some way of letting comments back in without being flooded by bots. Some re-design is also long overdue. The kids in the banner photos are darn near unrecognizable.

Someday baby, who knows what the wind blows. At least I got a new Blog Motto and home page banner photo up there. Suitable for framing in 2021.