

# Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series 2016/2017

 September 19, 2016 Jonathan Safran Foer	 October 17, 2016 Lauren Groff + Ann Patchett	Readings on Mondays <b>at 7:30 pm</b> For tickets, locations & details <a href="http://inprinthouston.org">inprinthouston.org</a>
 November 21, 2016 Rabih Alameddine + Juan Gabriel Vásquez	 January 23, 2017 Annie Proulx	
 April 3, 2017 Ada Limón + Gregory Pardlo	 May 8, 2017 Colm Tóibín	

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SEASON



Jonathan Safran Foer



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INSPIRING READERS & WRITERS









Lauren Groff & Ann Patchett





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INSPIRING READERS & WRITERS

Rabih Alameddine & Juan Gabriel Vásquez



INSPIRING READERS & WRITERS







Annie Proulx

# The Wortham Center

Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series

2016/2017

Annie Proulx

Monday, January 23 7:30 pm

[inprintheouston.org](http://inprintheouston.org)

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George Saunders





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READING READERS & WRITERS



INSPIRING READERS & WRITERS





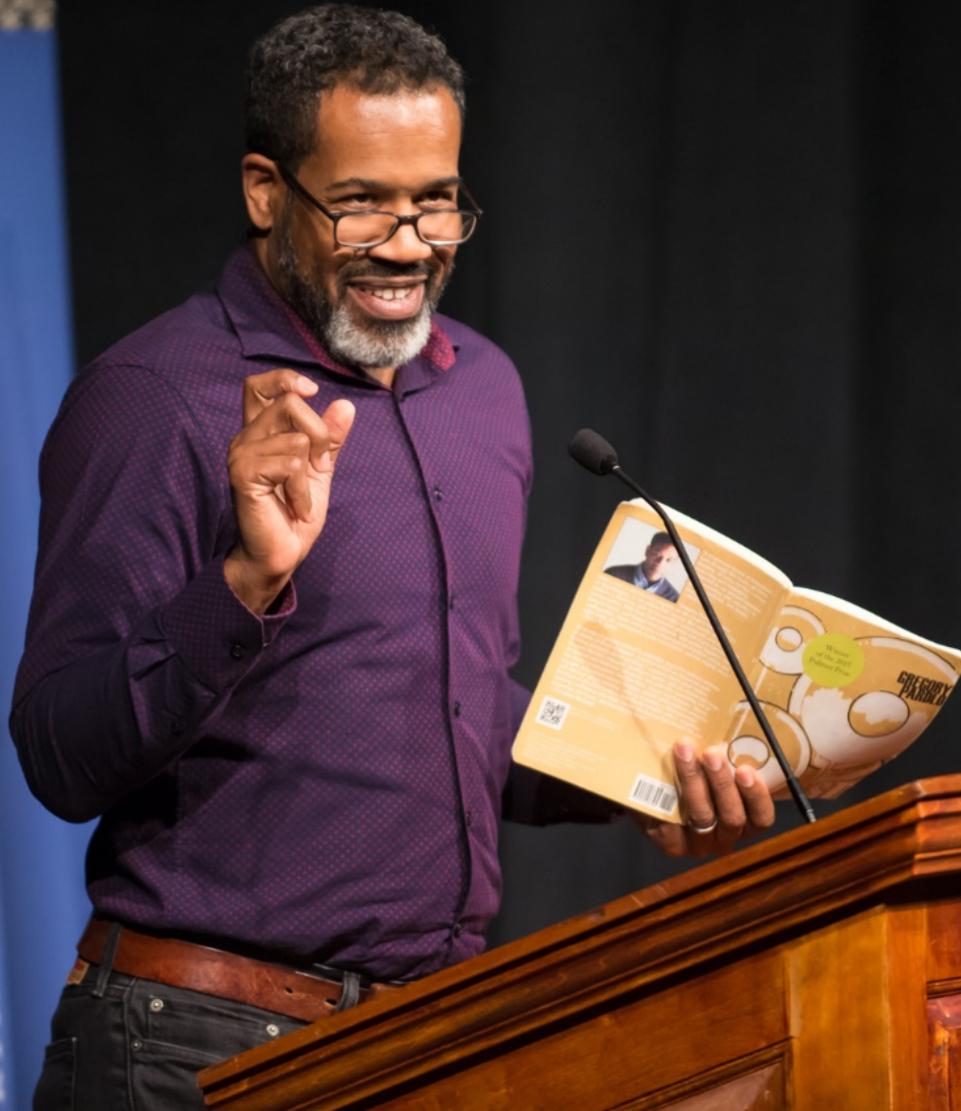
Ada Limón & Gregory Pardlo

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BRING READERS & WRITERS





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ERS & WRITERS





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# How Houston Cultivated One of America's Most Vital Book Scenes

By Steven Petite  
December 13, 2016



Peter Macdiarmid / Getty

When I decided to make the five-hour drive from New Orleans to Houston to hear Jonathan Safran Foer read from his new novel, *Here I Am*, I wasn't sure what to expect. After all, our society is awash in signals that reading is on the decline. There are three times as many non-readers as there were less than 40 years ago, and only a quarter of the population, give or take, manages to read a book a month. In a culture enthralled with Netflix binges, video games and smart phones—extensions of the hand at this point—it's hard to fault those who don't find time to sit down with a book. But I walked into a theater that told a different story: sold out, all 1,100 seats occupied by excited readers.



RM Photography

Houston, the fourth most populous city in the country, is known for its eclectic forms of industry; it is second to only New York City in terms of Fortune-500 based companies. Houston's wide-ranging emphasis on the arts—permanent opera, ballet, music and orchestra companies and a wealth of museums—has made the city, in many respects, the NYC of the South. Besides the Big Apple, downtown Houston has the most theater seats in the country.

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Still, when it comes to the literary scene, New York remains the first, and sometimes only, place mentioned as a touchstone for vibrant book culture. The home of the "Big Four" publishing houses has an inherent advantage. But over the past 30 years, a pair of Houston institutions —Inprint and Brazos Bookstore—have strived to change that preconceived notion. Houston's scintillating, under-the-radar book scene has

become a mecca for writers to share their work with enthusiastic readers.

Foer opened the 36th season of the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, which this year includes Lauren Groff, Ann Patchett, Annie Proulx, Juan Gabriel Vasquez and George Saunders. Consistently bringing in this level of talent takes a well-oiled machine. Rich Levy, the executive director at Inprint for the past 21 years, prepares for the series year-round with four other staffers. "We always try to have a roster of writers that is somehow approximating the incredible diversity of the community," says Levy. Today, approximately one in four Houston residents is foreign born, a number that has been rising since the city became a destination for refugees in the 1970s. Since 1980, the nonprofit has hosted over 350 writers from 28 different countries.

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“

**Independent bookstores are community hubs, not just stores. We treat Amazon like it's this great evil specter hanging over us, and it's not.**

”

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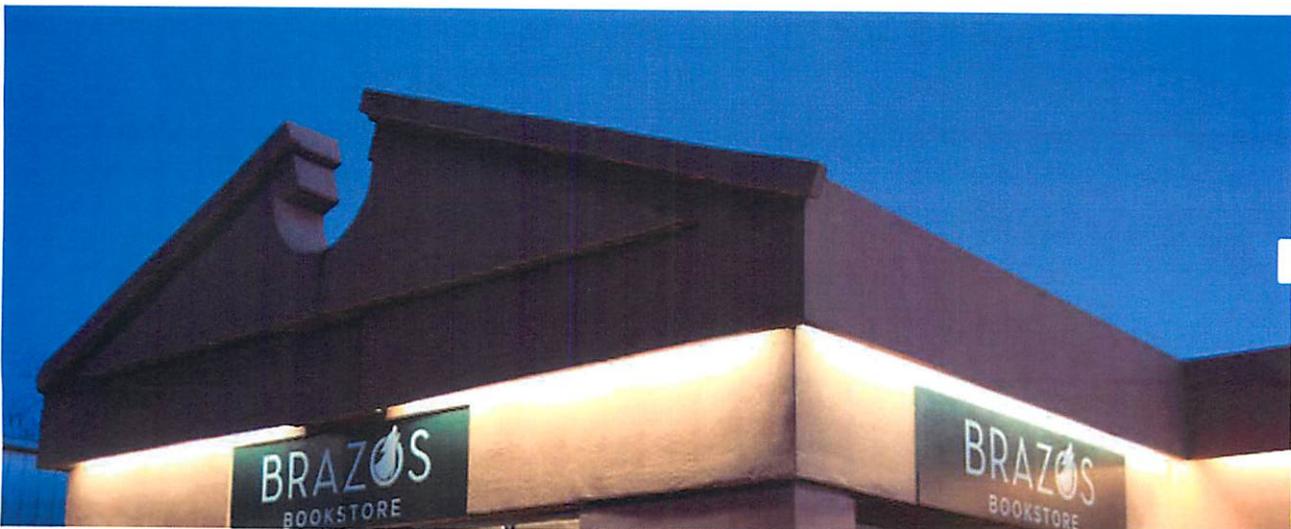
When tickets went on sale for the October 17th Groff/Patchett event, they sold out in under an hour. Discounting 500 season subscribers, that means approximately 500 people scooped up a \$5 ticket. Levy says they could gather even larger crowds, but the personal experience would diminish. Ticket prices remain low despite each seat costing Inprint \$40. They've kept events accessible to people of all classes largely from individual donations and corporate relationships. Coca-Cola, Hewlett-Packard, Bank of America and other Fortune 500 companies [match employee donations to the nonprofit](#).

Recently Brazos, the city's leading independent bookstore, partnered with Inprint by selling the reading writer's catalogue at each event. In Foer's case, Brazos sold several hundred copies of *Here I Am*. Brazos also lends promotional support for Inprint, and vice versa.

Brazos opened in 1974, six years before Inprint was founded. Levy and Benjamin Rybeck, Brazos' marketing director, agree that their relationship is integral to their mutual success. "We are all kind of doing the same mission in our different ways," says Rybeck. "And to have that symbiosis is great. We don't compete; we're all friends."

Inprint brings in what Rybeck calls "the big tent-pole writers" to fill theaters. For their own events, Brazos has the flexibility to support exciting debuts and underrepresented writers. Each year Brazos hosts over 250 events. On a given night, almost 200 people cram inside the 3,000 square-foot store, while off-site readings at area churches have amassed crowds of 600.

While Amazon has put brick-and-mortar chain bookstores out of business (Borders), and threatened what remains (Barnes and Noble), Rybeck claims that the independent bookstore has been given a space to shine in this new book-buying reality. "I don't think we are [competing with Amazon]. We do a completely different thing. Independent bookstores are community hubs, not just stores. We treat Amazon like it's this great evil specter hanging over us, and it's not."





Benjamin Rybeck

Houston's population has nearly doubled since these institutions were born, but the book scene has held onto its theme of intimacy. Brazos works tirelessly to cultivate a unique environment that encourages thoughtful discussion about books, a sentiment that still rings true when describing the aesthetic of the Inprint Reading Series.

Even so, both Brazos and Inprint recognize that today people spend an abundance of time online. Brazos' online storefront is innovative: Staff bios, reviews and features accompany the traditional sales portal. "We want people to have the experience of coming in and chatting with smart booksellers," says Rybeck. This methodology encourages people to come into the store for author readings.

As for Inprint, they have acknowledged that the demand for their readings is at an all-time high. Starting with the sold-out Groff/Patchett reading, they began live streaming worldwide on the [Inprint website](#) and Houston Public Media.

Inprint and Brazos have helped propagate a region that is refreshingly passionate about books. Houston is a place where writers and readers converge in startling numbers to be surrounded by like-minded people who believe that books can be a communal experience.

"We want the literature to be the main focus," says Levy. "Great writers, great books—we want it to rise in the consciousness of people everywhere."

Read our interview with Jonathan Safran Foer [here](#).

### Tags

TEXAS BOOKS CULTURE ENTERTAINMENT

### Conversation



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ZEST

By Alyson Ward

**Y**ES, we're in the dog days of summer. But fall is coming, and that means a new season of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

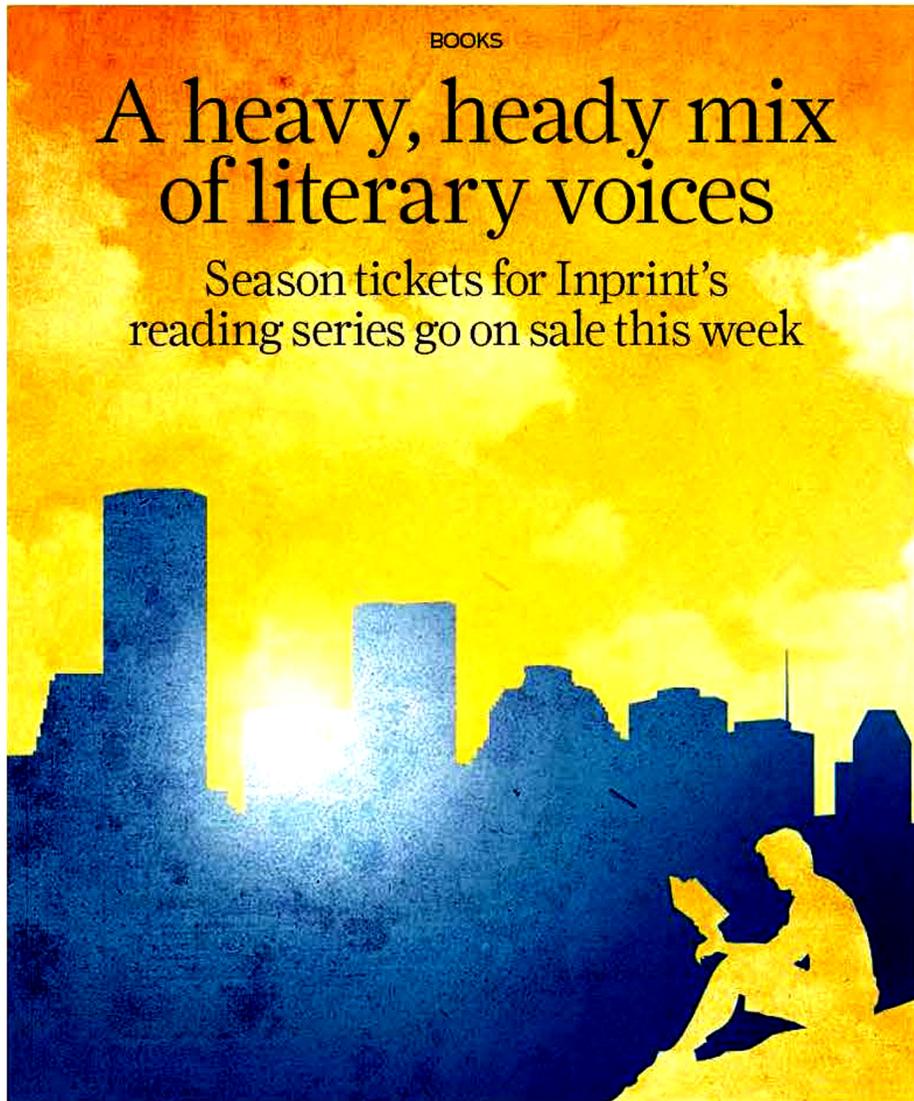
Every year, Houston's literary nonprofit brings in a mix of heavy-hitters and up-and-comers to read and discuss their work on stage. The first reading of the 36th season is in September, and season tickets are on sale Sunday.

So get those beach reads out of your system; your reading list is about to get serious. This season features writers and books that tackle themes of loss and grief, with plenty of domestic sagas and stories that unfold over decades and generations.

They're dealing with the serious stuff of life, says Marilyn Jones, Inprint's associate director. Loss, family, the passage of time — "that's the human condition," she says. "We turn to literature to give us some perspective on the human condition."

This year's season also offers a diverse mix of voices — writers who are Irish and Colombian, Jewish and African-American, Lebanese-American and Latina. Together, they've collected just about every major writing award, including the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize, and most of them have new books out this year or next spring.

Three of this season's programs will feature two writers in conversation on stage — novelists Lauren Groff and Ann Patchett in October, Rabih Alameddine and Juan Gabriel Vásquez in November and, in April, poets Ada Limón and Gregory Pardlo. These double appearances are sometimes the most enlightening programs, Inprint executive director Rich Levy says. The writers are selected to appear together because their work involves similar themes or structure, and the conversation should illuminate both. And if audience members are fans of one writer, the joint discussion



Robert Wuensche illustration / Houston Chronicle

BOOKS

# A heavy, heady mix of literary voices

## Season tickets for Inprint's reading series go on sale this week

allows them to discover another voice they might appreciate. "Good books enlarge your view, and we want to enlarge people's views," Levy says.

Inprint readings often sell out, so the best way to guarantee reserve seating at each event is to purchase season tickets.

**A closer look at the 2016-17 season:**

**SEPT. 19: Jonathan Safran Foer** will read from his novel "Here I Am," which publishes Sept. 6. It's the first novel in a decade for the 39-year-old author of "Everything Is Illuminated" and "Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close." "Here I Am" follows a Jewish family in Washington, D.C., struggling to stay intact just as the news

**Catch the readings**

Readings are all on Monday nights, at the Alley Theatre (615 Texas) or the Wortham Center's Cullen Theatre (501 Texas). Each program begins at 7:30 p.m.; doors open at 6:45 p.m.

**Tickets:** About 450 season tickets, \$180, are available now. For individual events, \$5 general admission tickets go on sale three or four weeks before each reading; free rush tickets for students and seniors (65 and older) are available at the door if the event isn't sold out.

**Information:** [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org) or 713-521-2026

is filled with a natural disaster that sets off a crisis in the Middle East.

**OCT. 17: Lauren Groff and Ann Patchett** will appear together to read from and discuss their latest novels. For Groff, that's "Fates and Furies," which was a finalist last year for the National Book Award. The novel spans 24 years of a couple's marriage, with all its secrets and revelations. Patchett will read from her novel

"Commonwealth," which publishes Sept. 13. It, too, spans years of family life — the love and secrets that carry six children and their four parents, blended into one family by divorce and remarriage, through five decades.

**NOV. 21: Rabih Alameddine and Juan Gabriel Vásquez** will appear together on stage. The Lebanese-American Alameddine's novel "The Angel of

History," out Oct. 4, features a Yemeni-born poet looking back over his life as he sits in a psychiatric clinic's waiting room — and is hovered over by Satan, Death and 14 saints. Colombian novelist Vásquez will read from "Reputations," which publishes Sept. 20; it's the story of a 65-year-old political cartoonist who's being honored for his impressive career when a young woman appears and throws everything into question.

**JAN. 23: Annie Proulx** will read from "Barkskins," which was published in June. It's a sprawling story about deforestation that spans generations, one that explores our relationship with nature. Proulx won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize for her 1993 novel "The Shipping News."

**MARCH 6: George Saunders** will read from "Lincoln in the Bardo," which publishes in February. Saunders, an Amarillo native who lives in New York, has built a career writing short stories and novellas; this, his first novel, is about Abraham Lincoln's son, who died while his father was in office. Here, 11-year-old Willie Lincoln exists in a state of transition, a purgatory known in Tibetan tradition as "the bardo."

**APRIL 3: Poets Ada Limón and Gregory Pardlo** will both read and discuss their work. Limón was a National Book Award finalist for her 2015 collection, "Bright Dead Things," and Pardlo won the Pulitzer Prize last year for his book "Digest." He is also the author of "Air Traffic," an upcoming memoir. Both are known for writing deeply personal poems. A prize committee once described Pardlo's poems as "snapshots of a life that is so specific it becomes universal." And last year, when "Bright Dead Things" was published, Limón wrote in her blog that she'd never felt so exposed: "Though the previous books of poems are certainly me, and expose all parts of me within them, this one doesn't hide under anything."

**MAY 8: Irish writer Colm Tóibín** will read from his novel "House of Names," which comes out in May. It revisits an ancient Greek myth, retelling the story of Clytemnestra, who killed her husband, Agamemnon, because he sacrificed their daughter. Tóibín is also the author of "Brooklyn," the Irish immigration story that was adapted into a movie last year.

[alyson.ward@chron.com](mailto:alyson.ward@chron.com)  
[twitter.com/alysonward](https://twitter.com/alysonward)

# Readings

It's not often you get to sit court with a Pulitzer Prize-winning author, but you can with Annie Proulx come January. Before and after, plenty of other authors visit us.

## SEPTEMBER

### 18 Nathan Hale:

Author and illustrator will read "Alamo All-Stars," the latest in his series of graphic novels about American history. Presented by Inprint's Cool Brains! series for young readers. Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School.



Ulf Andersen

### Jonathan Safran Foer

### 19 Jonathan Safran Foer:

The author reads from his new novel, "Here I Am." Presented by Inprint. Cullen Theater.

## OCTOBER

### 7-9 Houston Poetry Fest:

Festival of poetry readings and workshops. Willow Street Pump Station at the University of Houston-Downtown.

### 15-16 International Literature Festival Houston:

Annual fest features writers from seven countries, including Spanish poet Luis García Montero. Several venues.

### 17 Lauren Groff and Ann Patchett:

Groff will read from "Fates and Furies," a finalist last year for the National Book Award, and Patchett will read from her new novel, "Commonwealth." Presented by Inprint. Alley Theatre.

### 27-29 National Black Book Festival:

Festival will feature more than 100 African-American authors. Fallbrook Church.

### 29-Nov. 13 Jewish Book and Arts Fair:

Highlights include authors Michael Wex, Meir Shalev and Peggy Orenstein. Most events will be at the Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center.

## NOVEMBER

### 21 Rabih Alameddine and Juan Gabriel Vásquez:

Alameddine will read from his new novel, "The Angel of History," and Vásquez will read and discuss his novel "Reputations." Presented by Inprint. Alley Theatre.



Courtesy photo

### Annie Proulx

## JANUARY

### 23 Annie Proulx:

Author will read from her new novel, "Barkskins." Presented by Inprint. Cullen Theater.

### 29 Tim Green:

Author (and former NFL player) will discuss his book "Left Out" as part of Inprint's Cool Brains! series for young readers. Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School.

## MARCH

### 6 George Saunders:

Author will read from his new novel, "Lincoln in the Bardo." Presented by Inprint. Alley Theatre.

## APRIL

### 1 TeenBookCon:

Conference for teen readers and young-adult authors. Alief Taylor High School.

### 3 Ada Limón and Gregory Pardlo:

Poets will read and discuss their work with each other. Presented by Inprint. Alley Theatre.

### 8 Bayou City Book Festival:

Event will promote literacy with author appearances and book signings, live music and kids' programs. Presented by Lone Star College. Lone Star College — Kingwood campus.

## MAY

### 8 Colm Tóibín:

The author of "Nora Webster" and "Brooklyn" will read from his new novel, "House of Names." Presented by Inprint. Alley Theatre.

**INCLUDING:**

**SMOKEY ROBINSON**  
JONES HALL  
■ Fri., October 7, 2016, 8pm

**NEIL DEGRASSE TYSON**  
JONES HALL  
■ Tue., January 17, 2017, 8pm

**STOMP**  
JONES HALL  
■ Feb. 10-12, 2017

**JOEY ALEXANDER TRIO**  
CULLEN THEATER, WORTHAM CENTER  
■ Fri., Feb. 17, 2017, 8pm

**ALTON BROWN LIVE: EAT YOUR SCIENCE**  
JONES HALL  
■ Thu., April 27, 2017, 7:30pm

**CIRCUS 1903**  
JONES HALL  
■ June 9-11, 2017

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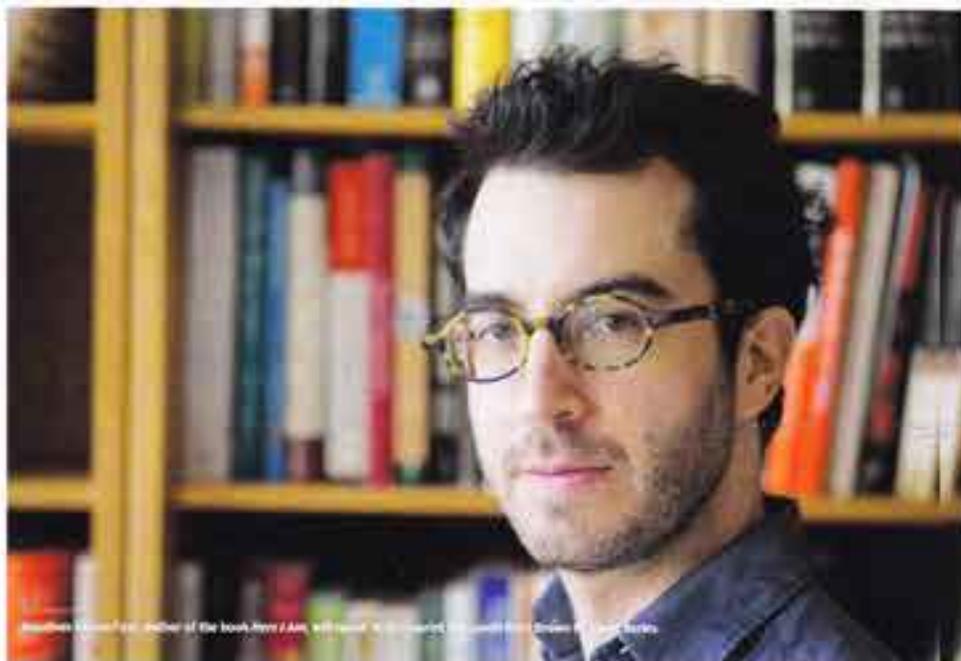
Mamma Mia! - Oct 4  
Symphony at Shangri La - Oct 16  
Elf the Musical - Nov 12  
Dirty Dancing - Nov 22 & 23  
Chris Botti and the Symphony of SETX - Nov 29  
Broadway Christmas Wonderland - Dec 22  
Pippin - Jan 28  
Into the Woods - Feb 21 & 22  
Barefoot in the Park - Mar 3  
The Illusionists - Mar 10  
42nd Street - Mar 16 & 17  
Greater Tuna - Apr 4  
Once - Apr 15

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# LITERARY ARTS



## Word Counts in Houston

**W**e live in a literary town filled with cool bookstores, awesome author presentations, resources for all types of writers and spoken-word events from those at the top of their games.

**Brazos Bookstore** hosts roughly 300 events each year that range from

space, yes, but more than that, a community hub, introducing readers to new favorite books, to beloved authors and — most important — to each other,” said Benjamin Rybeck, marketing director.

For its 2016-2017 season, the **Society for the Performing Arts** will bring the heavy hitters of literature and critical thinking to town, including David Sedaris, Neil DeGrasse Tyson and Neil Gaiman.

Likewise, **Inprint Houston** presents

“What exactly is a bookstore? A retail space, yes, but more than that, a community hub, introducing readers to new favorite books, to beloved authors and — most important — to each other,”

celebrating the anniversary of William Shakespeare's death to bringing in nationally celebrated authors for book readings and signings. The shop's fall calendar includes a celebration on September 10 of the 100th anniversary of Roald Dahl's birth that pays homage to the creator of *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* and *James and the Giant Peach*. “What exactly is a bookstore? A retail

readings and book signings with ten internationally celebrated writers during its Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. This season's eye-popping roster includes Jonathan Safran Foer (*Everything is Illuminated*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*), Ann Patchett (*Bel Canto*) and Annie Proulx (*The Shipping News*).

The annual Ann and Stephen

Kaufman Jewish Book & Arts Fair, scheduled from October 29 to November 13 at the **Evelyn Rubenstein Jewish Community Center of Houston**, will showcase acclaimed Israeli novelist Meir Shalev (*A Pigeon and a Boy*) presenting his new thriller murder-mystery, *Two She-Bears*. Michael Wex, author of *Rhapsody in Schmalz: Yiddish Food and Why We Can't Stop Eating It*, will also be in attendance.

**Writespace**, in a very short time, has become a potent player in Houston's expanding literary community. Along with regularly scheduled events such as the Community Write-In and workshops on food writing, the writing center is the scene for the Writefest festival, scheduled from March 10 to March 12. “This season marks Writespace's third year — and what an exciting year it is. Thanks to incredible support from the Houston writing community, we've grown exponentially this past year,” said Elizabeth White-Olsen, director. “Between our ever-expanding workshops program and free open-mikes and readings, Writespace offers resources for every kind of writer, no matter their background, age, genre or experience level. And Writefest, our flagship festival for emerging writers, is gearing up to be the literary event of the year, hosting writers and editors from across the country for a weekend of panels, presentations, a free literary journal fair and more.”

**Holocaust Museum Houston** offers readers a chance to discuss popular and

historically important titles, ranging from Michael Chabon's *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* to Jan Jarboe Russell's *The Train to Crystal City: FDR's Secret Prisoner Exchange Program and America's Only Family Internment Camp During World War II*.

On October 13 the **University of Houston**-produced *Gulf Coast, A Journal of Literature and Fine Arts*, founded in 1986, will hold its annual gala that celebrates the launch of its latest edition. The literary mag will also present a regular reading series at Rudyard's British Pub throughout the season.

On September 23-24, **Houston Writer's Guild** presents Indiepalooza, which offers manuscript consultations, marketing coaching sessions and editing advice to scribes of all skill levels.

A couple of big-name, classic masters of their crafts are on the marquee in the spring. On January 14 Jerry Seinfeld is the grand-opening performer for Sugar Land's sparkly new **Smart Financial Centre**, an indoor entertainment venue that will also present concerts and Broadway shows. On February 4 in Galveston, Sophia Loren, the Italian movie star legend who has shared the screen with Paul Newman, Clark Gable and Marlon Brando, will discuss her life and career on the main stage of **The Grand 1894 Opera House**.

Whether it's a trip to check out an author reading or a spoken-word performance, there are bountiful options for words with (new and old) friends in Houston.



# Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series 2016/2017



Readings on Mondays  
at 7:30 pm

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September 19, 2016

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Safran Foer

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Alameddine +  
Juan Gabriel  
Vásquez

January 23, 2017

Annie  
Proulx

March 6, 2017

George  
Saunders

April 3, 2017

Ada  
Limón +  
Gregory  
Pardlo

May 8, 2017

Colm  
Tóibín

**inprint**

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## LITERARY

### AUGUST

**August 27**  
Introduction to Personal Essay and Memoir  
with Mark Dostert  
Writespace  
713-516-5679 | [writespacehouston.org/creative-writing](http://writespacehouston.org/creative-writing)

**August 30**  
Book Discussion: *The Storyteller*, by Jodi Picoult  
Holocaust Museum Houston  
713-942-8000 | [hmh.org](http://hmh.org)

### SEPTEMBER

**September 2**  
Gary Rosin  
First Friday Reading Series  
Inprint House | [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

**September 15-24**  
Scriptwriters/Houston's 26th Annual 10x10  
Showcase  
Scriptwriters/Houston  
Pearl Theater  
713-679-1487 | [scriptwriters-houston.org](http://scriptwriters-houston.org)

**September 17**  
An Evening with Mark Russell, Politically In-  
correct  
The Grand 1894 Opera House  
Galveston  
800-821-1894 | [thegrand.com](http://thegrand.com)

**September 19**  
Jonathan Safran Foer, *Everything Is Illumi-  
nated, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and  
*Here I Am*  
Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series  
Wortham Theater Center  
713-521-2026 | [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

**September 20**  
Book Discussion: *The Amazing Adventures of  
Kavalier and Clay*, by Michael Chabon  
Holocaust Museum Houston  
713-942-8000 | [hmh.org](http://hmh.org)

**September 23**  
Anything Goes All-Genre Open Mike  
Writespace  
713-516-5679 | [writespacehouston.org](http://writespacehouston.org)

### OCTOBER

**October 5**  
Jan Jarboe Russell, *The Train to Crystal City*  
Holocaust Museum Houston  
713-527-1602 | [hmh.org](http://hmh.org)

**October 6**  
2016 Mitchell Artist Lecture with Tania Bru-  
guera  
Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts  
Moore's Opera House  
713-743-7008 | [mitchellcenterforarts.org](http://mitchellcenterforarts.org)

**October 7-9**  
Houston Poetry Fest 2016  
Houston Poetry Fest  
Willow Street Pump Station  
[houstonpoetryfest.info](http://houstonpoetryfest.info)

**October 17**  
Lauren Groff, *Fates and Furies*; and Ann Patch-  
ett, *Bel Canto* and *Commonwealth*  
Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series  
Alley Theatre  
713-521-2026 | [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

**October 20**  
Dr. Alon Confino, *A World Without Jews: The  
Nazi Imagination from Persecution to Genocide*  
Holocaust Museum Houston  
713-942-8000 | [hmh.org](http://hmh.org)

**October 22**  
David Sedaris  
Society for the Performing Arts  
Wortham Theater Center  
713-227-4772 | [spahouston.org](http://spahouston.org)

**October 26**  
Book Discussion: *The Train to Crystal City*, by  
Jan Jarboe Russell  
Holocaust Museum Houston  
713-942-8000 | [hmh.org](http://hmh.org)

**October 29**  
Halloween ComicFest 2016  
Halloween ComicFest  
Various locations  
[halloweencomicfest.com](http://halloweencomicfest.com)

**October 29**  
Frightspace Open Mike and Contest  
Writespace  
713-516-5679 | [writespacehouston.org](http://writespacehouston.org)

### NOVEMBER

**November 3-4**  
The Wonder of Fabergé: A Study of the McFer-  
rin Collection  
Houston Museum of Natural Science  
713-639-4629 | [hmns.org](http://hmns.org)

**November 4**  
Michael Lieberman  
First Friday Reading Series  
Inprint House  
[inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

**November 13**  
Andrew Torget, *Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slav-  
ery, and the Transformation of the Texas Bor-  
derland, 1800-1850*  
Galveston Historical Foundation  
Galveston  
409-765-7834 | [galvestonhistory.org/  
events/harbor-city-ambition](http://galvestonhistory.org/events/harbor-city-ambition)

**November 21**  
Rabih Alameddine, *An Unnecessary Woman*  
and *The Angel of History*; and Juan Gabriel  
Vásquez, *The Sound of Things Falling* and *Rep-  
utations*  
Inprint Margarett Root Brown Reading Series  
Alley Theatre  
713-521-2026 | [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

**November 28**  
Henry Rollins, Spoken Word  
House of Blues  
888-402-5837 | [houseofblues.com/houston](http://houseofblues.com/houston)

### DECEMBER

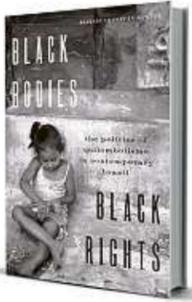
**December 2**  
12th Annual Signatures Author Series, Cheryl

ZEST

BOOK EVENTS

TUESDAY

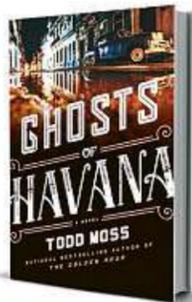
**Elizabeth Farfan-Santos:** Author will discuss and sign “Black Bodies, Black Rights: The Politics of Quilombolismo in Contemporary Brazil,” 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet; 713-523-0701 or brazos-bookstore.com.



WEDNESDAY

**Mac Barnett:** Author will discuss and sign “How This Book Was Made,” 5 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop, 14532 Memorial; 281-497-8675 or bluewillow-bookshop.com.

**Todd Moss:** Author will discuss and sign “Ghosts of Havana,” 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book, 2342 Bissonnet; 713-524-8597, or toll free 888-424-2842 or murderbooks.com.



THURSDAY

**Brad Meltzer:** Author will discuss and sign “I Am Jane Goodall” and “I Am George Washington,” 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book.

FRIDAY

**Joe Kilgore:** Author will discuss and sign “A Farmhouse in the Rain,” 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

SATURDAY

**Belle Manuel:** Author will sign “Fire” from the Elemental Series for teens, noon, Barnes & Noble, 7626 Westheimer; 713-783-6016.

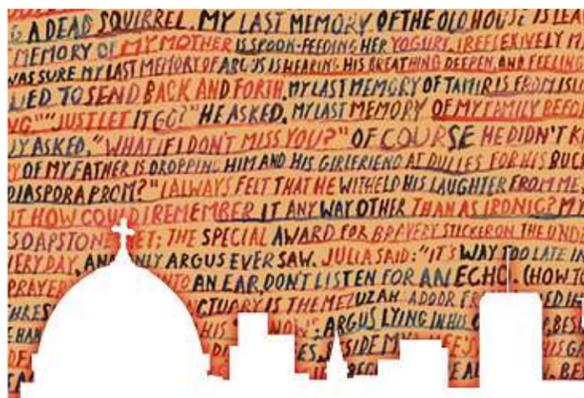
**Public Poetry:** Summer poetry-reading series features Carolyn Dahl, Vincent “Black-Bluez” Johnson, Paul Klinger and Varsha Saraiya-Shah, 2 p.m., Johnson Neighborhood Library, 3517 Reed; 832-393-2550.



**M.M. Wolthoff:** Author will sign “The West Texas Pilgrimage,” 3-5 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore, 3270 Westheimer; 713 520-0061 or riveroaksbookstore.com.

**Road Dahl Day celebrations:** Celebrate the late author’s 100th birthday with readings, trivia and more at a family-friendly party, 2 p.m., Brazos Bookstore. An adults-only celebration starts at 7 p.m., with Dahl-inspired cocktails and trivia.

Alyson Ward



# Novel treads fault lines in faith and family

By Alyson Ward

Jonathan Safran Foer’s first novel in a decade starts out as an exercise in upper-middle-class tedium. But it evolves into a soulful search to find the meaning in life and a faith no longer taken for granted.

Foer, the author of “Everything Is Illuminated” and “Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close,” will be in Houston on Sept. 19 to discuss his new novel as part of Inprint’s Margaret Root Brown reading series. With “Here I Am,” out Tuesday, he has written a thoughtful exploration of what it means to be Jewish in America today — and whether it should mean more than it often does. It’s tied up in a family drama — a family so tenuous and shifting (a struggling marriage, a dying grandfather, growing sons and an elderly dog) that it feels inevitable when the ground shakes and the political becomes personal.

Jacob and Julia Bloch, Jewish but not especially religious, are raising their three sons in Washington, D.C. Jacob is a TV writer who has found gainful employment writing for a show he doesn’t love. Julia, an architect, designs bathroom and kitchen remodels for the wealthy. In her spare time, she makes models of her dream house — always a house for one.

After 16 years together, they have precocious kids, a comfortable life and a total loss of communication. Jacob keeps secrets from Julia. There’s infidelity, but only the most unsatisfying kind. For the most part, they inhabit a world of podcasts, organic mattresses and trips to Whole Foods in the Subaru — a life so privileged that it’s hard to feel sorry for Julia and Jacob when their marriage hits the rocks, done in by boredom and a failure of partnership.

They plan (perhaps over-plan) to divorce after their son Sam’s bar mitzvah. Then a magnitude-7.6 earthquake wreaks

havoc on Israel and disrupts the Middle East, and “Here I Am” turns into a quest for religion and identity.

Jacob’s cousin Tamir and Tamir’s son, who had come from Israel for the bar mitzvah, get stuck in D.C. when all flights home are canceled, and their presence gives Jacob an uncomfortable “what if” view of his life. How would he have lived if he’d been brave and outspoken like Tamir, or if he’d ever considered living in Israel? A crisis that seems distant to the Blochs is immediate and life-or-death to Tamir and his family, and the forced proximity to the crisis makes Jacob rethink everything.

Then, when earthquake recovery becomes a full-blown war, the Israeli prime minister calls on Jewish men all over the world to “come home” and fight, and Jacob has to answer: What does it mean to be a Jew? Should he go and fight? What does Israel mean to him? What does his family mean, and his faith? Jacob wants to be less cowardly, a better person. He

wants to better understand who he is and what role his Jewishness plays in that.

The book’s title comes from the story of Abraham, who, when God calls to him, answers, “Here I am.”

Sam, preparing for his bar mitzvah, crystallizes the lesson: “Abraham didn’t say, ‘What do you want?’ He didn’t say, ‘Yes?’ He answered with a statement: ‘Here I am.’ What ever God needs or wants, Abraham is wholly present for him, without conditions or reservations or need for explanation.”

But God has asked Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his son. And when Isaac calls out for his father, the answer is the same: “Here I am” — an assertion

that he is wholly present for his son, too. “How,” Sam wonders, “can Abraham be two directly opposing things at once?”

The novel is full of such contradictions. What is real and what isn’t? What’s important and what is not? Are the Blochs more Jewish or American?

Sam concludes that what matters most is “who we are wholly there for, and how

that, more than anything else, defines our identity.”

Foer explores nearly every character’s inner life in the novel’s nearly 600 pages, but eldest son Sam may be the most fully developed. At 13, he sometimes seems to understand more about life than his parents do. Awkward and smart, he’s at his best in Other Life, an online world — not a game, he has to explain to his father — where he exists as the avatar he created, a Latina named Samanta. Regular life “was for good-enough,” Sam believes, “and Other Life was for putting things in the places they longed to be.”

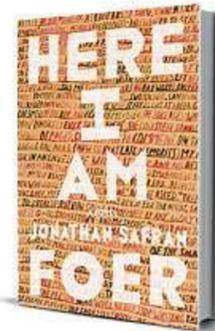
His father, meanwhile, is writing his own Other Life, a script he keeps in a drawer and allows no one to see because it’s too close to reality.

As much as “Here I Am” is a story about religion, it’s a story about family: What holds people together? And what happens when those ties aren’t strong enough?

Jacob and Julia mean well, but they so often misunderstand each other’s intentions or desires. “Everything was sublimated by something else: domestic closeness had become intimate distance, intimate distance had become shame, shame had become resignation, resignation had become fear, fear had become resentment, resentment had become self-protection. Julia often thought that if they could just trace the string back to the source of their withholding, they might actually find their openness.”

Early on, a rabbi at Sam’s school gives the Blochs a piece of wisdom they ignore. “There’s a Hasidic proverb,” he tells Jacob and Julia. “While we pursue happiness, we flee from contentment.”

“Here I Am” is about a family in upheaval, fleeing contentment every which way — and somehow, to some degree, finding it anyway.



‘Here I Am’

By Jonathan Safran Foer. Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 592 pp.; \$28



alyson.ward@chron.com  
twitter.com/alysonward

Robert Wuensche photo illustration / Houston Chronicle

BEST SELLERS

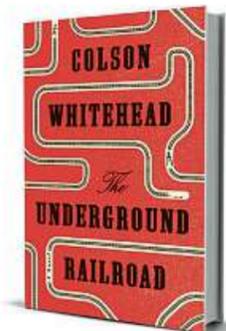
Fiction

**1. The Underground Railroad:** By Colson Whitehead. A slave girl heads toward freedom on the network, envisioned as actual tracks and tunnels.

**2. Sting:** By Sandra Brown. A hired killer and a woman he kidnapped join forces to elude FBI agents and others who are searching for her corrupt brother.

**3. Curious Minds:** By Janet Evanovich and Phoebe Sutton. A new series featuring Emerson Knight, an eccentric millionaire, and Riley Moon, an analyst at a megabank.

**4. The Woman in Cabin 10:** By Ruth Ware. A travel writer on a cruise is certain she has heard a body thrown overboard, but no one believes her.



**5. Truly Madly Guilty:** By Liane Moriarty. Tense turning points for three couples at a backyard barbecue gone wrong.

**6. Damaged:** By Lisa Scottoline. Mary DiNunzio defends a dyslexic fifth-grader accused of attacking a school aide.

**7. Bullseye:** By James

Patterson and Michael Ledwidge. While the president of the United States meets with his Russian counterpart, Detective Michael Bennett must stop a team of assassins.

**8. Insidious:** By Catherine Coulter. Two cases — one concerning an attempted poisoning and another about the hunt for a serial killer.

**9. All the Light We Cannot See:** By Anthony Doerr. The lives of a blind French girl and a gadget-obsessed German boy before and during World War II.

**10. The Black Widow:** By Daniel Silva. Gabriel Allon, the Israeli art restorer and spy, recruits a doctor from Jerusalem to help capture a secret ISIS terrorist in France.

Nonfiction

**1. The Girl With The Lower Back Tattoo:** By Amy Schumer. Humorous personal essays by the comedian, actor and writer.

**2. Hillbilly Elegy:** By J.D. Vance. A Yale Law School graduate looks at the struggles of America’s white working class through his own childhood in the Rust Belt.

**3. Armageddon:** By Dick Morris and Eileen McGann. The political strategist offers a game plan for how to defeat Hillary Clinton.

**4. When Breath Becomes Air:** By Paul Kalanithi. A memoir by a physician who received a diagnosis of Stage IV lung cancer at the age of 36.



**5. Between the World and Me:** By Ta-Nehisi Coates. A meditation on race in America.

**6. Hamilton: The Revolution:** By Lin-Manuel Miranda and Jeremy McCarter. The libretto of the award-winning musical, with backstage photos, a production history and

interviews with the cast.

**7. Crisis of Character:** By Gary J. Byrne with Grant M. Schmidt. A former Secret Service officer claims to have witnessed scandalous behavior by the Clintons.

**8. Liars:** By Glenn Beck. The author says progressive politicians gain power and control by exploiting Americans’ fears.

**9. Hillary’s America:** By Dinesh D’Souza. The conservative author and pundit warns of disaster if Hillary Clinton is elected president.

**10. White Trash:** By Nancy Isenberg. The role of the white poor in American history.

New York Times

# ARTS

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ART NOTES

## The Biggest Arts Bargain in Houston? Inprint's Star-Packed Reading Series Delivers Great Value and Celebrity Authors

BY ANGELA SHAH

08.24.16



[ABOUT](#) [TEAM](#) [ADVERTISING](#) [CONTACT](#) [PARTNERS](#) [NEWSLETTER](#) [TERMS & CONDITIONS](#)  
Jonathan Safran Foer is coming to Houston. [PRIVACY POLICY](#) [YOUR CALIFORNIA PRIVACY RIGHTS](#)

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**B**ack-to-school time doesn't have to be for students only. For those of us beyond our school days, Houston's Inprint program offers a chance to revel in reading, dissecting, and discussing some of the most compelling literature today.

Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series begins next month, once again providing a roster of fiction and nonfiction writers from September to May. The series has brought more than 100 Nobel, Pulitzer, and National Book Award winners to the Bayou City in the last 36 years.

The new series kicks off on September 6 with **Jonathan Safran Foer** reading from his new novel, "Here I Am." Ann Patchett and **Annie Proulx** will follow in the coming months. Find the entire program's schedule [here](#).

One of the things I've appreciated about Inprint's program is the effort the organization makes to bring a diverse set of voices to Houston. This year's roster includes Lebanese-American writer and painter Rabih Alameddine and American poet Ada Limón.

The program is also about more than author readings. Inprint runs a cluster of programs designed to promote literacy across the community. These include fellowships to writing students at the University of Houston, as well as "Teachers-as-Writers" workshops and "Memoir Workshops for Senior Citizens. Inprint also puts on the "Cool Brains!" series of author readings for middle school children.

The price of entry is a steal: \$5 general admission. At \$180, a season subscription is the best deal in Houston's arts community and come with added perks like reserved section seating, a copy of Foer's novel, and access to a special book-signing line.

Inprint is an important part of the Houston arts scene, and I look forward to listening in on the conversation.



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MORE FROM

STYLE

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# SPEAKER SERIES

## JERRY AND MARVY FINGER LECTURE SERIES—LEVI JORDAN PLANTATION: BEFORE AND AFTER THE CIVIL WAR

**Sep 15** This presentation covers the economic and social transition of the plantation before and after slavery. It also discusses the factors that kept the plantation operating and how those factors changed during Reconstruction. Members are free, non-members are \$5. Noon–1 pm. The Heritage Society Tea Room, 1100 Bagby Street. 713.655.1912. [heritagesociety.org](http://heritagesociety.org)

## INPRINT PRESENTS JONATHAN SAFRAN FOER READING

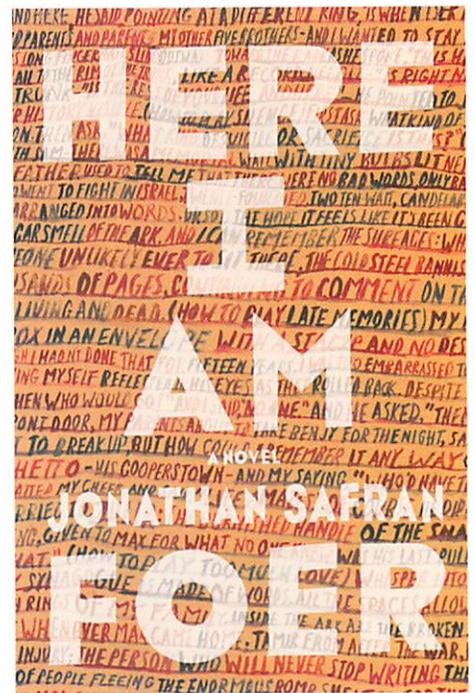
**Sep 19** Jonathan Safran Foer, bestselling author of *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* and *Everything Is Illuminated*—both made into award-winning films—will read from his new novel (his first in 11 years) *Here I Am*, kicking off the 2016/2017 Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. Tickets \$5. 7:30 pm. Wortham Center, 501 Texas. 713.521.2026. [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

## INPRINT PRESENTS LAUREN GROFF & ANN PATCHETT READING

**Oct 17** Lauren Groff, reading from her acclaimed novel *Fates and Furies*, finalist for the National Book Award and National Book Critics Circle Award, and Ann Patchett, winner of the PEN/Faulkner Award and Orange Prize for *Bel Canto*, reading from her new novel *Commonwealth*, will appear. Tickets \$5. 7:30 pm. Alley Theatre, 615 Texas. 713.521.2026. [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

## INPRINT PRESENTS RABIH ALAMEDDINE & JUAN GABRIEL VÁSQUEZ READING

**Nov 21** Rabih Alameddine, finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award for *An Unnecessary Woman*, reading from his new novel *The Angel of History*, and Juan Gabriel Vásquez, leading Latin American author of the international bestseller *The Sound of Things Falling*, reading from his new novel *Reputations*, will appear. Tickets \$5. 7:30 pm. Alley Theatre, 615 Texas. 713.521.2026. [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)



KBR KIDS DAY

During freshman year, Katy biology student discovers new virus.

Page D2

# STAR HEALTH

What you eat may increase your risk for Alzheimer's disease.

Page D3

Houston Chronicle Life &amp; Entertainment

Houston Chronicle | Monday, October 17, 2016 | HoustonChronicle.com and Chron.com

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Section D \*\*

## BOOKS

## Novelist Patchett upfront about real-life parallels in latest book

By Alyson Ward

As she worked on her latest novel, Ann Patchett consulted members of her family every step of the way. She made copies of her work and passed them around, asking for opinions.

"I cared so profoundly

what my family thought about this book," she said in a recent interview.

That's because "Commonwealth" is, in many ways, *about* her family.

The novelist will be in Houston on Monday to discuss her work as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading

Series, where she'll share the stage with author Lauren Groff. And she'll likely have to field a few audience questions about just how autobiographical this piece of fiction really is.

Since "Commonwealth" was released in September, *Author continues on D2*



Ann Patchett will be the speaker at Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

## Author retells story of family

*Author from page D1*

ber, it's hovered near the top of the best-sellers list. The story stretches over decades, following two families from the 1960s, when they're uncomfortably stitched together by divorce and remarriage, to the present day. At first the step-siblings spend unhappy summers together, six kids who "looked more like a day camp than a family, random children dropped off on the same curb." But as time and life go by, they face enough trauma together that they learn to rely on each other in unexpected ways.

Writing "Commonwealth" was sort of inevitable, Patchett says. Making the decision to do so was the hardest part.

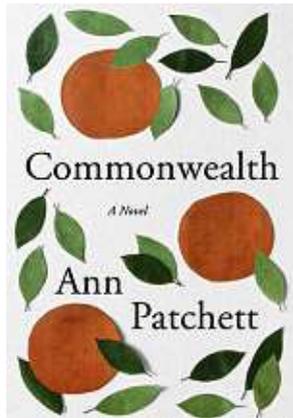
"I realized," she said, "that I just keep writing the same book over and over again."

Throughout her well-known catalog — "Bel Canto," "State of Wonder," "Run" — the characters and settings are all vastly different, but at heart "they're all the same book," Patchett said: Her novels all tell a story of strangers who are thrown together by circumstance and form lasting bonds.

She discovered that, despite the exotic settings and dramatic stories, she was always retelling the story of her own parents' divorce and remarriage — and how she and her sister had to blend into a family of step-siblings, strangers with whom they eventually bonded.

"I think that subconsciously, that's what I keep untangling and unpacking," she said. "At some point I thought: Wouldn't it be interesting to do this without all the scenery and props?"

Some authors are coy about putting their



### Author appearance

Ann Patchett will read and discuss "Commonwealth" and Lauren Groff will read and discuss "Fates and Furies" as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday, Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Ave.; inprint.org. Tickets are sold out, but Inprint and Houston Public Media will live-stream the reading at inprinthouston.org.

own lives into fiction, insisting that even the most obviously autobiographical story is one they pulled out of thin air. Not Patchett. Since "Commonwealth" was published last month, she has been upfront about the book's real-life parallels.

"My publicist said to me before the book is published, 'Are you going to tell people? Are you going to deal with this?'" she says. She figured she might as well. "Any reporter who spent five minutes on Google could probably figure this out, so there's no sense lying about it."

But there's one thing to keep in mind, reading "Commonwealth:" While the characters are based on Patchett's own family, "the things that happen to the people in the book didn't happen to us," she says. There's no childhood death, no story that be-

comes a secret even to the kids who lived through it. The truth is found in the "emotional energy" of "Commonwealth's" six kids — "how we felt at that time in our lives."

The other half of Monday's program, Lauren Groff is the author of "Fates and Furies," which President Obama declared his favorite book of 2015.

"Nobody would mistake a Lauren Groff novel for anybody else's novel," Patchett says. "She has a really singular voice."

The two writers know each other, Patchett says; they started corresponding because Groff once considered opening an independent bookstore.

Patchett, who opened Nashville's Parnassus Books in 2011, has become an outspoken booster of independent bookstores. Bookstores matter because they build community, she said, especially with readings and book signings that help readers find each other.

"Reading is a solitary act," she said. "Readers really need to come out of their house to bump up against other readers."

With our computers and phones, "we perfected a world in which we never have to leave the house — and then we realized we wanted to leave the house," she said. "I'm doing author events every night right now (at Parnassus), and what I hear over and over again is people are standing in line and they're making friends. They've come to hear an author whose work that they like and they're exchanging book recommendations, they're joining each other's book groups. I think as humans, we really need that."

alyson.ward@chron.com



## THE NEW NORMAL

AN AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR DISCUSSES THE FUTURE OF THE LOCAL BOOKSTORE, AND HER LATEST NOVEL

**ANN PATCHETT** is a favorite of booksellers across the country, and not only because they love her work. The best-selling author of six acclaimed novels—*The Patron Saint of Liars*, *State of Wonder* and *Bel Canto* among them—has been a driving force in the revival of the independent bookstore, even opening her own Nashville outpost with publishing veteran Karen Hayes, Parnassus Books, five years ago.

“Local bookstores are vital for both small and large cities,” Patchett says. “It’s a community center, whether you’re shopping, reading, meeting up with friends or playing with one of the five dogs lying around the store. Reading is not dead. Neither are independent bookstores.”

This month brings the release of Patchett’s highly-anticipated seventh novel, *Commonwealth*, which, she reluctantly admits, is her most personal offering to date. “It’s a real temptation to deny, but yes—this book hits close to home,” she jokes. “Throughout my career, I have been careful to never write autobiographical fiction, but then I wondered what would happen if I just wrote the book I was trying so hard to not write.”

The result: a compelling novel about characters connected by a tangled web of marriages, divorces and children. “It’s a story about a modern family—one we don’t see a lot in literature,” Ann said. “Complicated family trees are the new normal.”

Hear Patchett read and discuss *Commonwealth* as part of the **INPRINT MARGARETT ROOT BROWN READING SERIES** on Oct 17 at *Alley Theatre*, along with bestselling *Fates and Furies* author *Lauren Groff*. [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

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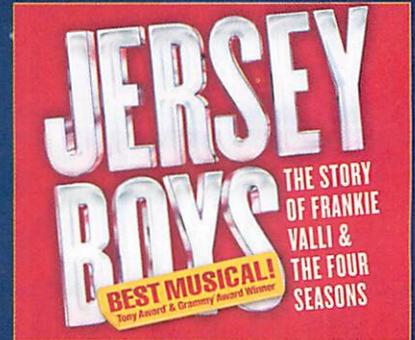
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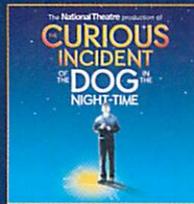


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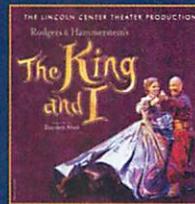


NOVEMBER 15-20, 2016

## SEASON PACKAGES STILL AVAILABLE



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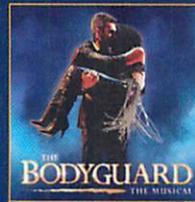
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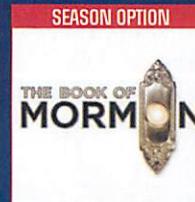
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AUG 15-20, 2017



JAN 3-15, 2017



JUN 27-JUL 23, 2017

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REVIEW

# With help from Satan and the saints, man sorts through AIDS losses

By Michael Magras

The 1980s and early '90s may as well be a millennium ago for many people, so it's understandable that some may not fully appreciate the devastation that AIDS wrought in the United States. Celebrities sported red grosgrain lapel ribbons to raise awareness of AIDS, but, more lastingly, works such as Randy Shilts's book "And the Band Played On" and Tony Kushner's "Angels in America" chronicled the effect of the disease and the government indifference that allowed it to spread. They are useful references for people who either don't know about America's AIDS epidemic or have put it out of memory.

Jacob, the 50-ish Yemeni poet who is the protagonist of Rabih Alameddine's fine new novel, "The Angel of History," remembers all too well. Over six months in the '90s, Jacob, a San Francisco resident, lost his pediatrician lover, Doc, and five other friends to the disease. "AIDS was a river with no bed," he says, "that ran soundlessly and inexorably through my life, flooded everything, drowned all I knew."

Twenty years later, the river is still raging. The impact of those losses lingers to such an extent that he talks to imaginary people and, as he did during the height of the epidemic, has begun hearing Satan's voice in his head, so he checks himself into a psychiatric clinic in an attempt to cope with the resurgence of his trauma.

"The Angel of History" goes back and forth in time and among different characters and styles to create a portrait of Jacob's life. How's this for a framing device: Satan sets up in Jacob's apartment to help him recall moments from his past, "to harrow the soil and dislodge the silt," and rescue him from his crisis. Satan conducts interviews with Death, sardonically resplendent in Versace and black cashmere ("I'm no low-rent Lucifer"), along with the Fourteen Holy Helpers, the Roman Catholic saints who are among the chorus of

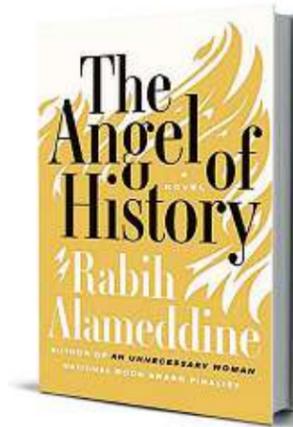


Robert Wuensche illustration / Houston Chronicle | Fotolia

voices Jacob often hears.

Alameddine intercuts these interviews with scenes from the visit to the clinic and excerpts from Jacob's journals. In these diaries, Jacob revisits people and events of his life, beginning with his unwed mother, a "short maid from the deserts of Yemen." Mixed among Jacob's diatribes against such recent events as a drone strike in Yemen and Middle Eastern children dying from sarin gas are tales of his mother's years working as a prostitute in a Sana'a whorehouse and their subsequent relocation to Cairo, where Badeea, one of the "aunties" who serviced gentlemen customers, looked after Jacob whenever she wasn't entertaining male patrons.

Most powerful are the



**Author appearance**

Rabih Alameddine will read in Houston this fall as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown reading series. He'll appear with author Juan Gabriel Vásquez at 7:30 p.m. Nov. 21 at the Alley Theatre, 615 Texas; \$5 tickets available soon at inprinthouston.org.

**'The Angel of History'**

By Rabih Alameddine  
Atlantic Monthly Press;  
304 pp.; \$26

scenes of Jacob during the height of the epidemic. It takes 17 minutes for Jacob to pry Doc's fingers off the bedrail after Doc dies. In his final days, a friend named

Greg can't stop shaking from a form of chorea. When Doc is too weak to move without Jacob's help, he cuts his foot on the floor, leaving a stain the shape of a kerosene lamp

in the wood, a stain Jacob wanted to preserve as a reminder.

These enduring traumas have crippled Jacob to the point that he can no longer write poetry. He turns to short fiction in the hope of regaining his creative spark. The novel's most wildly imaginative moments are in the sample stories included here. One is told from the point of view of an American drone that falls in love with a boy named Mohammad. And, in a sardonically hilarious entry, a husband and wife attend a party at his boss' opulent house, where they meet the boss' pet Arab. When the couple asks the reason the boss owns an Arab, he explains, "I'm allergic to cats."

Grim scenes of life in the AIDS era interspersed with rollicking comedy: That's the experience that awaits readers of "The Angel of History." Anyone who has read "An Unnecessary Woman" knows that Alameddine's is a poetically flippant prose style. As you can tell from the passages included here, he hasn't abandoned it. For some readers, however, that may be disconcerting: bitchy repartee among spirits and saints one minute, gut-wrenching scenes of death and illness the next. "Linearity can be boring," St. Eustace says. Alameddine would no doubt agree, but, in this case, the shifts in tone can sometimes be discordant.

But that's the price you have to pay with an author as ingenious as Alameddine. Despite its unevenness, "The Angel of History" is a richly textured novel that is a remarkable feat of imagination and a cry to remember a condition that not only still affects much of America but continues to overwhelm countries in Africa, Asia and elsewhere. The lapel ribbons may be gone, but the pain remains.

*Michael Magras is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. His work has appeared in the Minneapolis Star Tribune, San Francisco Chronicle, Philadelphia Inquirer, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette and Miami Herald.*

BOOK EVENTS

**SUNDAY**

**George Arnold:** Author will sign "Pharaoh's Follies: Kits of the CIA Adventures in Egypt," 11 a.m., Barnes & Noble, 2030 W. Gray; 713-522-8571.

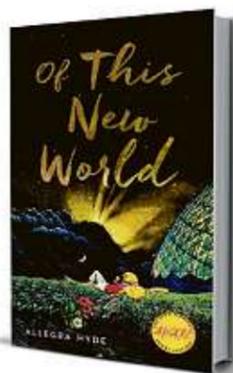
**MONDAY**

**Alton Brown:** Author will discuss and sign "EveryDayCook," 7 p.m., Stratford High School, 14555 Fern. For admission, purchase the book from Blue Willow Bookshop; 281-497-8675 or bluewillowbookshop.com.

**Allegra Hyde:** Author will discuss and sign "Of This New World," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore, 2421 Bissonnet; 713-523-0701 or brazosbookstore.com.

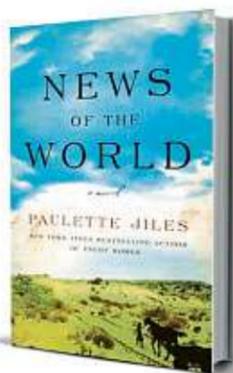
**TUESDAY**

**Paulette Jiles:** Author will discuss and sign "News of



the World," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

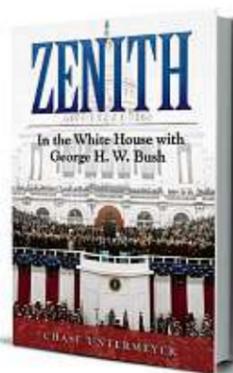
**Jessica Brody:** Author will discuss and sign her books for teens and tweens, including "A Week of Mondays" and "Boys of Summer," 7 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop, 14532 Memorial; 281-497-8675 or bluewillowbookshop.com.



**WEDNESDAY**

**Jan Jarboe Russell:** Author will discuss and sign "The Train to Crystal City," 6:30-8 p.m., Holocaust Museum Houston, 5401 Caroline; 713-942-8000. Registration required to attend: hmh.org/RegisterEvent.aspx.

**Nettje:** Author will discuss and



sign "North of Crazy: A Memoir," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

**THURSDAY**

**Susan Elia MacNeal:** Author will discuss and sign "The Queen's Accomplice," 6:30 p.m., Murder By The Book, 2342 Bissonnet; 713-524-8597, or toll free 888-424-2842 or

murderbooks.com.

**FRIDAY**

**Cassy Joy Garcia:** Author will discuss and sign her "Fed & Fit" cookbook, 7 p.m., Barnes & Noble, 2030 W. Gray; 713-522-8571.

**Houston Poetry Fest:** Three-day event begins with readings from juried poets at 7:30 p.m. Friday; open readings 11:30 a.m., workshops 2-4 p.m. and readings from juried poets 7:30 p.m. Saturday; and a 2 p.m. Sunday reading from juried poets and a youth poet. Willow Street Pump Station, UH-Downtown, 811 N. San Jacinto; houstonpoetryfest.info.

**SATURDAY**

**Galveston Art Bound:** Family festival, which supports children's literacy and art education, 2-6 p.m., Galveston

Art Center, 2127 Strand, Galveston; 409-763-2403 ext. 1003. During the street party, teams can sign up to use books to create art, which will be auctioned off at 5:30 p.m.

**Chase Untermeyer:** Author will discuss and sign "Zenith: In the White House with George H.W. Bush," 3 p.m., Blue Willow Bookshop.

**Kelly Windham:** Author will sign "Poe Pickles," 3-5 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore, 3270 Westheimer; 713 520-0061 or riveroaksbookstore.com.

**Kathryn Casey:** Author will discuss and sign "Possessed: The Infamous Texas Stiletto Murder," 4:30 p.m., Murder By The Book.

**Dan Slater:** Author will discuss and sign "Wolf Boys," 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore

*Alyson Ward*

## BOOKS

REVIEW

## Wobbling on the unsteady platform of public opinion

By Alyson Ward

To some people, Javier Mallarino is a hero; for others, he is “public enemy number one.” A political cartoonist in Colombia, the man has the power to “cause the repeal of a law, overturn a judge’s decision, bring down a mayor, or seriously threaten the stability of a ministry, and all this with no other weapons than paper and India ink.”

Juan Gabriel Vásquez explores the arena of public opinion — fickle and unsteady territory — in his sharp, compact novella “Reputations.”

Vásquez studied Latin American literature at the Sorbonne and lived in Europe for much of the past two decades, but in recent years he has returned to live in his native Colombia. He’ll be in Houston in November for a reading, part of Inprint’s Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

In “Reputations,” Mallarino has made a career of cartoons that are both witty and sharp, like “a stinger dipped in honey.” He has built a sterling reputation over four decades, jabbing at powerful figures in his cartoons on the newspaper editorial page.

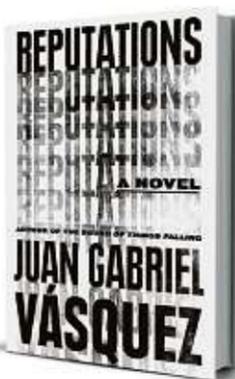
“Everyone knew the space where his cartoon had always been: in the very center of the first page of opinion columns, that mythic place where Colombians go to hate their public figures or figure out why they love them, that great collective couch of a persistently sick country.”

Mallarino’s world is the Colombian upper-middle class; he has been anti-establishment for so many decades, he has been embraced by the establishment. His outspoken cartoons have inspired death threats but, as his publisher said, “you’re nobody in this country until somebody wants to hurt you.”

And at 65, he is given a national achievement award for his long career. The national post office even unveils a stamp created in his honor.

“Caricatures might exaggerate reality, but they can’t invent it,” he tells the vast theater full of well-wishers. “They can distort, but never lie.”

At the reception afterward, a young woman approaches Mal-

**‘Reputations’**

By Juan Gabriel Vásquez  
Riverhead, 208 pp., \$25

larino, claiming to be a blogger and asking him for an interview. He agrees, telling her to come to his house the next afternoon.

That’s when the cartoonist’s life takes a turn. The woman, Samanta Leal, is not a writer; she lied to gain access to his house. When she tells him why she’s really there, Mallarino realizes that he met her when she was a young girl. She’s been in this house before. And

the story of what happened that day — a story neither of them fully knows — is crucial to both of them.

It’s difficult to offer more details without giving away the heart of the story.

For some time, the book becomes a mystery, a hunt for the truth, and that shouldn’t be spoiled. Mallarino, for his part, ends up wondering whether a politician he skewered nearly 30 years ago — a man he despised, who may have

been guilty of terrible things — was treated unfairly. The question has the potential to undermine the black-and-white, ink-and-paper career Mallarino has made. He’d destroyed that man’s reputation with his cartoon, and he’d built up his own. Was he right?

It upsets Mallarino’s world to think that his reputation is built on such quicksand, that he might lose his “moral authority” and become “a cheap rumormonger, a sniper of other people’s reputations.” He sees how easily his public stature could be turned against him imagining the enemies he’s made over 40 years — all the people he’s prodded with his pen — “egging on a crazed mob ready to judge him summarily and burn him at the stake, the stake of capricious, changeable public opinion.”

The prose in “Reputations,” translated by Anne McLean, is spare, simple and lovely. It is constructed like a good short story, with no extraneous scenes or unnecessary action. Vásquez has written a page-turner, a story that’s intriguing enough to follow through its short unfolding. It’s also a rumination on the power of public opinion that keeps churning long after the final page.

alyson.ward@chron.com



Colombia’s author Juan Gabriel Vásquez

Berenice Bautista / Associated Press

## ‘Nutshell’ is ‘Hamlet,’ as told from the womb

By Ron Charles

“Nutshell,” Ian McEwan’s preposterously weird little novel, is more brilliant than it has any right to be. The plot sounds like something sprung from a drunken round of literary Mad Libs: a crime of passion based on Shakespeare’s “Hamlet,” narrated by a fetus.

*That it should come to this!*

If you can get beyond that icky premise, you’ll discover a novel that sounds like a lark but offers a story that’s surprisingly suspenseful, dazzlingly clever and gravely profound. To the extent that “Hamlet” is an existential tragedy marked with moments of comedy, “Nutshell” is a philosophical comedy marked by moments of tragedy.

Essentially a 200-page monologue delivered in utero, “Nutshell” opens with this amniotic line: “So here I am, upside down in a woman.” Not exactly Shakespeare, but labor on.

This narrator speaks from the discovered country from which all of us come: “Fully inverted, not an inch of space to myself, knees crammed against belly, my thoughts as well as my head are fully engaged.”

This is a precocious fetus. Over several dark days, he reveals a well-informed taste in wine, a broad knowledge of history and a firm grasp of current events. A Latin phrase here and there suggests an unusually sophisticated mind, although he humbly acknowledges that “no child, much less a foetus, has ever mastered the art of small talk.” He’s not a ham so much as a Hamlet.

Such worldliness would be unbelievable, except that our narrator claims he’s an attentive listener of his mother’s educational podcasts. He doth protest too much, methinks, but the whole premise of the novel rests on his thoroughly isolated, well-developed consciousness trapped as a reluctant witness. “I count myself an innocent,” he notes, “but it seems I’m party to a plot.”

Clearly, something is rotten in the state of matrimony. His mother, Trudy,

is carrying on an affair with his dull-witted uncle, Claude (Queen Gertrude, King Claudius — *check, check*). When they’re not having sex — described here from an alarmingly close perspective — they’re planning to murder Trudy’s husband, Claude’s brother. They need him out of the way not only so that they can marry each other, but to get their hands on the family estate, an expensive old house in London.

This is not a consummation devoutly to be wished, particularly by the narrator. He has no special fondness for his hapless father — a poor poet — but, having heard a radio documentary called “Babies Behind Bars,” he’s

worried that his mother will be arrested, and then he’ll be birthed from one prison into another.

What’s a fetus to do besides lament his inability to act? “Waiting is the thing,”

he concedes. As we listen to the conspirators plotting, our pre-born nar-

rator reflects on the world he’s about to enter. It’s not a wholly welcoming place, as you may have noticed.

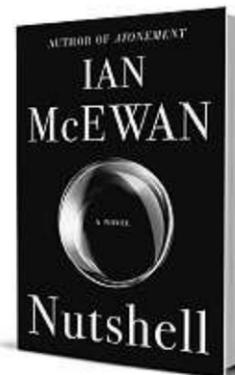
But there’s the rub: “Pessimism is too easy, even delicious,” the fetal narrator says. It’s “the badge and plume of intellectuals everywhere. It absolves the thinking classes of solutions.” He has no intention of giving up before he arrives: “I want my life first, my due, my infinitesimal slice of endless time and one reliable chance of a consciousness. I’m owed a handful of decades to try my luck on a freewheeling planet.”

But only if he can forestall the carnage gathering around him.

It doesn’t seem possible that this oddly ridiculous narrator caught in a tawdry murder scheme could deliver such a moving, hilarious testimony, filled with equal measures of dread and hope, but babies and sweet princes can surprise you.

Welcome to the world, Nutshell.

Ron Charles is the editor of *The Washington Post Book World*. He wrote this review for *The Washington Post*.

**‘Nutshell’**

By Ian McEwan.  
Nan A. Talese,  
197 pp., \$24.95

## BOOKS

HONORS

## National Book Award winners deal with race and politics

By Alyson Ward

**T**HE National Book Foundation is *woke*," comedian Larry Wilmore declared last week as he hosted the National Book Awards. And sure enough, at Wednesday's ceremony to honor the year's best books, the personal and political were equally prominent. Three of this year's winners are African American, and all four winning books deal with issues of class, race and societal ills.

The 67th annual prizes were awarded for the best in four categories — fiction, nonfiction, poetry and young people's literature. Here's a look at the winners.

## FICTION

**"The Underground Railroad" by Colson Whitehead**

Whitehead's book was scheduled to come out in September, but then Oprah chose it for her book club. The publication was bumped up a month, and since then "The Underground Railroad" has gotten steady (and positive) buzz from readers and reviewers. It's also been on the best-seller list since August.

Whitehead's novel is the story of Cora, a slave on a Georgia cotton plantation, who risks everything to escape with a fellow slave on the Underground Railroad — which, in Whitehead's book, is an actual railroad, a secret network of tunnels and stations and trains that head north. The two escapees make stops along the way, encountering a different world each time, but when they discover they're being hunted, they have to flee for their lives. It's an adventure story that offers a raw, up-close look at the lives of slaves.

## NONFICTION

**"Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America" by Ibram X. Kendi**

Kendi, a historian, examines how anti-black, racist ideas have developed, spread and impacted American history. These beliefs didn't bubble up from the bottom, he says. Rather, they were invented (and perpetuated) by some of the brightest, most influential leaders in history. Kendi argues that we're not living in a post-racial society at all — that racist myths and beliefs are still strong and infiltrating our lives today.

## POETRY

**"The Performance of Becoming Human" by Daniel Borzutzky**

Borzutzky's poems delve into the stories of Chicago and Chile, two places he knows well.

"When I wrote this book, I was thinking about my hometown of Chicago," he said, "and how it destroys itself, abolishes public services, closes psychiatric hospitals, privatizes or shuts its public schools, and militarizes its police that have murdered and

grees of impunity since the 1970s.

"I was thinking about how Chicago is like the Chile my parents left in the 1970s, which destroyed itself by depleting public services, by privatizing and destroying its social security system, by murdering and torturing its citizens in the name of neo-liberal progress. I was thinking about immigrants, refugees and workers in the U.S. and abroad who give up their lives to survive in economies that exploit them and make them invisible. And I was thinking about bureaucracies and the abuse of data and fake mathematical measures to justify the destruction of real people's lives. I was thinking about those who cannot survive the brutalities of our rotten economies."

Borzutzky's book, by the way, was published by Brooklyn Arts Press, which is so small it's operated out of a New York City apartment.

## YOUNG PEOPLE'S LITERATURE

**"March: Book Three"**

by John Lewis, Andrew Aydin and Nate Powell

Rep. John Lewis, a congressman from Georgia, was a key figure

in the civil rights movement. In the "March" trilogy, he tells his story — which, in many ways, is 20th-century America's story — in a series of graphic novels. This third book starts in the 1960s, when a 20-something Lewis worked with other young activists to fight voter suppression and end segregation. He spoke at the March on Washington; he coordinated efforts to register black voters during Mississippi Freedom Summer. And on Bloody Sunday in 1965, as he led a civil rights march across a bridge in Selma, Ala., state troopers beat him within an inch of his life.

Lewis worked on this graphic novel with Andrew Aydin, who works for the congressman, and artist Nate Powell. When he accepted his award last week, Lewis recalled trying to get a public library card when he was 16; he was turned away because the library was for whites only. "March: Book Three" is the first graphic novel to win a National Book Award.

alyson.ward@chron.com  
twitter.com/alysonward



Andrew Aydin • Nate Powell • John Lewis • Daniel Borzutzky • Colson Whitehead • Ibram X. Kendi

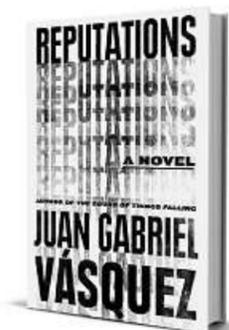
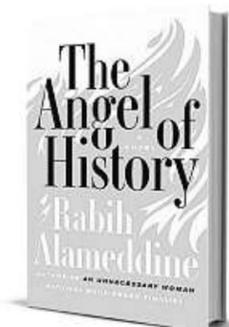
Robin Platzer / Twin Images

## BOOK EVENTS

## MONDAY

**Katharine McGee:** Author will sign "The Thousandth Floor," 6-8 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore, 3270 Westheimer; 713 520-0061 or riveroaksbookstore.com.

**Rabih Alameddine and Juan Gabriel Vásquez:** Alameddine will read and discuss "The Angel of History," and Vásquez will read and discuss "Reputations" as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m., Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Ave.; inprint.org. \$5 admission. Inprint and Houston Public Media will live-stream the reading at inprinthouston.org and houstonpublicmedia.org/inprint.



## TUESDAY

**Claire Cusack and Sharon Kopriva:** Two of the artists featured in the book will sign Robert Craig Bunch's "The Art of Found Objects: Interviews With Texas Artists," 5-7 p.m., River Oaks Bookstore.

## SATURDAY

**Book Talk: Gift Edition:** Store's quarterly Book Talk program will focus on books that make good gifts; bring a dozen cookies for the cookie exchange. 4:30 p.m., Katy Budget Books, 2450 Fry, Houston; 281-578-7770 or katybooks.com.

**Local author signing event:** Laura Elvebak, James Glassman, Kay Kendall, Mark Lardas, Kathleen Shanahan Maca and William Dylan Powell will all be available to sign their books, 4:30 p.m., Murder By The Book, 2342 Bissonnet; 713-524-8597 or murderbooks.com.

**Transcendent Zero Press party:** "November Shindig" features readings by poets Kristy Loye, Winston Derden, Thay Bustamante and Melissa Studdard, with live music by The Midnite Eyes, Gwen Doll and Mystery Loves Company; 7-11:30 p.m., Last Concert Cafe, 1403 Nance. Admission \$10; transcendentzeropress.org/events.

Alyson Ward

## 'Twilight' author's new novel is a zippy emotional ride

By Keith Donohue

Just over a decade ago, Stephenie Meyer published "Twilight," the first of her books about a teenager who falls in love with a vampire. Insanely popular — the Twilight series has sold more than 155 million copies worldwide — Meyer's books spawned a cottage industry. In addition to the blockbuster science-fiction novel "The Host," there were the movies based on the books and an enormous fan following that turned this onetime receptionist into one of the most popular authors in the world.

Meyer's new novel, "The Chemist," has no vampires or aliens or anything supernatural to steal your soul while you're reading. (I waited, my neck bared.) But this espionage action story will no doubt tighten her grip on her devoted readers. Its main character is much like Jason Bourne, to whom the novel is dedicated affectionately. More accurately, it is a romance novel cleverly nesting inside a thriller. And what a strange romance it is.

The tale opens with an extended scene describing in great detail the precau-

tions taken by the titular chemist. Wrung out from a long day of stealing books from a distant library, the chemist sets booby traps, arranges a fake body — complete with stage blood — in a bed and goes off to sleep in the bathtub wearing a gas mask for protection. Yes, it seems that someone is out to get her. For the past three years, she has been on the run from a top-secret U.S. government agency determined to kill her.

Trained by that same nameless department, she has become an interrogator who uses her psychological tactics and biochemistry skills to extract confessions

from terrorists and other bad guys. The department killed her kind old lab partner and nearly eliminated her, so she is paranoid and overcautious, assuming multiple identities and disguises — all of which are described in gleeful, almost fetishistic, detail.

Given the chance to come in from the cold, Alex (not her real name) agrees to a department plan to apprehend a seemingly innocuous high school teacher who they claim is part of an intricate plot to release a deadly virus. They meet cute on D.C. Metro's Green Line, and she drugs him and whisks him off to a makeshift lab in West Virginia where she strips him, straps him down to a table and begins to torture him with carefully calibrated injections.

Saved by an ex-CIA black-ops renegade in Kevlar armor, the teacher falls in love with the torturer. Not all at once, mind you, but he quickly forgives her once she explains the reasons behind her sadistic behavior. Smitten, I guess. Together with the commando and his superbly trained dog, Alex and the teacher set in motion a counterplan to get the bad

guys.

The plot zips from Texas to Florida and back to D.C. and features all of the expected motifs of the genre: double switches, innocent mistakes that compound the dangers, the lurid technical capacities of gadgets and weaponry and opiates, the politician gone as rogue as the Manchurian candidate's mother and even the obligatory tone of simmering hatred between two members of the team that turns into mutual respect and admiration.

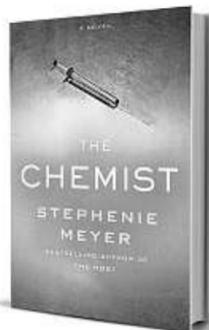
Along the way, there are some wonderful touches. The ex-CIA guy specializes in training dogs of all shapes and sizes to the point where they fearlessly obey every command and have memorized complex escape routes from their Texas ranch. These canines are often smarter than their human counterparts.

Other matters further challenge credulity. The melodramatic plot depends upon well-worn devices such as a pair of twins whose bodies mirror each other. The writing and bantering dialogue never fully escape a cataclysm of clichés. But one does not read Meyer for her style. Her appeal is emotional

rather than aesthetic, and she knows how to control dramatic tension as skillfully as any of the Bourne movies. The pages turn themselves.

And Alex is one stone-cold heroine. "The Chemist" asks that age-old question: Can sadists find true love and happiness? Or, to put it from the teacher's perspective: Can love — or, at least, infatuation — conquer the deepest pains inflicted by the beloved?

Keith Donohue's latest novel, "The Motion of Puppets," was published last month. He wrote this review for the Washington Post.

**'The Chemist'**

By Stephenie Meyer  
Little, Brown, 528 pp., \$28

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NOV 17, 2016

## INTERVIEW: JUAN GABRIEL VÁSQUEZ

*Daniel Peña*

Colombian writer Juan Gabriel Vásquez is at the forefront of decentering Colombian literature as it's commonly known: the magical realism, the polite political allegories, the associated orientalist gaze that threatens to broad-stroke all of Latin America (and its literature) with Gabriel García Márquez' legend. While some might say Juan Gabriel Vásquez is actively working against that burden, I think it's apparent by now that he's in a league of his own. The realism of his most recent work, rooted in historical fact, is a fresh lens through which we might digest the very real bizarre world of our own 21st century—political fact-skewing and spin and botched peace deals, etc. Juan Gabriel Vásquez looks at Colombia's historical distortion of reality—the violence of it, the horror if it—in the eye and conveys it to us in the flesh of his own characters. Gabriel Vásquez' newest novel, *Reputations*, does just that.

*Reputations* centers on Javier Mallarino, a political cartoonist whose pen is so powerful it destroys political careers. After four decades as the moral compass of his nation, his life and his work are very much crystallized at the end of a long career but everything comes unraveled as he helps a woman in her search for the truth surrounding her sexual assault. I talk with Juan Gabriel Vásquez about *Reputations*, the first FARC peace deal, and how to caricature a politician who caricaturizes himself.



Daniel Peña is a Pushcart Prize winning writer and an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Houston-Downtown. Formerly, he was a Fulbright-García Robles Scholar at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City and a Lecturer at Cornell University where he also earned his MFA in Creative Writing. His work can be seen in *Ploughshares*, *The Kenyon Review*, *The Rumpus*, and *Huizache* among other outlets. He's a regular contributor to *The Guardian* and the *Ploughshares's Blog*. He lives in Houston, Texas.

**Daniel Peña:** In *Reputations*, Javier Mallarino is a political cartoonist whose pen could end the political career of anyone. There's even a character who commits suicide at one point because he's been characterized by Mallarino. Do you believe opinion is now, or has ever been, that strong in Colombia? What are the origins of *Reputations* and its protagonist, Javier Mallarino?

**Juan Gabriel Vásquez:** There is a strong tradition of political cartoons in Colombia. In fact, the first idea for the novel was an exploration of the life of one of the most influential cartoonist of our history: Ricardo Rendón, who killed himself for unknown reasons in 1931. But this is not what my novel is about. *Reputations* shouldn't be read as a study in the Colombian tradition of opinion, but as an exploration of our universal tension between the fragility of our public image and the power of those who can shape it. You mention that character who commits suicide, but the novel doesn't state that this is a direct consequence of Mallarino's cartoon. In fact, he himself says that cartoons cannot cause a man to kill himself. Each reader must figure out the truth on their own.

**DP:** In both *Reputations* and your last novel, *The Sound of Things Falling*, the narratives are both driven by a certain desire for catharsis through confronting the past. In *Reputations*, Samanta says, "Not knowing is not hell. The hellish thing is not knowing whether I want to know." Does the quest for confronting truths about the past (or the anxiety behind that) hold a kind of gravity in the Colombian psyche?

**JGV:** No, I think it hold a kind of gravity in anyone's psyche anywhere around the world. Our difficult relationship with the past is prominent in all of my books because it's a big part of our lives as human beings. There are many things in my books that address directly a part of the Colombian experience, but this is not one of them: this is (again) universal. Samanta needs to have some certainty about a past event that shaped her life, and this idea of the past as mystery, as a dark place full of secrets, is very much one of my obsessions. And this is where the other big theme of the novel kicks in: memory and its fallibility.

**DP:** Could you talk about weaving fact and fiction in your work? What are the certain responsibilities (or pressures) of writing about the nuanced trauma that has afflicted Colombia?

**JGV:** Well, my novels always have one foot firmly set in fact. This is because they're interested in the crossroads between private life and public life. So my characters act like investigators in the dark areas of my country's past... In this sense, *Reputations* is perhaps the least public of my books. It deals almost exclusively with an intimate conflict, a conflict that takes place in memory and in the private lives of two people. But the rest of my books seem to think that there is something important in turning our facts into a story, because that way you understand them, they gain meaning. Fiction is the transformation of information into knowledge. And sometimes there is no better way to know what has happened to us than turning it into fiction.

**DP:** *Mallarino* feels like a metaphor for Colombia at large. Though he's survived the turmoil and death threats of his career, even in his old age he's still haunted by Samanta's earlier trauma and he has to make a decision about what lengths will he go to maintain the dignity of Samanta by destroying the dignity of someone else? Someone has to pay for this trauma to resolve. Do you think Colombia is still in that same search to find resolve in 2016? And if so, is that resolve attainable?

**JGV:** Is *Mallarino* a Metaphor for Colombia? I'm not sure about that. In an exploration of his life, *Reputations* gets to explore many traits of the Colombian recent past--its violence, its political tensions—but the conflict is private: *Mallarino* has to face his past and present, his relationship with his life's work and also with the people he loves, to understand his place in the world. My country... well, my country has been living in violence during the last 50 or 60 years, and we do have a lot of soul-searching to do about our common past. Part of that is story-telling: our great novels, before and after *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, have always tried to explore the story of our conflict: that search you mention in your question.

**DP:** In light of that last questions, what are your thoughts on the recently failed peace referendum between the Colombian government and the FARC?

**JGV:** It was a sad day for me, not just because we failed at the simple task of ending a 52-year old war that has hurt the lives of 8 million people, but because so many people rejected the agreements under the influence of lies and misinformation. The worst thing is that this was accepted by the leaders of the right-wing party that rejected the agreements: they openly spoke about manipulating the truth to have the voters “go out and vote angry.” We still have a long way to go in terms of democratic culture, tolerance and the responsibility, as citizens, of being well informed. I think we failed miserably in terms of solidarity, magnanimity, political intelligence and economic foresight.

**DP:** Reading this novel amidst an American Election, I can't help but consider our own American trauma in 2016. What does an opinion critic do with a man who characterizes/caricatures himself?

**JGV:** I write this after Trump has been elected. I'm horribly disappointed and, honestly, quite afraid at what this means. An ignorant narcissist has been elected on lies and fear-mongering; extreme, reckless populism has arrived to the most powerful office in the world. On the other hand, the system was not rigged. He lied in that aspect too.

Juan Gabriel Vásquez will be reading on Monday, November 21 at 7:30 PM at the Alley Theatre along with Rabih Alameddine as a part of the **Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series**.

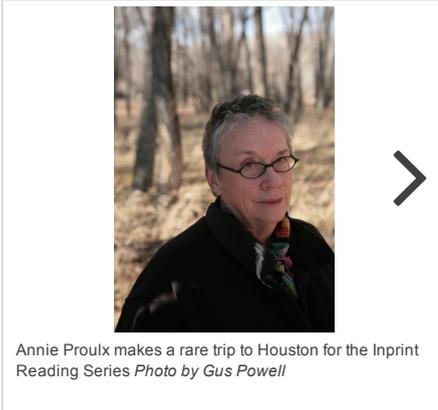


WRITERLY RELATIONSHIP WITH NATURE

## Annie Proulx guides Houston book lovers through literary wilderness

By Tarra Gaines 1.20.17 |  
Gaines(/author/tarra\_gaines/articles/)

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Annie Proulx makes a rare trip to Houston for the Inprint Reading Series Photo by Gus Powell

When wandering through the wild literary landscapes of Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winning author Annie Proulx's latest novel, *Barkskins*, it's difficult not to think of the old adage about seeing the forest for the trees. The epic tale of two American families, which begins in the late 17th century and ends in the present day, covers three centuries and what seems like a hundred characters, but readers shouldn't get lost among the years and faces, as Proulx's true focus in *Barkskins* is humanity's sometimes sacred sometimes abusive relationship with the forests of the Earth.

I had a chance to ask Proulx some questions by email about the monumental novel before she makes a rare trip to Houston for the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series(<http://inprinthouston.org/event/inprint-annie-proulx-reading/>), and so I had to inquire about how her own writerly relationship with nature.

Many of Proulx's novels and stories, including *The Shipping News* and "Brokeback Mountain" delve just as intimately into the landscapes of her settings as much as her created characters, and *Barkskins*, which spends many of its 700 pages exploring the forests of North America, with stops in Europe, China and New Zealand, is no different. Proulx confessed from an early age she felt a concern for and connection to wilderness.

“Since childhood I had lived near forests and woodlands, and was something of a weather buff, so when climate change began to penetrate the world’s consciousness I was inclined to pay attention to the trees,” she said.

### **Vanished Trees**

Proulx has stated that she got the inspiration for the novel decades ago, when traveling through Michigan she happened upon a marker for a white pine woods that was no longer there. In fact, that species of tree no longer grew in the state at all.

“The trip through Michigan and noticing the absence of white pine that had once grown there to great size was simply the time point when I decided to write a book about the falling of the forests,” she described, and then went on to explain how stumbling upon an absence of forest led to the creation of a novel’s worth of diverse characters.

“I had no characters in mind and no story, no beginning—only the urge to write about the disappearance of what had been considered permanent tree cover. It took years of thought and reading before characters and story line actually gathered into a shape.”

That shape became two central, sprawling family sagas that begin with two French immigrants who travel to the new world of North America on a contract of indentured servitude. René Sel and Charles Duquet work side by side cutting down trees in the forests of Canada, for only a few days, but their descendants lives will intertwine throughout the centuries.

“René Sel was vaguely based on my ancestor, Jean Prou, who came to New France in the late 17th century. Duquet was an amalgam of many men who made their fortunes through natural resource extraction,” Proulx explained.

### **Glimmers of Hope**

Proulx characters live hard lives and some experience gruesome deaths, but it might be her descriptions of the leveling of the great old forests that readers mourn the most. And while all that destruction might leave readers with no choice but to surrender to the bleak beauty of Proulx’s narrative, *Barkskins* does end in hope with characters like Sapatisia Sel, the descendent of both Sel and Duquet.

“The specific character Sapatisia Sel was a late-comer in the book’s development,” Proulx revealed. “But I knew I would have someone thinking and doing the things she

did. It was necessary to give her hope for the future, or her actions would have been futile,” explained Proulx, who might also be giving hope to readers.

### **An Operatic Adaptation**

While it’s likely a few of those readers at the Inprint event will have discovered Proulx’ work through the film adaptations of her stories, specifically *The Shipping News* and the Oscar winning *Brokeback Mountain*, Proulx has resisted that contemporary novelist trend to try her hand at screenwriting or pitching a show idea to television producers. She remained focused on novels and short stories, until recently.

In 2014, her collaboration with composer Charles Peter Wuorinen on a *Brokeback Mountain* opera (<http://www.charleswuorinen.com/operas/brokeback-mountain/>) reached the stage. When I asked her if she found she had a different relationship to the opera than to the films which were adapted by others, Proulx had a rather wry and Proulx-esque response.

“Not really. Because I was doing something out of the usual, I was, myself, out of the usual. Could have been anyone, right?” she replied, but she did find writing the libretto a “fun” experience with the added “pleasure of a friendship with the composer.”

Proulx is 81 now and only occasionally does reading appearances anymore, so Inprint fans who got their tickets early to the now sold out event are in for a special authorial treat. “I asked my publisher to limit the book tour,” Proulx explained to me. “I truly hate air travel and living in the Pacific Northwest makes travel to almost everywhere onerous.”

For those not lucky enough to grab a ticket a month ago, Proulx hasn’t braved the long flight for just one event. She will also participate in a free and open to the public Inprint Craft Talk/Q&A on Monday, January 23, 1 pm, at the University of Houston Honors College Commons, M. D. Anderson Library.

*Annie Proulx appears for the Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series at the Wortham Center on Monday, January 23 at 7:30, but the event is sold out.*

ZEST

FILM

# Aboard the bus

## Cinematographer helps 'Paterson' director put poetry in motion

By Andrew Dansby

For 40 years, Frederick Elmes has taken jobs that might strike other cinematographers as needlessly complicated.

Case in point is filmmaker Jim Jarmusch's new "Paterson," which opens Friday and is about a poet. Though poetry may possess some cinematic qualities, writing poetry doesn't often find its way to the local multiplex.

"You know, Jim actually didn't lead with that, the poetry," Elmes said. "He just said, 'I'm making a picture about a bus driver in Paterson.' Which is right up Jim's alley. He likes stories about the everyday person, the working man whose life isn't dramatic."

Elmes has worked with Jarmusch since 1991, so he was on board, knowing the process would be as rewarding as it was challenging.

So they filmed the story of a poet named Paterson, played by Adam Driver, who drives a bus in the city of Paterson, N.J.

An independent cinematic auteur, Jarmusch's work often involves repetitions and subtle variations on themes, giving it a quality similar to minimalist music. "Paterson" may be the best representation of that style thus far in his filmography. Paterson, the poet, is a creature of habit.

"He's a person whose life is driven by routine," Elmes said. "He drives the same bus every day, the same schedule, the same walk home. It allows him to free his mind to think about the things he can write poetry about."

So Elmes helped Jarmusch find the barely perceptible dif-



Mary Cybulski / Amazon Studios & Bleecker Street

Cinematographer Frederick Elmes shoots on a city bus for the Jim Jarmusch film "Paterson."

ferences in that routine. Paterson spends his lunch eating by the same waterfall.

"It's a different waterfall every day," Elmes said. "There are these factors that make it look different. The amount of sunlight, the clouds. The falls look very different on a cloudy day than they do on a sunny day. That was the wonderful part of photographing the film for me. Every day, there is something slightly different there that would inspire him that wasn't there yesterday. Finding those little triggers that allowed him to write was a challenge but a rewarding one."

Elmes, 70, was born in New Jersey and initially wanted to be a still photographer. But he

frequently found himself trying to assemble narratives out of his photographs. Film became a natural next step.

At the American Film Institute, he met an aspiring filmmaker, who enlisted him to shoot an experimental film called "Eraserhead." Though savaged on its initial release, David Lynch's film became a cult classic.

Elmes was in Houston in November at the Cinema Arts Festival for a 40th-anniversary screening of the film. He worked on subsequent Lynch films including "Blue Velvet" and "Wild at Heart." Following "Wild at Heart," he joined Jarmusch for "Night on Earth," released in 1991.

Their partnership has endured since, despite plenty of logistical difficulties presented by Jarmusch's peculiar visions for his films.

"Jim said, 'This is gonna be great because I got two actors in a very small space: a car! And they can't move, so I have control,'" Elmes recalled. "Of course, he'd never shot inside cars before, so it proved to be challenging."

Elmes took the "Paterson" job and immediately spent a day on a bus viewing the city, which has a rich history as a hub for America's industrial revolution.

The shoot provided greater complications for the two to overcome than "Night on Earth" did.

"A bus is just about the ultimate in difficulty," Elmes said. "First, you have to find a route around the city that shows the things outside the windows that you want to see. But traveling north you get one view, but traveling south tends to put things in shadows. Another thing we learned is city buses have notoriously horrible suspension systems."

Jarmusch and Elmes decided to have two camera crews shooting at once to minimize the number of times the bus had to follow a particular route.

But buses are rich with reflective surfaces.

"We learned quickly it's easy to shoot the reflection of a camera crew huddled behind an actor," he said. "So that was another thing we had to overcome. The shoot became a series of solving little problems. That made it more manageable."

Elmes views those challenges as part of the sum of what makes each film an interesting project.

"Each film, the chemistry is different," he said. "Some directors are more interested in the story and not at all in the actors. Some are obsessed by the cinematography and the quality of the lights. You end up with a group of artisans and actors that will never be replicated. That's interesting to me."

Ideally, he'll avoid bus shoots for a while. And maybe shooting on water, too.

"I've been fortunate to never have shot at sea," he said. "A lake is bad enough. But the sea you have so little control. You really realize how small you are in the universe."

andrew.dansby@chron.com

INPRINT READING SERIES

# Annie Proulx on writing 'Everything springs from place,' 'Brokeback Mountain' author says

By Doni M. Wilson

All day I have been teaching Shakespeare: "King Lear" to sophomores, "Hamlet" to freshmen. You are not supposed to call them "freshmen" anymore: You are supposed to call them "first-year students."

In any case, some of them are rookies.

For some, the language is daunting: so many words in long passages, so many passages in long acts. We have become accustomed to sound bites, Twitter, the cold but efficient text. I am not blaming anyone for this: It is what it is.

Some of them ask me, "Why are we reading this?"

I say, "Reason not the need!" and I laugh.

Some of them laugh with me. Some of them wait for me to answer the question for real.

I tell my students, all of them, that I had an adventure Monday night. I drove from Friendswood to the Wortham Center, endured single lanes, slowdowns, the trick of parking not too far from the venue. I'll go to great lengths to hear new words. It is thrilling to hear them in new combinations. I never get sick of it.

The event was the Inprint Reading from Annie Proulx. She is 81, doesn't travel so much now. I was excited that she was coming all the way to Houston. The reading was sold out. How many literary readings are sold out? Hardly any. But Inprint has sold out many. You must be quick to get your tickets: A lot of people want to hear high-quality writing.

Maybe that says something about what we read and listen to every day. There is always a reason for yearning.

I tell my students that it is really something when you hear



Gus Powell

When novelist Annie Proulx read "Barkskins," she immersed listeners in her words.

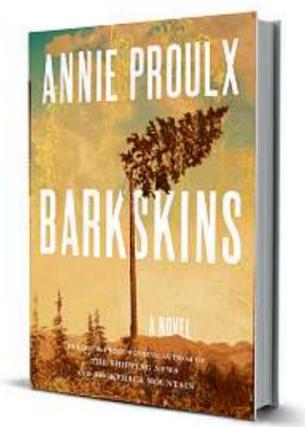
an author read her own work. Then, when you read the book, you can imagine that voice.

Proulx was reading from her new, long novel, Barkskins.

It spans 300 years and many generations. It is about a lot of things: fur trappers, rivalries, trees. You might remember

that Proulx wrote "Brokeback Mountain," which was made into a riveting film. She has won many awards, including the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award. She is no rookie.

When she reads, you can picture the novel's places vividly in your head. You don't need



**'Barkskins'**

By Annie Proulx

Simon & Schuster, 736 pp., \$32

a camera — you just need to listen, and then things start to come alive. She pronounces each French name and phrase perfectly.

When Rich Levy, executive director of Inprint, introduced Proulx, he was right: She has "lean, fresh prose," a "sharp wit."

Proulx reminded us that in 1695, when her story begins, there were only 600 million people populating the world. Now there are over 7 billion. I let that sink in, but I couldn't completely comprehend it. I heard it, but it was too staggering. That's what happens at a reading: Whatever you might have glossed over in an almanac seems rich and strange when an artist is uttering it.

You hear the reading, get excited about reading the book.

And you take mental souvenirs with you. You marvel that you are in warm and sunny Houston, hearing about characters who died

of "winter starvation." You picture being "plunged into the gloomy country." You imagine a "fabric sky," "the narcotic effect of deep forest." You think of that terrifying movie with Leonardo DiCaprio called "The Revenant," the times you went camping, fairy tales that took a turn for the worse.

As you hear the words, you want to remember some of them: the forest and "its moody darkness," "the funereal spruce and hemlock," and you think of how the natural world has left its inprint on you, even when you didn't realize it.

Then, if you are lucky, you stay for the Q-and-A, and you learn a few things about how to write, how to make people listen. For Proulx, when she is working on a short story, "it is realer than one's own life." She rewrites and rewrites and rewrites, until she creates "a sentence that I can live with." She recommends that if they are too long, with too many extraneous words, that you "get at it with the scissors." For her, everything starts with history and place: "Everything springs from place." She has a point: You cannot escape where you come from.

So I tell my students, if you are lucky, and you go to a reading, you might learn about a new novel that you would like to read. But usually, you learn a lot more, like how to observe, how to take it in, how to get it on the page. And then, maybe someone will hear, in a sold-out crowd in Houston, how to imagine trees, the sweep of history, how to find your own way. It could happen.

Doni M. Wilson is an English professor and writer in Houston and has a high schooler named Christopher. You can find her on Facebook and Twitter.

LITERATURE

## Inprint Author Interview: Annie Proulx

Author Annie Proulx on telling a long story through the eyes of short-lived characters.

[DACIA CLAY](#) | JANUARY 23, 2017, 2:25 PM

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Gus Powell

Annie Proulx



In her new book [Barkskins](#), Annie Proulx ("Brokeback Mountain," *Shipping News*) tackles the topic of climate change as only she can: with the story of a place, through the eyes of the people who experience it. In this case, the "place" – forested areas – has many locations around the globe. It starts in the 1600's through the eyes of two Frenchmen – René Sel and Charles Duquet – and follows their lives and that of their heirs, up to present day, largely within the world of the timber cutting business.

[Inprint](#) brings the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award winner to Houston on January 23rd to read from *Barkskins* at Wortham Center. Stay tuned to this website for full video of that reading.

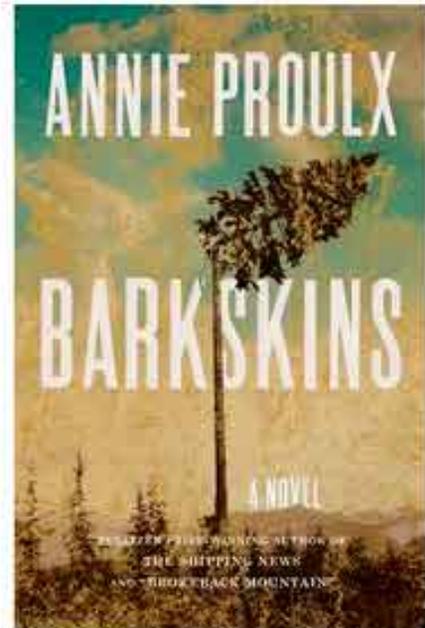
*The following interview was conducted via email with Ms. Proulx.*

**What (or who) inspired you to become a writer initially? What drives you now?**

I had stories I wanted to write and I still do have stories I want to write.

**What's a typical work day like for you?**

There is no typical work day. When I am working on something I give it my full attention day after day until I am done. When I am not working on something specific I do other things — travel, explore, read, shop for groceries or maps, correspond with friends and acquaintances, think, watch birds, garden, paint, imagine.



barkskins

**When ideas come to you, how do you know a “keeper” when you think of it?**

The shapes of stories form slowly, often over years of consideration and research. I am interested in geographical place and social problems, and when I've accumulated enough information about a particular time or situation I begin to write.

**What are your ideas about the relationship of the writer to the reader?**

I am interested in telling a story the best way I can. I do not think very often about “the reader” beyond trying to keep the story understandable and in motion.

**A lot of your characters are very solitary people. Why? And why do you think this connects with people?**

All people have a solitary inner sense of self. And I do not see nor agree that “a lot” of my characters are “very solitary.”



**When did you know that *Barkskins* was a project that you wanted to see through to the end?**

After several decades of thinking and observation I wanted to write a story about climate change. That subject was too large and too difficult (for me, anyway) to serve as the foundation for a novel. So I chose to write about one facet of climate change — deforestation caused by human timber cutting for profit. When I began writing the story there was never any thought of stopping before an appropriate timeline ending — the present.

**You live in the Pacific Northwest where, when driving along I-5, one can see big bald patches of land where logging has cut into the forests. Did the Northwest's landscape and industry play a part in your idea for *Barkskins*?**

For most of my life I have seen clearcuts in many many places. *Barkskins* was essentially finished when I moved to the Pacific Northwest and that state's clearcuts made no particular impression on me. I intended that the last section of the novel would deal with log poaching in Indonesia, but ran out of time and space to visit and write this part — which I regret. France, Canada, United States, China (briefly), Amazonia, New Zealand were the main forested places I referenced in the story.



**Talk about the role the natural world plays in your writing. Why do you think that writing about the natural world connects with modern people (who mostly live in cities)?**

Generally place and the natural world, land forms, climate, geography, weather are the underpinnings of everything I have written. Against a backdrop of the natural world a story plays out. Even people in cities have some sense of the natural world, even if it's only local weather. But I am writing to suit the story, not to urban readers who are free to take it or leave it if they find it too weird and unfamiliar.

**What does the title of your new book, *Barkskins*, mean? Did you create this word, or did it come from somewhere?**

*Barkskins* refers to people involved with trees in any way, from lumberjacks and timber workers to empire builders. It can also refer to insensitive, thick-skinned humans who ignore everything in life but their own goals.

**Talk about place as character in your work. Do you treat the development of place in the same way as the development of people?**

I write about place. Human characters are there to carry the story against the background of time and place.



**The “turnover rate” for humans in *Barkskins* (as in real life) is much more rapid than that of the forest. Can you talk about the tension that this temporal difference creates between humans and the natural world (when we can’t immediately see the results of our actions)?**

To develop the picture of slow attrition of a vast forest area it was necessary to deal with a relatively long time period. Three hundred years is extremely short to illustrate a process that has been ongoing for millennia. In a novel that involves so many places and characters over 300 years, it is natural and necessary that characters cash in their chips. Very few characters could persist for more than 80 or 90 years. You are quite right to pick up on the inability of short-lived humans to understand the natural world’s millennial tempos. It is a problem. Humans seem unable to grasp long time periods. The geologists among us know this well.



**Dacia Clay**

WEB EDITOR, ARTS & CULTURE; HOST/PRODUCER,  
CLASSICAL CLASSROOM



Dacia began her career in public radio as the Audio Librarian for Houston Public Media (then KUHF) in 2009. She earned her Master of Library Science from the University of North Texas' School of Library and Information Science, where she focused on special collections (thanks to the sage advice of...



CHEVRON HOUSTON MARATHON

## SPEAKER SERIES

### SHARKEY'S NEW YEAR'S EVE

**Dec 31** Celebrate the New Year with Sharkey and the rest of his underwater friends, complete with a buffet, balloon drop, contests and giveaways for the kids! Reservations required. Downtown Aquarium, 410 Bagby. [downtownaquarium.com](http://downtownaquarium.com)

### 2017 CHEVRON HOUSTON MARATHON & ARAMCO HALF MARATHON

**Jan 15** With more than 250,000 participants, volunteers, and spectators, the Chevron Houston Marathon Race Day is the largest single-day sporting event in Houston. Watch the excitement at Discovery Green, where the races begin and end, or stake out a place along the route to cheer on the participants. Please note that with all the development and construction underway in Houston, the route may be different from previous years. [chevronhoustonmarathon.com](http://chevronhoustonmarathon.com)

### SUPER BOWL LI

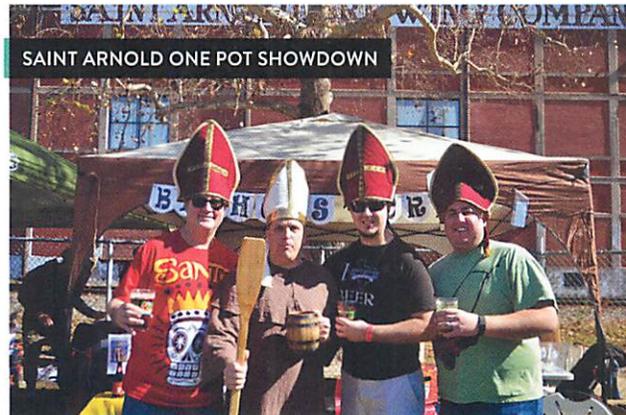
**Jan 27–Feb 5** Houston is center stage for the country's biggest sporting event. Downtown is going to erupt with fun: from the ultimate fan fest to live music to Houston-centric activities, you will not want to miss the excitement. [housuperbowl.com](http://housuperbowl.com)

### SAINT ARNOLD ONE POT SHOWDOWN

**Jan 29** Back for a 9th year, Saint Arnold Brewing Company's annual anything goes cook-off will pit amateur chefs against each other in an effort to create the best beer infused dish. Tickets go fast, so visit their website in early January. [saintarnold.com](http://saintarnold.com)

### AUTHORS IN ARCHITECTURE –THE EIGHTH WONDER OF THE WORLD: THE LIFE OF HOUSTON'S ICONIC ASTRODOME

**Dec 8** When it opened in 1965, the Houston Astrodome, nicknamed the Eighth Wonder of the World, captured the attention of an entire nation, bringing pride to the city and enhancing its reputation nationwide. It was a Texas-sized vision of the future, an unthinkable feat of engineering with premium luxury suites, theater-style seating, and the first animated scoreboard. The book, *The Eighth Wonder of the World*, tears back the facade and details the Astrodome's role in transforming Houston as a city while also chronicling the building's pivotal 50 years in existence and the ongoing debate about its preservation. Free. 5:30 pm. Architecture Center Houston, 315 Capitol, Suite 120. 713.520.0155. [aiahouston.org](http://aiahouston.org)



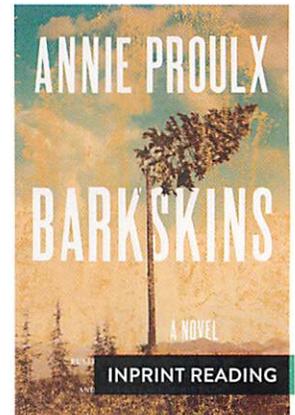
SAINT ARNOLD ONE POT SHOWDOWN

### INPRINT PRESENTS ANNIE PROULX READING

**Jan 23** Annie Proulx, Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning author of *The Shipping News* and *Brokeback Mountain*, will read from her latest novel *Barkskins* as part of the 2016–2017 Inprint Margaret Brown Reading Series, followed by an on-stage interview, book sale and signing. Tickets \$5. 7:30 pm. Alley Theatre, 615 Texas. 713.521.2026. [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org)

### HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY QUARTERLY AUTHOR SERIES PRESENTS: TERRY MCMILLAN AT THE ALLEY THEATRE

**Feb 6** *New York Times* bestselling author of *Waiting to Exhale* and *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, Terry McMillan, discusses her latest book, *I Almost Forgot About You*. Free. 7 pm. Alley Theater, 615 Texas.



INPRINT READING

REVIEW

# Caught between life and death

## Tightly written ‘Lincoln in the Bardo’ dazzles

By Alyson Ward

Late on a February night, Abraham Lincoln slips alone into Oak Hill Cemetery, looking for his son.

Eleven-year-old Willie is newly dead — his funeral was that morning — and his father needs to see him again. Inside the crypt, he slides the boy's coffin from its shelf and opens it. And as Lincoln holds his son's body, rocking him and tenderly stroking his hair, a crowd gathers at the door.

Lincoln doesn't see or hear them. They are citizens of the cemetery itself, long separated from the ones they loved on Earth. And Lincoln's visit makes them ache.

"The holding, the lingering, the kind words whispered directly into the ear?" says one. "My God! My God!"

"To be touched so lovingly, so fondly, as if one were still —" "It was cheering. It gave us hope."

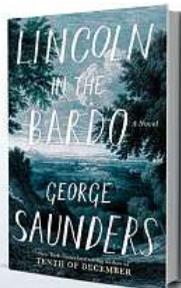
Willie Lincoln's death of typhoid fever in 1862, 155 years ago this month, is the event that drives the action in George Saunders' new novel, "Lincoln in the Bardo." But this remarkable novel is far

more than the story of a son's death and a father's grief. The Civil War looms as a backdrop, but "Lincoln" feels fresh and persistently personal. Through characters who are palpably real and genuinely funny, Saunders pries open the door between life and death, poking at the boundary between the two. It's a dazzling ride.

"Lincoln" is the first novel for Saunders, who is considered a master of the short story. But — perhaps not surprisingly — it's a novel that reads like a short story. There's no bloat, no storyline that feels tangential or unnecessary. The action in the cemetery takes place over a single night, and the story moves swiftly because it's presented on the page much like a play.

Instead of relying on a third-person narrative, Saunders lets his characters speak. They talk to us and to each other, explaining who they are and what they've done. Many of them are not alive, but they're not exactly — well, it's complicated.

The graveyard narrators number in the dozens, but we're led through the cacophony by two men who have been



### 'Lincoln in the Bardo'

By George Saunders

Random House, 368 pp., \$28

there for a long time: Hans Vollman, who was hit by a beam that fell from the ceiling, and Roger Bevins III, a gay man who, denied by the one he loved, slit his wrists with a butcher knife.

They're both recovering now, or so they seem to believe: Bound to a "sick-box" by day and to the graveyard at night, they wait for the time they can — as Bevins puts it — "go outside, into that beautiful world, a new and more courageous man, and begin to *live!*" But

meanwhile they wait, ignoring the decay of their bodies while hoping they can return to their lives.

"Bardo," a Tibetan Buddhist term, refers to a state of transition between two lives; one is past death but hasn't yet reached whatever's next. In Saunders' universe, citizens can escape this in-between state only by giving up the things of this world and acknowledging they are dead. Then they are — poof! — released into "the matterlightblossoming phenomenon" and disappear, their clothing fluttering to the ground.

Vollman, Bevins and the rest have been in the bardo for years — decades, even — when Willie Lincoln arrives, living in a "sick-box" in a "white stone home." Willie needs to leave this phase — "These young ones are not meant to tarry," Bevins says — but he wants to wait for his father's return. The night becomes a mission to get the boy past the bardo and on to what's next.

"I feel I am to wait," young Willie tells his new friends. "My mother, I said. My father. They will come shortly. To collect me ..."

Vollman and Bevins know

better. "They may come," Bevins says. "But I doubt they will collect you."

Nineteenth-century newspapers reported that Lincoln did, in fact, visit the cemetery to hold his son's body. When Saunders learned that, he was struck by the image.

"It was such an unbelievable kind of strange, macabre anecdote, and it felt mostly true to me," he said in an interview with the Houston Chronicle. "It was one of those moments that disturbed my understanding of who Lincoln was and what grief was."

The idea stayed with him for 20 years, surfacing every now and then, a story in the making. For years, Saunders avoided working with the idea because he wasn't sure he was "big-hearted enough" to write "Lincoln" — unsure he could "abide with true emotion long enough" to get the story out.

Those doubts were unfounded. Saunders has written a big-hearted text, one full of grief and love in equal measure. There's not a false note in this story.

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[twitter.com/alysonward](https://twitter.com/alysonward)

### Author appearance

George Saunders will read and discuss "Lincoln in the Bardo" as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. March 6, Alley Theatre, 615 Texas; [inprintheouston.org](http://inprintheouston.org). Tickets are sold out, but Inprint and Houston Public Media will live-stream the reading at [inprintheouston.org](http://inprintheouston.org).



Robert Wuensche illustration / Houston Chronicle

MARCH 2017

# H-Town Picks



**CONCERT**  
**The Lumineers**

The little-known folk trio skyrocketed to stardom after their breakout 2012 hit "Ho Hey." Today they sell out arenas, so book your tickets now to hear them perform 2016 album *Cleopatra*.

Mar 2 at 7. \$49.50–64.50. Smart Financial Centre, 18111 Lexington Blvd. in Sugar Land. 281-207-6278. smartfinancialcentre.net

**VISUAL ARTS**  
**Flowers and People Cannot Be Controlled But Live Together—  
A Whole Year Per Hour**

For the inaugural exhibition at the newly minted Moody Center for the Arts at Rice, Tokyo art collective teamLab presents an interactive installation that sprouts, blooms and wilts digital flowers as it senses visitors' movements.

Thru Aug 13. Free. 6100 Main St. moody.rice.edu



**FAMILY**  
**Buffalo Bayou Regatta**

Join the 800 canoers and kayakers taking part in the festive flotilla, or root for them as they cross the finish line at Sesquicentennial Park.

Mar 11. \$50 per participant. Ages 12 and up. Finish line at 400 Texas Ave. 713-752-0314. buffalo bayou.org



**CLASSICAL**  
**Ben Folds**

The pianist pivots between alternative rock and classical with ease on his latest album *So There*, new numbers from which he'll perform this month with the Houston Symphony, along with a few Ben Folds Five favorites.

Mar 16 at 7:30. \$29–108. Jones Hall, 615 Louisiana St. 713-224-7575. houstonsymphony.org



**BALLET**  
**Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo**

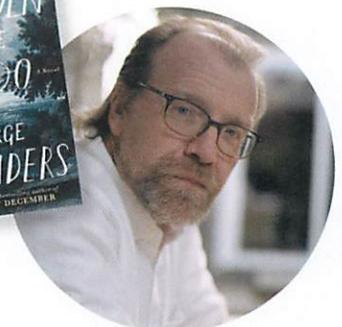
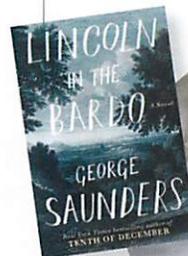
After four decades of performing, the world-famous all-male ballet company, affectionately known as The Trocks, continue to delight audiences with athletic parodies of classic and contemporary dance.

Mar 24 at 8. \$43–83. Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas Ave. 713-227-4772. spahouston.org

**READING**  
**George Saunders**

Inprint brings the acclaimed short story writer to Houston to read from his much-anticipated first novel, *Lincoln in the Bardo*. Set in a graveyard and narrated by a chorus of voices, living and dead, the book centers around the death of the president's 11-year-old son, Willie.

Mar 6 at 7:30. \$5. Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Ave. 713-521-2026. inprintheouston.org



LUMINEERS: FACEBOOK.COM/LUMINEERS; FLOWERS AND PEOPLE CANNOT BE CONTROLLED BUT LIVE TOGETHER: COURTESY MOODY CENTER FOR THE ARTS; BUFFALO BAYOU REGATTA: COURTESY BUFFALO BAYOU; TROCKADERO: SASCHA VAUGHAN; GEORGE SAUNDERS: COURTESY ALLEY THEATRE

## BOOKS

POETRY

## Poet: 'The 'I' in these poems is 'ME'

Ada Limón to share stage with Gregory Pardlo at Inprint reading

By Alyson Ward

"I'm learning so many different ways to be quiet," Ada Limón writes in her poem "The Quiet Machine."

"... There's how I don't answer the phone, and how I sometimes like to lie down on the floor in the kitchen and pretend I'm not home when people knock."

The frankness is what makes her most recent collection, "Bright Dead Things," so fresh and immediate. Limón isn't hiding from anyone in these poems, which are full of grief and regret, overwhelming love and the discomfort that love sometimes demands.

"The 'I' in these poems is 'ME,'" she wrote in 2015, when "Bright Dead Things" was published. Claiming the "I" in her poetry might have felt like a risk, but it made her work more powerful. And that paid off: Limón's collection was a finalist for both the National Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Limón will share some of those personal poems Monday at the Alley Theatre, where she'll share the stage with Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Gregory Pardlo as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.

Deciding to "own" her poems, not to hide behind an ambiguous narrative voice, felt like the right way to offer "Bright Dead Things" to the world.



Poet Ada Limón

"It was sort of entering into a different kind of contract with the reader: 'Here I am, fully on the page for you,'" Limón said. "I was asking people to intimately engage with a work; I had to tell them why."

"I used to pretend to believe in God," she writes in "Miracle Fish." "Mainly, I liked so much to talk to someone in the dark."

Poems that address the death of her stepmother offer intimate, painful detail: "Sometimes I would have dreams / that she was still alive, and I couldn't find / enough washcloths to help her, / to clean her face, / the tumor's foul, black spit-up."

And in "Remember the Carrots," Limón recalls a moment in childhood, when she ripped the carrots out of her father's garden, killing the whole crop: "I loved them: my own bright dead things."



## 'Bright Dead Things'

By Ada Limón  
Milkweed, 128 pp., \$16

As an adult, she strives more often to be "agreeable," but she wonders: "Why must we practice / this surrender? What I mean is: there are days /



Poet Gregory Pardlo

## Author appearance

Poets Ada Limón and Gregory Pardlo will discuss and sign their works as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday, Alley Theatre, 615 Texas; 713-521-2026 or inprintheouston.org. \$5 general admission.



## 'Digest'

By Gregory Pardlo  
Four Way Books,  
84 pp., \$15.95

I still want to kill the carrots because I can."

All that openness on the page, Limón said, made her feel vulnerable. She confessed in her blog

that her poems contained "things I might not say in person to a good friend, and yet here it is in the world where anyone could pick it up." But after a while, that transparency turned into a more courageous way of living.

"When the book first came out, it really did make (readings) hard because I felt like I no longer had any of the tricks I could rely on to put a border between me and the audience," she said. "And then, sort of with time, I thought: 'You know what, why don't I just try to be totally present in this moment, too?'" That presence, Limón said, has "changed the way I read and the way I want to interact in the world."

Limón is not immune to current events, and her writing doesn't look only within. "A New National Anthem," a poem published on

Buzzfeed in December, begins with a statement that is sure to provoke: "The truth is, I've never cared for the National Anthem." (Limón goes on to discuss the lines "we never sing" now because they mention slavery, suggesting that "Perhaps, / the truth is, every song of this country / has an unsung third stanza, something brutal / snaking underneath us ...")

"That poem is a pretty political poem, but I'm always very scared to write anything that feels like a polemic," she said. "One of the things that happens when we move toward the political is we claim we have answers. And poems are not a place for answers; they're a place for questions."

Limón, who turned 41 last week, is working on poems for a future collection; she plans to read some of them Monday night.

Pardlo, by the way, is a friend; they met at New York University, where they both earned graduate degrees in 2001. The two poets have done readings together before, Limón said.

"Getting to do this always feels like it's honoring the time we spent together as graduate students," she said, "way back when we couldn't afford cab fare and didn't think anyone would ever read our poems."

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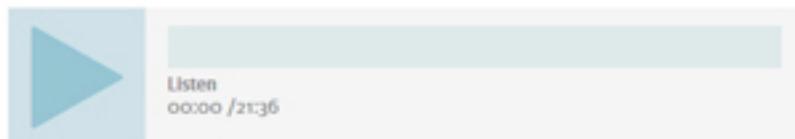
**LITERATURE**

# Inprint Author Interview: Gregory Pardlo

The Pulitzer Prize-winning poet talks about poetry, community, Panera Bread, and reads some of his work.

CATHERINE LU / DACIA CLAY | APRIL 1, 2017, 1:09 PM

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Gregory Pardlo

Rachel Eliza Griffiths



"There's something about the poetry community. We're kind of like Trekkies or Civil War reenactors. We're a very unique community. We're a very small, but absolutely committed, community."

Pulitzer Prize-winning poet [Gregory Pardlo](#) is an understated kind of guy. Until recently, he liked to write while drinking a smoothie at a Panera Bread in his Brooklyn neighborhood (it got "discovered" so he had to find new writing digs). He's a dad. He teaches undergraduate writing courses at Columbia University. But when he talks about poetry, you begin to get a glimpse into what lies beneath his cool exterior. And when you actually hear his poetry, you wonder how all of that intense imagery and emotion can live inside of such a laid back person.

Learn more about Gregory Pardlo in this interview with Catherine Lu. Hear Pardlo, along with poet Ada Limón, read at [Inprint's](#) next Margaret Root Brown Ready Series event, happening Monday at the Alley Theatre at 7:30pm. The event will also be live streamed on this website.

Audio editing and article by Dacia Clay.

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Catherine Lu

CONTENT PRODUCER & ANNOUNCER

While growing up in Chicago and Houston, Catherine's love for art, music and creative writing was influenced by her teachers and parents. She was once concertmaster of the Clear Lake High School Orchestra and a four-time violinist of the Texas All-State Symphony. A graduate of the University of Chicago, Catherine...

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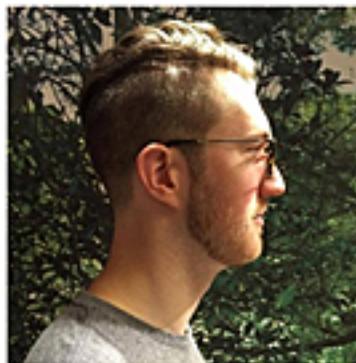
Poets Savannah Blue And Rain On Poetry, Politics And The Bayou City Poetry Slam

APR 02, 2017

“THE LANGUAGE IS CONSTRUCTING OUR IDEAS MORE THAN WE ARE DEPLOYING THE LANGUAGE”: AN INTERVIEW WITH GREGORY PARDLO

Nathan Stabenfeldt

Gregory Pardlo’s collection *Digest* won the 2015 Pulitzer Prize for Poetry, was shortlisted for the NAACP Image Award, and was a finalist for the Hurston-Wright Legacy Award. His other honors include fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts; his first collection *Totem* was selected by Brenda Hillman for the APR/Honickman Prize in 2007. He is translator of Niels Lyngsø’s *Pencil of Rays and Spiked Mace: Selected Poems*, and his work has appeared in the *Boston Review*, *The Nation*, and elsewhere. Pardlo is also the author of *Air Traffic*, a memoir in essays forthcoming from Knopf. In the Fall of 2016 he joined the faculty of the MFA program in creative writing at Rutgers University-Camden.



Nathan Stabenfeldt is the Nonfiction Editor for *Gulf Coast* and an MFA candidate in poetry at University of Houston. He was born and raised in Evansville, Indiana. Before moving to Houston he studied writing and philosophy at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. His work has most recently appeared in *Jet Fuel Review* and *DMQ Review*.

I had a chance to chat with Pardlo over the phone about his forthcoming essay collection, the ways in which we define labor, improvisation in poetry, and our shared received narratives.

**Nathan Stabenfeldt:** First of all, congratulations on [your recent essay in the \*New Yorker\*](#). Is this at all related to your forthcoming memoir in essays, *Air Traffic*?

**Gregory Pardlo:** Thank you! Yes, absolutely; that was the central essay, in fact more a kind of a Frankenstein of several of the essays in the book. I pieced together a larger narrative for the *New Yorker* specifically. So that piece points in several directions, for a number of the essays that go much deeper into their various episodes.

In the book that essay—which I will say is actually shorter than you see on [newyorker.com](#)—that essay is titled “Air Traffic.” We’re actually tossing around new ideas for the title of the book, I don’t think we’re going to go with *Air Traffic*.

**NS:** The version of the essay that appears in the *New Yorker* is about how your father lost his job as part of the 1981 Air Traffic Controllers strike and the subsequent firings by the Reagan administration, and

that one starts with a memory of you marching in the picket line as a child. I feel like that's a scene that's being echoed by protests and marches in the current political climate. It feels relevant, like a commentary on the cyclical nature of history or something. I was wondering, was this something you were thinking about as you were working on the essay?

**GP:** Not at all.

**NS:** Not at all, it's just sort of unfortunate timing?

**GP:** [laughs] Yeah, exactly. So in my first book, *Totem*, there's a poem called "Winter After the Strike," which has to do with this, and since that poem I've wanted to do something more. I had actually flirted with the idea of writing a collection of poems about labor and the strike and I looked at some models; Mark Nowak's *Coal Mountain Elementary* was attractive to me, some of C.D. Wright's work I thought about. But ultimately, I wanted to do a lot of research and it just lent itself, seemed to be pushing me more toward prose and the personal essay. And so I started thinking more and more about the lyric essay, the sort of stuff that John D'Agata was sort of popularizing at the time, late in the first decade of this century. I had long had this idea and this ambition to think about that moment in history, and if there is a kind of consistency that I recognize [between then and today] it's that 1981 was kind of the beginning of the end of organized labor.

Certainly when I was in grad school, and much later even until now, we're still having these conversations about the relationship between graduate students and the university and whether they are students or laborers or a sort of a workforce. And so the question of how we identify labor, how we identify the work in relation to the industry that contextualizes that labor, has always been really fascinating to me. I think one of the central questions that motivated me to write about the Air Traffic Controller strike was that PATCO [Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization], the union, was in very much a similar identity crisis. 'Are we going to be a professional organization, or are we going to be a labor union?' So is it more like a guild, right, or a labor union? And it all has to do with issues of class and the relationship to the working class. 'Do we want to identify with poor people, with working people?'

To me, that always echoes in questions of race, and how I think so much of what we end up calling racism—and it may very well be racism proper—but I am interested in how racism is also just the mindset of ‘I don’t want to be associated with the reviled, with the alien class, I want to keep as much distance as possible from the people who are oppressed.’ And so these questions were on my mind the whole time, and as you say it’s kind of an unfortunate coincidence that they’ve come to a head now, and in the way that they are coming to a head, but it wasn’t intentional.

**NS:** Turning to talk a little bit about *Digest*: I know you’ve mentioned in the past that you’ve held various jobs that put you around jazz and jazz musicians a lot, and there are a number of improvisation series threaded through *Digest*. What role does improvisation play in your process, and what sort of personal connections do you feel between jazz and poetry?

**GP:** I don’t know if I feel a personal connection between jazz and poetry in the way that I think we most traditionally imagine, and that is the kind of beatnik, beanie-wearing, finger-snapping poet with a saxophone player standing next to him or her; that’s not so much the image that I have. But I am very much interested in the dynamics of, the relationship between preparation and spontaneous expression. I’m not so sure I believe spontaneous expression is possible. I guess I am sort of influenced by literary theory and sort of structuralist ideas that the language is constructing our ideas more than we are deploying the language; the romantic idea that the poet/artist/musician is inspired and untrained just bothers me.

And these conversations go on in workshops and classrooms all over the place, where somebody says “Allen Ginsberg, he would just riff and whatever came out was what we have and there was no preparation—” yeah, and Charlie Parker and John Coltrane and Miles Davis, these cats are all sort of riffing spontaneously, but we often overlook the fact that there’s decades of really intense training that goes into creating a foundation, a kind of background through which the so-called spontaneous expressions can occur.

So in my work, when I’m working on *Digest* and I’m thinking about improvisation, I’m not interested in making an argument about improvisation, but I do want to explore the relationship between a given topic or framework or context and the free play of the imagination: how surprising, how much delight, how playful can I be within a fairly—not necessarily rigid—but a fairly circumscribed

form. Certainly in the Corrigedora improvisations ["Four Improvisations on Ursa Corrigedora"] you can see the form, you can kind of tell how the riffs are going and they're really like—I was thinking about Van Gogh's iterations of the same image in the paintings, and I wanted to do that with Corrigedora, with a previous text.

But then the later ones, "The Conatus Improvisations" and "The Clinamen Improvisations," it's much more difficult to identify the formal constraints there, and that's because I'm trying to give the poem ideological and conceptual restraints more than poetically formal ones. For example, the poem has to reference cars in some way, the poem has to deal with motion or fossil fuels; I would have these restraints in the back of my head. And they're all seventeen lines, I think. The point being that I would come up with a set of standards and rules for the poem that weren't necessarily foregrounded, and I thought about this as a way that a musician might approach a cover song or the way a jazz musician might expand on a jazz standard.

**NS:** Some of my other favorite poems in *Digest* are poems like "Corrective Lenses" and "Ghosts in the Machine." I really like the way those mimic some of the language of academic posturing, they mirror course descriptions, and I like these because I think they're incredibly funny, but also because they encourage the reader to question received narratives that are broadcast at us from all sides. Do you think this is a responsibility of poetry, to encourage that kind of awareness?

**GP:** No, I don't think it's a responsibility, but I certainly think it's something poetry can do, and I think that poetry has a unique ability to do it because of its self-referential nature and its self-conscious nature. And I mean that in the sense that, in prose, we're not often as conscious of the language and the operation of language itself. Our focus is on the content, on what is denotatively produced. In poetry we are trained, or at least readers of poetry are trained, to attend to or account for the structures of language as well as what that language conveys. Given that, one of the things I love about poetry is that it allows us to communicate on that register, that sort of, I wouldn't call it a shadow register—but to make the reader aware that we're conscious of how the language is operating in the world and not just what's it's saying; that there's this other level of communication going on.

**NS:** I just want to ask one final question. Is there anything that you're listening to right now? Any album recommendations or anything like that?

**GP:** Yeah, so I have two daughters straddling the tween years, and so I often tell people I have the musical taste of a twelve-year-old girl. So I was just listening to Shawn Mendes and—who's the Irish guy that I really like?

**NS:** Is it Ed Sheeran?

**GP:** Ed Sheeran, yeah! I've been listening to a lot of Ed Sheeran lately.

*Gregory Pardlo will be reading at the Alley Theater in Houston on Monday, April 3<sup>rd</sup> at 7:30pm with Ada Limón as part of Inprint's **Margarett Root Brown Reading Series.***

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ZEST

REVIEW

# An ancient story of revenge, made new again

By Alyson Ward

Colm Tóibín's "House of Names" is full of betrayal and deception, rage and retaliation. It's an ancient Greek story of palace intrigue, but it feels as fresh as newly spilled blood.

The book retells the story of Agamemnon and his wife, Clytemnestra, who incite a loop of family infighting in which one killing leads to another, then another, destroying all.

The Irish author (he wrote "Brooklyn" and "Nora Webster") will be in Houston on Monday to discuss "House of Names," the final reading of the season in Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series. The event is sold out, but a livestream is available.

First, a note to readers who don't know or care about Greek mythology: It doesn't matter. Tóibín said he intended to write a novel that wouldn't require background knowledge of the ancient Greek stories. "You don't have to say, 'Oh my god, I don't know anything about this story — how can I read this book?'"

He started with the

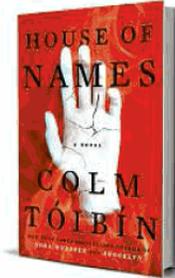
original texts — Aeschylus' "The Oresteia," the plays of Sophocles and Euripides — but Tóibín added some of his own characters, motives and relationships to the basic narrative. His story is simultaneously classic and new.

From the beginning, "House of Names" is urgent and violent: It starts with an account from Clytemnestra herself.

"I have been acquainted with the smell of death," she announces, then launches into her story, a 70-page fountain of bile that is, ultimately, the most arresting section of the book.

Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek army, summoned Clytemnestra and their daughter Iphigenia, telling them he had arranged for Iphigenia to marry the handsome warrior Achilles. When mother and daughter arrived, ready for a wedding, they discovered they'd been tricked: Agamemnon was actually planning to sacrifice his daughter so the winds would change direction and the Greek army could set sail for Troy.

As Iphigenia dies before a chanting crowd, Clytemnestra is so filled with rage



**'House of Names'**

By Colm Tóibín  
Scribner, 288 pp., \$26

**Author appearance**

Colm Tóibín will discuss and sign "House of Names" as part of Inprint's Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday, Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Ave. Tickets are sold out; watch a livestream at [inprinthouston.org](http://inprinthouston.org).

that she vows revenge — and, in fact, when Agamemnon returns from war, she's waiting with a knife to slit her husband's throat.

"I would be waiting for him, all smiles," she says. "The gurgling sound he

would make when I cut his throat became an obsession."

Clytemnestra turns her anger into a cool resolve, taking palace prisoner Aegisthus as her lover and co-conspirator. Her remaining children, daughter Electra and son Orestes, soon learn that her anger is not merely righteous; she is not to be trusted.

Tóibín presents the story from alternating viewpoints: When Clytemnestra is quiet, we learn the story of Orestes, who is kidnapped and taken from the palace to live in exile. We then hear from Electra, who plots her own course with the grim knowledge that her mother and Aegisthus are her enemies.

"I should have had her join me in my rage," Clytemnestra reflects later. "Instead, I left her free to have her own rage, much of it now directed against me."

The design of this web is both clean and complicated; the only certain knowledge is that no one in the family should get too comfortable or certain. One begins to think that Iphigenia, who died quickly after merely one betrayal, might have had it easy.

"The mother thinks she's powerful," Tóibín said of his

Clytemnestra. "The mother thinks she's the one who is running things around here — without realizing that, in fact, her daughter is strategic and her son will do anything. That's a lethal combination."

The story may be ancient, but Tóibín was inspired to write "House of Names" by events of the 21st century. Civil war in Syria, Libya and elsewhere — not to mention the ever-roiling Israeli-Palestinian conflict — has made him think about "the idea of violence as a spiral," an unending cycle in which each deadly act is retaliation for something else.

"If I'd been writing this novel in the aftermath of the second World War, I think it would be a different book," he said. But today, in spots around the world, he sees that ancient rhythm of spite and revenge that never ceases.

"It's very much a novel of civil war," Tóibín said. "It doesn't deal with the Trojan War. It deals with the intimate business of what happened at home, when they started to murder each other."

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Robert Wuensche photo illustration / Houston Chronicle

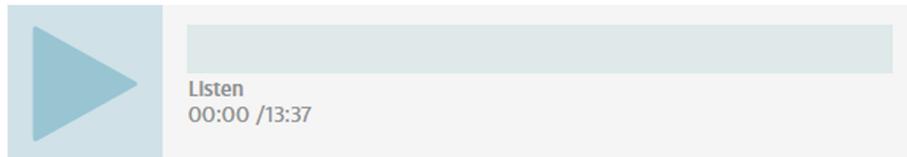
LITERATURE

## Inprint Author Interview: Colm Toibin

The award-winning Irish author talks about his latest novel, 'House of Names,' based on the Greek story of Clytemnestra, Agamemnon and their children Iphigenia, Electra and Orestes.

EDEL HOWLIN | MAY 1, 2017, 4:27 PM

Share



Award-winning Irish author [Colm Toibin](#) is probably best known for his novel [Brooklyn](#). It's a story about an Irish girl who emigrates to New York and it was turned into a movie, last year, starring [Saoirse Ronan](#).

Toibin's latest novel [House of Names](#) is quite the departure from [Brooklyn](#) and his last few stories centered around Ireland. [House of Names](#) retells the mythical Greek story of [Clytemnestra](#), [Agamemnon](#) and their children [Iphigenia](#), [Electra](#) and [Orestes](#). King Agamemnon, desperate for the wind to change so he can sail into battle sacrifices his oldest daughter, Iphigenia. His wife, Clytemnestra, spends years plotting her revenge in the form of Agamemnon's death. In turn Orestes, in cahoots with his sister Electra, then murders their mother, Clytemnestra. This dark tale is Toibin's 11<sup>th</sup> novel and fills in the gaps left by other, older, versions of this story told from Electra's and Orestes perspectives.



Phoebe Ling  
Colm Tóibín

In the interview above, he talks about why he jumped from rural Ireland to ancient Greece.

Colm Toibin reads from [House of Names](#) at the next [Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series](#) on Monday May 8, 2017.

There were also some miscellaneous questions that we asked Mr. Toibin, starting with what he gets out of teaching at places like UT Austin, Stanford, Princeton and currently, at the University of Columbia.

 [Listen](#)  
00:00 / 00:49

Toibin's work spans form and genre – we asked if he had to choose only one for the rest of his career, what would it be?

 [Listen](#)  
00:00 / 00:43

A question from listener Dennis, a local author from the Heights, was what ties the characters of Henry James from Toibin's book *The Master*, Eilis, the Irish emigrant girl in *Brooklyn* and the story of Clytemnestra in *House of Names* together?

 [Listen](#)  
00:00 / 00:15

And finally, we had to ask, in *Brooklyn*, why did the character of Eilis return to New York and not stay at home in Ireland after she returned for her sister's funeral?

 [Listen](#)  
00:00 / 01:13

*This interview will also air in an edited version on [Houston Matters](#) on May 5, 2017.*



**Edel Howlin**

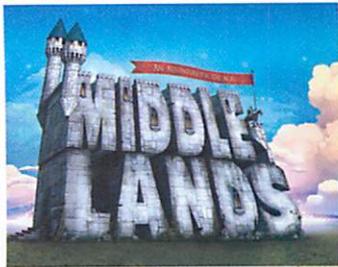
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, SPECIAL PROJECTS



Edel is an executive producer of special projects working on station-wide, multi-platform initiatives such as [DiverseCity](#). At Houston Public Media, Edel started as a reporter covering veteran issues and the quirkiest side of life in Houston. Before her time in public radio she worked for local commercial station Cox as an on...

[More Information](#)

# MAY H-TOWN PICKS



**MUSIC**  
**Middlelands**

The buzzy new festival takes over the Ren Fest fairgrounds at Todd Mission for three days of alternative music—12th Planet, Bassnectar, AC Slater (no, not that one)—medieval-themed rides, art installations and camping. *May 5–7. From \$98. 21778 FM 1774, Todd Mission. middlelands.com*



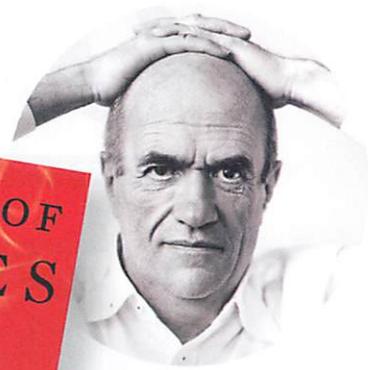
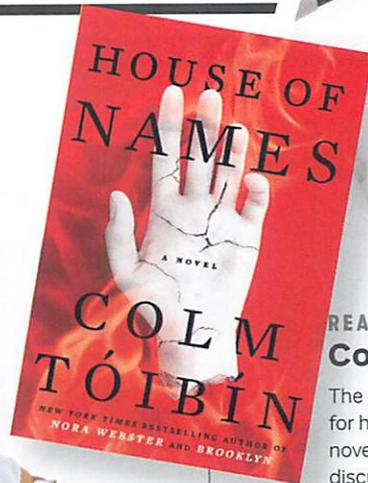
**COMEDY**  
**Chris Rock**

In November, the comedian, who's never been shy about calling the country out, joined *SNL* host Dave Chappelle to roast Americans shocked by President Trump's surprise win. "Get some rest," the former cast member said in the skit, addressing a group of astonished election-night partygoers. "You got a big day of moping and writing on Facebook tomorrow." Expect more where that came from when, after a decade-long hiatus from the road, Rock stops through Sugar Land on his Total Blackout Tour. *May 13 at 7. From \$49.50. Smart Financial Centre, 18111 Lexington Blvd., Sugar Land. 281-207-6278. smartfinancialcentre.net*



**FESTIVAL**  
**Galveston Island Beach Revue**

Vintage swimsuits and parasols abound at this beloved throwback festival, which reemerged in 2009 after a 77-year hiatus. The weekend brings the retro-inspired Bathing Beauties Contest, plus a full roster of performers, headlined by NYC jazz musician Dandy Wellington. *Free. May 19–21. Beach Central, 2102 Seawall Blvd. galvestonbeachrevue.com*



**READING**  
**Colm Tóibín**

The celebrated Irish author, known for his critically acclaimed 2009 novel *Brooklyn*, reads from and discusses new tome *House of Names*, which retells the ancient Greek tale of Clytemnestra, who kills her husband Agamemnon to avenge their daughter's death. *May 8 at 7:30. \$5. Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series at the Alley Theatre, 615 Texas Ave. 713-521-2026. inprinhouston.org*

**DANCE**  
**The Tempest**

Commemorating the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death, Houston Ballet performs the American premiere of visiting choreographer and Birmingham Royal Ballet director Davis Bintley's ethereal production, based on the Bard's beloved tragicomedy. *From \$25. May 25–June 4. Wortham Center, 501 Texas Ave. 713-227-2787. houstonballet.org*



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