HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SEASON
Annie Proulx
Inprint
Margarett Root Brown
Reading Series
2016/2017

September 19, 2016
Jonathan Safran Foer

October 17, 2016
Lauren Groff + Ann Patchett

November 21, 2016
Rabih Alameddine + Juan Gabriel Vásquez

January 23, 2017
Annie Proulx

April 3, 2017
Ada Limón + Gregory Pardlo

March 6, 2017
George Saunders

May 8, 2017
Colm Tóibín

Readings on Mondays at 7:30 pm
For tickets, locations & details
inprinthoustan.org
How Houston Cultivated One of America's Most Vital Book Scenes

By Steven Petite
December 13, 2016

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.
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.

More From Playboy.com:

Feel the Heat with Ruthie Hanan
Lazy days in hammocks, and by the swimming pool, and just lying around: Model...

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, prepare...
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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A heavy, heady mix of literary voices

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

YES, 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 love and loss, 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 Latinx. 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 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 is 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 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 66-year-old political cartoonist who’s being honored for his impressive career when a young woman appears and throws everything into question.

JAN. 28: 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 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.

alyswnard@chron.com
twitter.com/alyswnard
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.

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.

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.

APRIL
1 TeenBookCon: Conference for teen readers and young-adult authors. Alief Taylor High School.

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
6 Colm Tóibín: The author of “Nora Webster” and “Brooklyn” will read from his new novel, “House of Names.” Presented by Inprint. Alley Theatre.
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cool brains!
INPRINT READINGS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

presenting the nation's top middle grade writers to families

2016/2017 Readings

Nathan Hale
September 18, 2016

Tim Green
January 29, 2017

Dianne K. Salerni
April 23, 2017

Meyerland Performing and Visual Arts Middle School
10410 Manhattan

Sundays, 3 pm, free
inprinthouston.org
LITERARY ARTS

Word Counts in Houston

We 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 everyone, 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 master's 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

For tickets, locations & details
inprinthouston.org

LITERARY

AUGUST

August 27
Introduction to Personal Essay and Memoir
with Mark Dostert
Writespace
713-516-5679 | writespacehouston.org/creative-writing

August 30
Book Discussion: The Storyteller, by Jodi Picoult
Holocaust Museum Houston
713-942-8000 | hmh.org

SEPTEMBER

September 2
Gary Rosin
First Friday Reading Series
Inprint House | inprinthouston.org

September 15-24
Scriptwriters/Houston's 26th Annual 10x10
Showcase
Scriptwriters/Houston
Pearl Theater
713-569-3487 | scriptwriters-houston.org

September 17
An Evening with Mark Russell, Politically Incorrect
The Grand 1894 Opera House
Galveston
800-621-1894 | thegrand.com

September 19
Jonathan Safran Foer, Everything Is Illuminated, Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close and Here I Am
Inprint Margaret Root Brown Reading Series
Wortham Theater Center
713-521-2026 | inprinthouston.org

OCTOBER

October 5
Jan Jarboe Russell, The Train to Crystal City
Holocaust Museum Houston
713-527-1602 | hmh.org

October 6
2016 Mitchell Artist Lecture with Tania Bru- gueru
Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Arts
Moores Opera House
713-743-7008 | mitchellcenterforarts.org

OCTOBER 7-9
Houston Poetry Fest 2016
Houston Poetry Fest
Willow Street Pump Station
houstonpoetryfest.info

NOVEMBER

November 3-4
The Wonder of Fabergé: A Study of the McFerrin Collection
Houston Museum of Natural Science
713-689-4639 | hmns.org

November 4
Michael Lieberman
First Friday Reading Series
Inprint House
inprinthouston.org

November 13
Andrew Torge, Seeds of Empire: Cotton, Slavery, and the Transformation of the Texas Borderlands, 1800-1850
Galveston Historical Foundation
Galveston
409-765-7834 | galvestonhistory.org/events/harbor-city-ambition

DECEMBER

December 2
12th Annual Signatures Author Series, Cheryl
BOOK EVENTS

**Tuesday**

**Mac Barnett** will discuss and sign his "Ghost of Heracles: 12 Labors, 12 Monsters, 12 Misadventures," 7 p.m., Brazos Books, 2324 Bissonnet; 713-862-8000 or 862-4620 or at brazosbooks.com.

**Wednesday**

**Andrew Lyon**

Jonathan Safran Foer’s first novel in a decade starts out as an exercise in upper-middle-class tidiness. But it evolves into a soulful search to find the meaning in life and a faith that no longer takes for granted. "Everything is Illuminated" and "Ex- hibitionist," the late author’s first two novels, "will be an Houston on her love life. "Let Me Tell You," which part of Marguerite Duras’ "The Lovers," With "Here I Am," out Tuesday, is a family’s exploration of what it means to Be a Jew in America today — and whether it should even feel that way. Lyon, a tied-up family drama — a suffering marriage, a dying graying person, and an old dog lugging that it feels like they’re under the ground shakes and the political becomes personal.

Jacob and Julia Fisch, Jewish brother and sister, are raising their three sons in Washington D.C., Jacob a model lawyer who writes for the New York Times; Julia an advertising executive. Their sons are in terrible trouble and Julia makes friends with Jacob and their sons. The book's title comes from a family friend who, something is worthwhile for his family, and his novel, and his story makes to the crisis makes everywhere. "Here, then, for him, without every God needs or wants, Abraham is a whole present for him without conditions or reservations or need for explanation.

But God has asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, and when Isaac calls out for his father, the name of the book. "Here I Am." the character he is wholly present for his sons. "Here" Sam wonders, "can Abraham two directly opposing things at once?"

The novel is full of such contradictions. To what end and what? What is important and what? Are the Fisch’s more Jewish than America? Sam concludes that "Here I Am" is not a novel that emphasizes "who's more than who’s less," and now, he thought that if the string has been cut, or at least the whole world, they might actually feel their importance. He says that how the string is cut, or at least the whole world, they might actually feel their importance.

"Here I Am" is part of a series of novels Foer, "There’s a whole world of vanishing things. There’s a whole world of things that have been shamed, shamed have become resignation, have become resentment, rose. Self-protection. Julia is often thought that if the string has been cut, or at least the whole world, they might actually feel their importance. He says that how the string is cut, or at least the whole world, they might actually feel their importance. He says that how the string is cut, or at least the whole world, they might actually feel their importance.

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**Thursday**

**Alyson Ward**

Sam, preparing for his bar mitzvah, crystallizes the fates of three men, all older than he is and struggling with what it means to come home. In a terminology that paraphrases the rabbinic notion of meaning, "Here I Am," almost human and dyslexic, asks the question: "What does he mean to his family, and his story makes to the crisis makes everywhere. "Here, then, for him, without every God needs or wants, Abraham is a whole present for him without conditions or reservations or need for explanation.

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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
Back-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](http://www.papercitymag.com/arts/biggest-arts-bargain-houston-inpr...).

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.
SPEAKER SERIES

JERRY AND MARY 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

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

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

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 Rock Brown Reading Series. Tickets $5. 7:30 pm. Wortham Center, 501 Texas. 713.521.2026. inprinthouston.org
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 mentions how much she enjoyed them around, asking for opinions.

“I cared to profoundly what my family thought about this book,” she said in recent interviews.

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 the piece of fiction really is.

Since “Commonwealth” was released in September, “There are stories that I’ve heard from people in my family that have surprised me,” she says. “I think the only disclaimer I have to make is that my family is not perfect. We’re all very different, and we all have our own, different stories.”

But she’s also considering their life together, especially how their life together shapes their work as authors.

“This will be an opportunity for me to hear about the book’s real-life parallels, and to see how they’ve affected me and hopefully affected my work,” Patchett said.

“Since “Commonwealth” was published last month, she has been upfront about the book’s real-life parallels.

“I’ve sat up at night and I’ve thought about this book a lot,” she says. “We’ve been discussing it a lot, and I’ve been trying to think about it.”

But she’s also considering how the book’s real-life parallels affect her as an author.

“I think that subconsciously, that’s what I keep untying and unpacking, the idea that there are stories that are important to me and that I’m writing about them,” she says.

Patchett’s new novel, “Commonwealth,” is a novel about a family of step-siblings, strangers who are thrown together by divorce and remarriage.

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 me for a Lauren Groff novel for anybody else,” Patchett says. “She’s got a really singular voice.”

The two writers know each other, Patchett says, they started corresponding because Groff once worked at Patchett’s independent bookstore, Parnassus, which opened Nashville’s Parnassus Books in 2011, has become an outspoken booster of independent bookstores.

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

On Monday, Patchett will be the speaker at Inprint’s Margaret Root Brown Reading Series, 7:30 p.m. Monday, Alley Theatre, 615 St. Louis Ave.; inprint.org.

Tickets are sold out, but Inprint and Houston Public Media will live-stream the reading at inprintatutor.org.

Author retells story of family

Author from page D5

DEAR ABBY: Husband wants to send message by not voting. PAGE D5

One prep pill a day is
92% EFFECTIVE AT PREVENTING HIV.
One pill. Once a day. PreP now. Prevent HIV.

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

THE YOU DOCS

SCIENCE

During freshman year, Katy biology student discovers new virus.

Page D3

BOOKS

NOVELIST PATCHETT’S LATEST NOVEL IS UPFRONT ABOUT THE BOOK'S REAL-LIFE PARALLELS, AND HOW THEY’VE AFFECTED HER AND HER FAMILY. SHE’LL SHARE THE STAGE WITH AUTHOR LAUREN GROFF. THE TWO WRITERS KNOW EACH OTHER, AND SHE SAYS THEY BEGAN CORRESPONDING BECAUSE OF GROFF’S WORK AT PATCHETT’S INDEPENDENT BOOKSTORE, PARNASSE.

Mon, October 17, 2016

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

THE YOU DOCS

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

By Alyson Ward

As she worked on her latest novel, Ann Patchett consulted members of her family every step of the way. She mentions how much she enjoyed them around, asking for opinions.

“I cared to profoundly what my family thought about this book,” she said in recent interviews.

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 the piece of fiction really is.

Since “Commonwealth” was released in September, “There are stories that I’ve heard from people in my family that have surprised me,” she says. “I think the only disclaimer I have to make is that my family is not perfect. We’re all very different, and we all have our own, different stories.”

But she’s also considering their life together, especially how their life together shapes their work as authors.

“This will be an opportunity for me to hear about the book’s real-life parallels, and to see how they’ve affected me and hopefully affected my work,” Patchett said.

“Since “Commonwealth” was published last month, she has been upfront about the book’s real-life parallels.

“I’ve sat up at night and I’ve thought about this book a lot,” she says. “We’ve been discussing it a lot, and I’ve been trying to think about it.”

But she’s also considering how the book’s real-life parallels affect her as an author.

“I think that subconsciously, that’s what I keep untying and unpacking, the idea that there are stories that are important to me and that I’m writing about them,” she says.

Patchett’s new novel, “Commonwealth,” is a novel about a family of step-siblings, strangers who are thrown together by divorce and remarriage.

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 me for a Lauren Groff novel for anybody else,” Patchett says. “She’s got a really singular voice.”

The two writers know each other, Patchett says, they started corresponding because Groff once worked at Patchett’s independent bookstore, Parnassus, which opened Nashville’s Parnassus Books in 2011, has become an outspoken booster of independent bookstores.

“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 prefer a world in which we never have to leave the house — and then we realized we wanted to leave the house,” she said.

“Tin doing author events with people right at Parnassus, and what I realized over time 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 bestselling 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 publisher 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 not to 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 IMPRINT MARGARET ROOT BROWN READING SERIES on Oct 17 at Alley Theatre, along with bestselling Fates and Furies author Lauren Groff. inprinthouston.org
With help from Satan and the saints, man sorts through AIDS losses

By Michael Magnes

The twin real and early ‘80s 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 gloves on live television to raise awareness of AIDS, but, more tellingly, wore such a Randy Shilts’s book “And the Band Played On” and Tom Atwood’s “This War in America” chronicle the effects of the disease and the government inaction that allowed it to spread. They are useful refer- ences for people who either don’t know about America’s AIDS epidemic or have put it out of memory.

Jachim with Yemeni poet who is the protagonist of the latest in a string of Nobel Prize novel, “The Angel of History,” remarks on her well. Over six months in ‘90s, Jacob, a San Francisco resident, looks after Jacob whenever he checks himself into a psychiatric clinic in an attempt to cope with his crisis. Satan conducts Jacob’s help, he cuts his foot from a form of chorea. When Doc Greg can’t stop shaking from his unwed mother, a “short chapter ends, as does the novel.” The Angel of History’

Author appearance

Stahl Alameddine will read to inaugurate this fall as part of Imprint’s Margaret Root-Brown reading series. We’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 imprintshop.org.

THE ANGEL OF HISTORY

By Ralph Alameddine

Atlantic Monthly Press; 352 pp.; $26

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 shader the book from BlueWillow Bookstore.com.

FRIDAY

Dan Slater: Author will discuss and sign “South of Crazy: A Memoir,” Tuesday, 3:30-5 p.m., Murder By the Book, 2421 Bissonnet; or toll free 800-152-2643 Jr.

UNIVERSITY BOOKS

Susan Elia MacNeal: Author will discuss and sign “Queen’s Accomplice,” Monday, 7 p.m., Brazos Bookstore.

WEDNESDAY

Robert Munsch illustration / Houston Chronicle / Ljubica

TUESDAY

Robert Munsch illustration / Houston Chronicle / Ljubica

TUESDAY

By Rabih Alameddine

in Houston this fall as part of the Noir connoisseur and an American drone strike in Yemen. As you can tell from the novel, ‘The Angel of History’ is a rollicking comedy: That’s an unnecessary woman”

Published by aS an Francisco resident, lost and five other friends to AIDS. Celebrities sported red grosgrain lapel ribbons to raise awareness of AIDS, but, more tellingly, wore such a Randy Shilts’s book “And the Band Played On” and Tom Atwood’s “This War in America” chronicle the effects of the disease and the government inaction 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.

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By Alyson Ward

Javier Mallarino is a cartoonist, author, and journalist from Colombia who has lived in Spain, France, and Italy. His work has been recognized with several awards, including the National Prize for Cartooning in Spain and the Special Jury Prize at the World Press Congress in Madrid. He is known for his sharp political cartoons and his critical view of political and social issues.

By Louise Penny. An academic’s murder is solved—without giving away the heart of the story.

Fiction

5. The Woman in Cabin 10: By Ruth Ware. This psychological thriller involves a woman who wakes up on a cruise ship to find her husband dead, and she must try to figure out what happened.


7. Hidden Figures: By Margot Lee Shetterly. The story of four black women mathematicians who helped launch America’s first astronauts into space.

8. Between the World and Me: By Ta-Nehisi Coates. A letter to the author’s son, born into a world where blackness is so often seen as a threat.


10. The Pigeon Tunnel: By John Le Carre. A spy’s memoir that takes readers behind the scenes of the intelligence community.

Best-Sellers

Wobbling on the unsteady platform of public opinion

By Alyson Ward

Some people say Javier Mallarino is a brilliant journalist; others say he is a public enemy number one. He is both. Mallarino’s cartoons in Colombia have the power to “rattle” the powerful, and he has earned the nickname “The Cartoonist of the Suggage.”

By Louise Penny.

In the story of what happened that day—a story neither of them fully knows—it is crucial of both of them remaining calm, without giving away the heart of the story.

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Nonfiction

By J.D. Robb. In this collection of short stories, the author explores the lives of detectives and their relationships, set against the backdrop of New York City.

By Armando Gamarra, the retired bombshell of the Department of Justice, and by one of the cadets favored by New York City's finest.

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**HONORS**

**NONFICTION**

**Stampede From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America** By Leon Y. Kendi, a historian, examines how black, racist ideas have developed, spread and impacted American history. These beliefs didn’t bubble up in history from the bottom, the says. Rather, they were invented (and perpetuated) by some of the brightest, most influential leaders in history. Kendi argues that we’re still living in a post-racial society at all — that racist myths and beliefs are still strong and infringing on us today.

**POETRY**

**The Performance of Becoming Human** By Daniel Borzutzky Borzutzky’s poems delves into the populations of Sierra and Chile, two places he knows well. Borzutzky’s most recent collection, From My Neck I Bare, is a testament to his work as a journalist and poet, and his commitment to shining a light on the pressing issues of our time.

**The Chemist**

By Stephenie Meyer

This is the third book in the Underworld Railway series, and it features all of the elements of the genre: a taut plot, plenty of action, and features a protagonist who has a superpower.

**At the edges of the world.**

**Fiction**

**Twilight**

By Keith Donohue

This is the next book in the Underworld Railway series, and it follows the adventures of Cora, a son of a Georgia congressman, who gets caught up in a series of events that will change his life forever.

**Nonfiction**

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This is the definitive history of racist ideas in America, and it examines how these ideas have developed, spread, and impacted American society. Kendi argues that we’re still living in a post-racial society at all — that racist myths and beliefs are still strong and infringing on us today.

**National Book Award winners deal with race and politics**

By Alyson Ward

The National Book Awards have been around for over 70 years, and they’ve become a highlight of the literary world. This year’s winners are no exception, and they deal with themes of race and politics.

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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 bizarro 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 caricaturize a politician who caricatures himself.
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 falliblility.

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 question, 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 Margarett Root Brown Reading Series.
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 Margarett Root Brown Reading Series, 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.

“No 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._

Wortham Theater Center
Aboard the bus
Cinematographer Elmo Mascon helps ‘Paterson’ director put poetry in motion

By Andrew Dansby

For 40 years, Frederick Elmas has taken jobs that might strike other cinematographers as needlessly complicated. “Case in point,” he says. “I was just hired to do Paterson, Jim Jarmusch’s new “Paterson.” The story isn’t about that much, it’s about a poet. So I told him ‘I can’t do that, it’s just about a poet.’ And he said ‘You’re hired.’”

Elmas found the barely perceptible differences in the things he can write poetry about — such as the color of the sky, the raindrops, the clouds. “The falls look different. The amount of sunlight, the clouds. The light, the clouds. The light looks very different on a cloudy day than they do on a sunny day.”

Elmas has worked with Jarmusch for “Night on Earth,” “Wild at Heart,” and “Boarding House.” He joined Jarmusch for “The Dead” and “The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou.”

Elmas explains that the scenes about the everyday life of Jim, Paterson, the poet, is a creature of routine. He drives the same bus every day, he has the same walk home. It allows him to look for little triggers that allowed him to put poetry in motion. “That was the wonderful part of it; you don’t waste inspiration that wasn’t there yesterday. Finding those little triggers allowed him to write a whole challenge but a rewarding one.”

So Elmas helped Jarmusch find the barely perceptible differences in routine. Paterson spends his hands eating by the same waterfall. That was the wonderful part of it; you don’t waste inspiration that wasn’t there yesterday.

At the American Film Institute, he met an aspiring filmmaker, who enlisted him to shoot an experimental film called “Ennui.” Though unfinished, on its initial release, David Lynch’s film became a cult classic.

Elmas was in Houston in November at the Cinema Arts Festival for a 20th anniversary screening of the film. He worked on subsequent Lynch films including “Blue Velvet” and “Wild at Heart.” Follow this film, “Wild at Heart,” he joined Jarmusch for “Night for Earth,” released in 1991.

“Barkskins’”

By Annie Proulx

“‘Barkskins’”

Annie Proulx on writing

‘Everything springs from place, ‘Brokeback Mountain’ author says

By Doni M. Wilson

All day I have been watching Shakespeare’s King Lear, which is not exactly freshnews. You are not supposed to call it “fresh.” Not to an audience anymore. You are supposed to call it “new” because it’s new.

In any case, some of them are naked.

For some, the language is daunting by contemporary standards. Rest easy, there are long passages, so many passages in long words. Shakespeare has endowed us with a voice, a narrator who can recount in a voice that the bent back of the often elderly chronicler. He can hear the words. He can hear the voice of the narrator.

Shakespeare is realer than one’s own life. You cannot escape where you were born and raised. The context, the country, the time, the language. Everything starts with history, it is a group of artisans and actors. You have the reflection of a director and cinematography and the quality writing. You have the reflection of a director and cinematography. You have the reflection of a director and cinematography. You have the reflection of a director and cinematography.

Annie Proulx

When Rich Levy, executive director, introduced Proulx, he said, “Let’s hear what Annie has to say.”

Proulx reminded us that in 1997, when her story began, there were only 600 million people populating the world. Now there are over 7 billion. It has changed her perspective, that when an artist is uttering it, you take mental souvenirs with you. You take mental souvenirs with you. You take mental souvenirs with you.

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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.

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.

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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...
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

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

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

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

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 unthinkably lean engineering project that challenged convention. The book, The Eighth Wonder of the World, tells the story of the Astrodome and its 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. 713.522.0155. architecturecenterhouston.org

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 Root Brown Reading Series, followed by an on-stage interview, book sale and signing. Tickets $5. 7:30 pm. Alley Theatre, 615 Texas. 713.521.2527. inprinthouston.org

HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY QUARTERLY AUTHOR SERIES PRESENTS: TERRY MCMILLAN AT THE ALLEY THEATRE
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 fingerling, the kind words whispered directly into the ear?” says one. “My God! My God!”

“It was so lovingly, so fondly, as if one were still…”

“ ‘To be touched so lovingly, so fondly, if as one were still’ …”

“ ‘It was so tender, 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 plot, 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 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 maternal blooming 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.

Alyson Ward	alyson.ward@chron.com	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; inprintonline.org. Tickets are sold out, but Inprint and Houston Public Media will live-stream the reading at inprintonline.org.
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. buffalobayou.org

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 wilt digital flowers as it senses visitors’ movements.

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

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. inprinthouston.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
Poet ‘The T in these poems is ME’
Ada Limón shares stage with Gregory Pardlo at Inprint reading
By Alyson Ward

It was sort of entering into a different kind of contract with the reader. “I have, I fully, on the page for you,” Limón said, of her collection. “I have to intimately stage with a work, to talk to them, to try to bring the reader to believe in God.” “Maundy,” she said, “I liked so much to talk to someone in the dark.”

Poems that address the death of her stepmother offer intimate, painful details. “Sometimes I would have dreams that she was still alive, and I couldn’t find enough wadcloths to help her,” she said, to the “flower, the shell, the fine, mud-up, soul-stick.” Praying, “Remember the Carrots,” Limón recalls going out of her home, when she ripped the carrot top out, “killing the whole crew. I loved them, my own bright dead things.”

As an adult, she writes more often about “agree-able,” but she wonders, “Why must we practice the page, Limón said, of her new book, “by the way.”

At first, Limón said, the graduate looks at the page, Limón said, of her new book, “by the way.”

“’Bright Dead Things’ will remain,” Limón said of her new book, “by the way.”

“I want to tell the world that my poems are real,” Limón said of her new book, “by the way.”

By the former president. Nonfiction

The Benedict Option: By the

1. Lincoln in the Bardo: By George Saunders. Vi-ta’s grace of this massive young adult begins the year. “I was the only member of the intangible full of ghost.”


3. In This Grave Hour: By Jacqueline Winthrop. St. Louis University’s student and investigative Masse Dobbs to the world of 1925.

4. Ex WifE: By Dara Birnbaum. The 39-year-old divorcee. “It was sort of entering into a different kind of contract with the reader.”


6. The Benedict Option: By the

7. The Book of Joy: By the

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8. When Breath Becomes Air: By Paul Kalanithi. A neurosurgeon who is diagnosed with cancer.

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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

“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.
“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 Lyngso’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.

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...
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 3rd at 7:30pm with Ada Limón as part of Inprint’s Margaret Root Brown Reading Series.
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, who 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.

Iphigenia dies before a chanting crowd, Clytemnestra is filled with rage that she vows revenge — and, in fact, when Agamemnon returns from war, she’s waiting with a knife to slit his husband’s throat.

I would be waiting for him, all smiles,” she says. “The gorging sound he would make when I cut his throat became an obsession.”

Clytemnestra turns her anger into a cool resolve, taking palace prisoner Aegeus 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 Aegeus 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. “She 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-rolling Israeli-Palestinian conflict — has made him think about “the idea of violence as a spelt,” 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.”

alyson.sarat@chron.com

Twitter.com/Alysonward

Robert Warren photo illustration / Houston Chronicle
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

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 11th novel and fills in the gaps left by other, older, versions of this story told from Electra’s and Orestes perspectives.

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

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.

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?

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?

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?

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 quirkier 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 $18. 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 $48.50. Smart Financial Centre, 18111 Lexington Blvd., Sugar Land. 281-207-6788. 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. inprinthouston.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 Brintley'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