

Stunning photos and compassionate storytelling take reader to the mountains of Mustang

East of Lo Monthang in the Land of Mustang
Photography:
Thomas Laird
Writing:
Peter Matthiessen
Shambhala Press

PAT FITZPATRICK
THE BRUNSWICKAN

Having heard of Peter Matthiessen and Thomas Laird prior to receiving a review copy of *East of Lo Monthang*, I had some idea of what to expect, though my knowledge of their subject matter was admittedly rather sketchy.

Matthiessen is a naturalist and explorer of some renown, having received recognition in the United States for a number of works, including a nomination for a National Book Award for *The Snow Leopard*.

Thomas Laird's name may be less

familiar to many, but a cursory examination of previous *National Geographic* and *Time* issues on any number of Asian topics will unearth a host of his images. Although principally known for his photography, Laird is also a writer and ethnographer of note, having lived in Nepal for over 20 years and also having been the first Westerner to enter Mustang when it was re-opened to the world in 1991. He was also the only foreign correspondent to cover the "Nepali People's Movement" of 1990.

Before leafing hesitantly through this book, my interest in Nepal was scant at best. As for Lo Monthang, my interest was "less than zero" — simply put, I had never even heard of it. So before tackling *East of Lo Monthang*, I decided to turn to the staples — *National Geographic* provided the primer, while the library filled in a few gaps. Thus prepared with some idea of what Nepal is all about, I decided that I might tackle Matthiessen & Laird's work.

It's strange, really. I've never been to Asia, never set foot in Nepal, and yet I have the most vivid mental picture of the people and land from the flowing

prose and spectacularly rich images Matthiessen and Laird have produced.

Matthiessen and Laird's book is certainly not one of contemporary social or political history, eschewing the latter while progressing beyond the former into a highly personal portrait of a land long-closed to Western eyes.

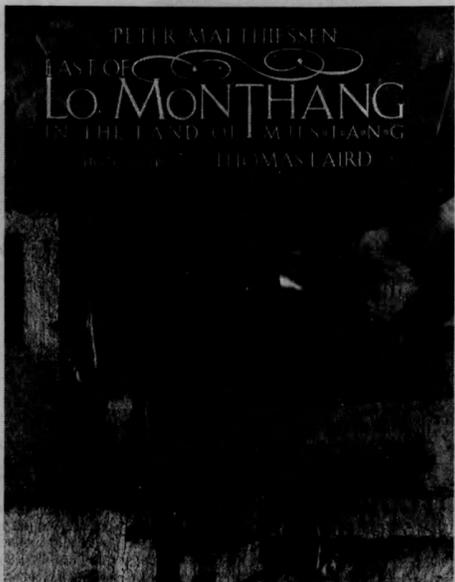
The *Mustang* of the title is the British misnomer for Lo Monthang, the central city of the secretive Sao Kohla valley in the Northernmost stretches of the Himalayas. It is a land of arid plateaus and narrow river valleys plunging thousands of feet to the river below. Against this raw natural backdrop, Matthiessen and Laird seek to present an accurate portrait of the cultural and religious life of the people who populate the hills, valleys and mountain monasteries which dot the countryside.

Through the course of *Mustang*, Laird and Matthiessen recount their horseback visits with nomadic herders protecting their flocks from snow leopards; with sages and monks in hilltop Buddhist temples, shrines and monasteries; with the inhabitants of ancient walled villages struggling with

the infusion of new technologies into their most ancient culture.

Matthiessen's prose is elegant, if at times slightly torturous to wade through. Whatever minor flaws one may identify in his writing are, however, of secondary importance to the beautifully drawn overall picture which emerges from his work. As for Laird's contributions, the photographs are simply fantastic. Employing mostly 35mm systems and slide film, Laird has produced stunningly elegant images ranging from the visually complex to the simplistically understated, with rich, eye-popping colour and fantastic sharpness throughout. This is especially surprising when one takes into consideration the technical and weight restrictions imposed upon them by the nature of their journey.

Overall, *Mustang* is highly recommended to anyone with an interest in Nepal, ethnography or travel journalism / photography. While it barely breaks the surface of the political undercurrents in Nepal, it nevertheless presents a stunning and compelling portrait of a people long-isolated from prying Western eyes.



Book offers insight into "New American Revolution"

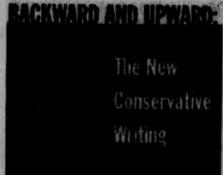
Backward and Upward: The New Conservative Writing
Edited by David Brooks
Vintage Books

JOSEPH FITZPATRICK
THE BRUNSWICKAN

This anthology proves to me that much of debate between liberals and conservatives is almost entirely a reaction to each other. Us fence-sitting types have the advantage of watching these two (who are by no means easily identifiable) wage a war of wits on editorial pages, radio shows and "news commentaries" throughout the media.

I always enjoy anthologies of criticism. It allows for a sampling of many of the people who are writing in a field. Chosen, of course, by the editor or the publisher, but, nonetheless, it would be difficult to so effectively encompass as much of the conservative writings in one book, as this one has.

It also gives a crash course in the canon of conservative values, many of which boil down to P.J. O'Rourke's, "all we have is the belief that people should do what people want to do, unless it causes harm to other people. And that had better be clear and provable harm. No nonsense about secondhand smoke



or hurtful, insensitive language, please." O'Rourke has the advantage of being interesting to quote. But he is by no means the reason this anthology has held me rapt for so long.

The book is quite an enjoyable read. O'Rourke contributes a bit of humor, and Andrew Ferguson does a real number on the "men's" seminar he attended. Of course, no "new conservative" anthology would be complete without Rush Limbaugh. Odd, though, with Rush selling so many books, I might have thought he would receive some sort of higher billing. When it came to his piece "Voice of

America: Why Liberals Fear Me" I found an answer. Maybe they were hiding him so the "liberals" wouldn't be scared off from reading the book. Not that a conservative book needs liberals to buy them, no. But sales are sales.

No Rush on the front cover. There, you find Noonan, Helprin, Buckley and an endorsement by William J. Bennett, who happens to have contributed to the work he lauds. Oh, well.

Then there's the content. But, the content doesn't really matter so much as the opportunity to get acquainted with the "dark" side of politics. It is the underbelly of society, some would have you believe. But if the book could teach anything, it is that the people represented here are like most people, they want what's best for themselves and their family. In a world which tells everybody to succeed, they see a contradiction in the demonisation of those who could. This book may challenge some of your own assertions, but that's always a good thing. Better to know thy enemy than to be surprised by their attacks.

And now some caveats: this is a book of rhetoric, American rhetoric. It covers three generations of conservatives and it addresses a variety of topics, from cars to abortion to Vietnam. To me, these attributes make it a much better book. At least for the purpose I was reading it, which was to learn about this "new American revolution."

Fiction novel set in ancient times communicates timeless lessons for life

An Imaginary Life
by David Malouf
Vintage Books

CAM MACLEOD
THE BRUNSWICKAN

I began reading David Malouf's *An Imaginary Life* with some trepidation. After all, on the front cover there is a quote from a review in the *Wall Street Journal*. I've never pictured myself sharing reading interests with that particular publication. However, now that I've read the book, I can say that I loved it.

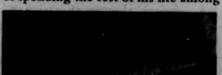
David Malouf, who also wrote the acclaimed *Remembering Babylon*, is an author of both fiction and poetry. He creates a dazzling world in *An Imaginary Life* that sucks the reader in.

I read the first chapter one day, and the rest of the book the next — much like a thriller or mystery, this book is one you can not put down, even at 3 AM!

The idea behind the novel comes from one obscure fact: in the first century AD, Publius Ovidius Naso, an unimportant and irrelevant poet of Imperial Rome, was banished to a remote village on the edge of the Black Sea, never to return. In those

days, this was equivalent to being banished from the Earth itself, as further beyond lay only unknown, barbarian-inhabited areas.

Ovid is at first repelled by the idea of spending the rest of his life among



mere savages, with whom he shares no language or skills. He depends entirely on their kindness, and is forced to confront his own feelings and attitudes about their conversing with spirits he has no belief in, or their impaling of the dead in a chillingly-described grave site.

When a young boy is found on the hunt, evidently a lost child surviving by his wits in the open forest, Ovid takes him in, caring for him and trying to teach about the society within which he once lived. Malouf's incredible journey, both mental and emotional, through the experiences of Ovid and the child, is touching and heart-warming.

The descriptions of the living arrangements, the conversations in which Ovid cannot take part and the people around him are vivid, detailed, and entirely believable. I find myself paying more attention to the world around me, and seeing his visions in it, in all the things that have happened to this world in the thousands of years since the setting of *An Imaginary Life*.

I would recommend this book to anyone who sees around us a distancing from nature, and who might like to see it up close again in their mind. Or to anyone who sees nature around us already, or who wants to read a vivid and engaging novel about the world in a way we rarely think about. And even for someone who likes little books — 153 pages, how can you lose? But I hope (and believe) that at the end of those pages, most readers will feel like they've read a novel of depth and strength.

Free speech and censorship focus of first-hand account

Beyond the Burning Cross: A Landmark Case of Race, Censorship, and the First Amendment
by Edward J. Cleary
Vintage Books

DAMIAN PENNY
THE BRUNSWICKAN

A teenage boy is charged with burning a cross on a black family's lawn. He is charged under a city ordinance prohibiting the display of a symbol he knows would likely arouse anger in others on the basis of their race. He is assigned a court-appointed attorney, who successfully challenges the law as a violation of the First Amendment. That lawyer was Edward J. Cleary, and the case was *R.A.V. v. City of St. Paul*, the story of which Cleary tells in *Beyond the Burning Cross*.

His book is a thought-provoking defence of free speech. It is also an effective portrait of a man forced into defending a client whose beliefs he

despises, all for the greater good of protecting an important constitutional right. A self-proclaimed liberal who abhors the sentiment behind the burning cross, Cleary's point — which the US Supreme Court unanimously accepted — was that the accused could have been punished to greater effect

by existing laws against making terroristic threats. The ordinance at issue, he felt, punished the sentiment behind such racist acts rather than the acts themselves.

The author spends much time discussing such laws and the harm they can do to free discourse in a democratic society. Laws which punish expression just because it is unpopular, he argues, could have been used once to silence groups that have only recently been recognized as worthy of the law's protection, including the Civil Rights Movement itself. The point of the First Amendment was to protect expression condemned by the majority on the basis that the state has no right to make some ideas more legitimate than others. Giving the state that right could undermine freedom itself.

In reviewing this book for a Canadian audience, it must be noted that Canada's constitution does not go to such extremes in protecting unpopular expression; relative to our southern neighbour, this country has been more amenable to the rights of the society as a whole. Because much

of Cleary's argument is based on American jurisprudence, its utility and relevance are limited somewhat for Canadians. Still, much of his argument is compelling and well-argued and deserves to be read by those interested in the debate over society's tolerance for free speech and expression.

The book is also interesting in other ways. Cleary looks at the personalities of each Supreme Court Justice and how he predicted each would react, and goes into great detail about the argument before the court itself. It is a fascinating view of how a judge's individual personality can affect his or her view of the law. As well, there is much discussion of Cleary's search for assistance from groups and individuals in taking the case; spurred by traditional allies like the American Civil Liberties Union, he found himself debating whether or not to accept help from the "Patriot's Defence Foundation," an Atlanta-based group set up to defend the Klan. Ultimately, he accepted their brief on the premise that, in a free speech case, he would have been a hypocrite to refuse it. In a way, that summarizes his whole point.

Honest portrayal of an adolescent's growing pains

Rule of the Bone
by Russell Banks
Vintage Canada

CYNTHIA KIRBY
THE BRUNSWICKAN

Even before I started to read this book I liked it. *Rule of the Bone* has an incredibly touchable cover, and the pages are so soft, the book stays open on its own.

The story is equally wonderful. Bone, a fourteen year old transient, narrates. Even though the author has written twelve works of fiction, which would presumably make him older than his protagonist, the diction is convincing. So is the punctuation: Bone rushes ahead where there would normally be commas, and begins new sentences whenever it's emphatically appropriate. Since Bone doesn't use quotation marks either, it is very easy to imagine you are listening to him.

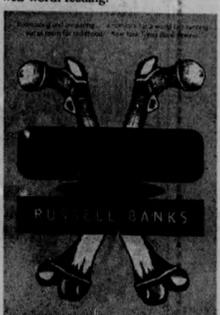
Rule of the Bone is a fascinating listen too. The story begins at Bone's house, where he lives with his mother and stepfather. "[I] was heavy into weed but I didn't have any money to buy it so I started looking around the house all the time for things I could sell but there wasn't much." Eventually he finds some coins, which bring him some money but also result in his leaving home.

Bone (a nickname he adopts 107 pages in) is resourceful, and manages to cope without a steady source of income, without someone to depend on, and without the respect and rights adults get. His travels take him to Jamaica, at which point the novel seems forced for the first time: he sees his father, who he hasn't seen since he was five.

Aside from that, *Rule of the Bone* seems very natural. It is rare to see an adolescent

portrayed so realistically. Bone has a mohawk, earrings and a nose ring. He takes drugs and often sells them, if he needs to. At one point, he lives with a motorcycle gang, but the author gives him far more credit and personality than is normally attributed to someone fitting this characterization. Bone has his own strict moral code. He is insightful and understands his surroundings and adversaries (cops and parents). He also has the clarity to realize that often there's nothing he can do, but he tries when he encounters someone more helpless than he is. Despite an extraordinary self-sufficiency, Bone is still vulnerable when it comes to being loved; this is especially upsetting when his mother chooses his step-father over him.

This is an incredible novel. Despite encountering an abusive step-father, a kiddie-porn maker and his drugged-out protégé, various hitmen and other nasty people, Bone finds role-models and sees good in life. *Rule of the Bone* is realistic and harsh, but inspiring, and certainly well worth reading.



Noted Canadian author/scholar to speak at UNB

Jamie Swift, a noted author and independent scholar will speak next week at UNB. Brought to the University through the cooperation of the UNB Department of Political Science and the STU Department of Economics, Swift is the author of *Wheel of Fortune: Work and Life in the Age of Falling Expectations*.

Swift is highly regarded as having a unique breadth of insight into issues relevant to every person's life. He will give a public lecture entitled, *The Creation of the New Worker in the Age of Falling Expectations*.

Public Lecture: Tuesday, January 28, 1997
Time: 8:00 pm
Location: 303 Tilley Hall

Books Contest Winner!

Congratulations to our contest winner, who responded to the challenge, "Name five innovative reasons to read books." His answers were definitely innovative. He wins four fiction books from various publishers. Look for upcoming contests in future issues.

- 1. In the library, the bathroom graffiti are very dull, and I bring a book to enrich my brief bowel-moving experience.
- 2. For me, reading books serves the same purpose as smoking. The only difference is that a book can be recommended, thus saving a lot of money.
- 3. Before I had a wife, I kept a book in bed, and when I had a wife, I learned that she kept the book as a bed companion.
- 4. I regard reading books as an exercise in design: I cover each one before picking up another.
- 5. I read books so dilute my mind thick with profound ideas. Books keep me alert against indulging in philosophical thinking.

In respect for the fact that this winner wanted to remain anonymous, I'll just say you know who you are. Come to room 45 of the STU to pick up your prize.