ture beyond the academic cloister. In fact, states Lemann, DeLillo’s novel is less a work of good storytelling than is Anthony Lukas’s Common Ground, which won the 1985 American Book Award for nonfiction (and a 1986 Pulitzer Prize). A vivid chronicle of school busing in 1970’s Boston, Common Ground captures the lives of flesh-and-blood American citizens enmeshed in a public debacle. By contrast, White Noise merely furthers the view popular among the nation’s literati that “American life is unreal and sterile for the middle class and degrading for the working class.”

One reason for such rejection, Lemann suggests, is that even best-selling American novelists do not receive the attention they once did. Forced to compete with television and other media, all but the most popular novels sell fewer and fewer copies each year. As Lemann observes, “a writer who thinks most people aren’t listening might use his writing as a way to return the compliment.”

Chekhov’s Dilemma

“It’s about time that everyone who writes—especially genuine literary artists—admitted that in this world you can’t figure anything out.”

Only 28 years old when he wrote this, Anton Chekhov (1860–1904), the Russian physician-turned-writer, had already retired as a moral crusader. The playwright (The Cherry Orchard, The Seagull) and short-story writer (Ward Number Six, Ariadne) decided to use his fiction to record, rather than judge, the human condition. Calling himself an “impartial witness,” Chekhov strove to clarify and to illuminate moral dilemmas, but not to try to solve them.

Epstein, editor of the American Scholar, has high praise for Chekhov’s work, admiring, among other things, his astute, intuitive grasp of ordinary folk. Yet, at the same time, Epstein sees Chekhov’s moral neutrality as a weakness. Lacking a political or ethical stance, his fiction often stalls. The point of the story is missing.

“Chekhov’s stories are not about good and evil; they have no heroes,” observes Epstein. “With only rare exceptions is there anything resembling intrinsic drama.”

Chekhov himself was aware of this flaw. In a letter to Dmitry Grigorovich, also a writer, Chekhov admitted that his basic principles changed “every month.” And, since all good writers move “toward something definite and beckon [the reader] to follow,” his stories would sag. He could only describe “life as it is and stop dead right there.”

In a story, for instance, titled “My Life” (which was not about Chekhov’s life), he reflects momentarily on a Russian village: “I could not understand what these 60,000 people lived for, what they read the gospel for, why they prayed, why they read books and magazines.” Refusing to cast the townspeople in a good or bad light, he instead presented them just as they were.

“Unfocused” as it was, Chekhov’s style did have some unique advantages, Epstein concedes. He became a “master of moods. Verisimilitude
came naturally to him. Whatever Chekhov writes, one feels, is true." Thus Chekhov’s failure to achieve gripping drama enabled him to excel at something else: capturing in his characters their “condition of soul.”

OTHER NATIONS

Détente in Ulster?  


On November 15, 1985, prime ministers Margaret Thatcher of Britain and Garret FitzGerald of Ireland signed the so-called Anglo-Irish agreement, a pact officially recognizing Dublin as a partner, alongside London, in the governance of Northern Ireland, or Ulster.

Granting the Irish Free State a voice in the administration of Northern Ireland’s police force, courts, and prisons, the agreement marked a major turnaround in Thatcher’s stance toward the troubled northern province. Only a year earlier, Thatcher had steadfastly refused to negotiate with Irish nationalists.

What brought about this political concession? Shannon, a Boston University historian, believes that Thatcher’s “hard-line” approach toward the Catholic Ulster nationalists—condemning the extremist Irish Republican Army (IRA), ignoring the moderate Social Democratic and Labour Party, and spurning the Catholic bishops—ultimately backfired. Her 1981 decision to allow Bobby Sands and nine other militant members of the IRA to die in hunger strikes was, in Shannon’s opinion, a “major strategic error.” The hunger strikes roused Catholic sentiments and a corresponding backlash among Northern Irish Protestants, who favor continued British rule.

By 1983, tension in the north had become so ugly that the four nationalist parties, representing three-quarters of the island’s population, held a New Ireland Forum to find a solution. After a year’s deliberation, they proposed three possible models for a unified Ireland: a single state headed by Dublin; a federation of the two Irish provinces; or joint governance of northern Ireland by London and Dublin. Thatcher rejected all three. The result: Moderate Irish Catholic nationalist parties began losing support to the IRA and its political wing, Sinn Fein. Trapped in a political stalemate, and alarmed by the IRA’s popular resurgence, Thatcher reluctantly endorsed the Anglo-Irish agreement.

Had Thatcher been more willing to negotiate with moderate nationalists early on, contends Shannon, the IRA might not have gained support. Thatcher also might not have found herself in the position of seeming to abandon her Protestant unionist constituents.

With the Intergovernmental Conference in place, Shannon argues, perhaps Northern Irish Catholics will feel less disenfranchised. Maybe they will now turn from IRA extremism and support reconciliation between the island’s northern and southern communities.