

she believes led to the death of a colleague, contradicting the account in an official UN report. A year after UN peacekeeping forces stood by as thousands of men were killed in Srebrenica, Bosnia, Thomson arrives under the same UN flag to exhume the dead as evidence for war crimes prosecutions. He introduces himself to widows and other relatives. “When I tried to comfort them,” he writes, “they turned on me screaming, spraying spitfire into my face.”

Although the three enjoy small victories and develop intense and rewarding relationships, they battle a sneaking suspicion that, in the absence of forceful intervention against brutality, the standard UN peacekeeping offerings—training human rights workers, documenting atrocities, setting up

courts, and providing medical aid—only make matters worse. (Indeed, the UN commissioned an expert panel in 2000 to study its peacekeeping work and has subsequently adopted a number of reforms.) The authors’ initial enthusiasm for international peacekeeping turns into a passion for bearing witness, and the ultimate verdict is not a pretty one. No wonder United Nations muckety-mucks are displeased with this book, and not only for its revelations of ineptitude, corruption, and hedonism in UN ranks.

“For me there’s only one lesson,” Thomson writes. “If blue-helmeted UN peacekeepers show up in your town or village and offer to protect you, run. Or else get weapons. Your lives are worth so much less than theirs.”

—SHERI FINK

## ARTS & LETTERS

### *MYSELF AND STRANGERS: A Memoir of Apprenticeship.*

By John Graves. Knopf. 235 pp. \$24

First, a confession: I know John Graves, we sprang from the same Texas soil, we’re in the same business, and I admire both the man and his work. So *Myself and Strangers*, based on a journal Graves kept from the mid-1940s through the 1950s, has a particular appeal for me. But even if you’ve never heard of John Graves, you’re likely to enjoy his youthful preoccupations, worries, loves, searches, and encounters with a world not much with us anymore. “Old John”—now 83—occasionally breaks into a comment on “Young John,” but fortunately he doesn’t overuse that device or attempt to prettify his youthful actions and opinions.

In 1946, not long discharged from the U.S. Marines, in whose service he had lost his left eye in a firefight, Young John went to Mexico, “mainly because it was unconnected with my own personal background and it seemed to be a likely environment wherein to start getting my head straightened out,” an effort that would “endure sporadically for another 10 long years.” Graves didn’t think of himself as a writer then, but he soon had the bug. While getting a master’s degree in English at Columbia University, he started turn-

ing out short stories, the first of which “was taken, unbelievably, by *The New Yorker*.” (In time, a failed attempt at a novel and a distaste for writing formula fiction for slick magazines turned him toward nonfiction.) He taught English at the University of Texas, found little pleasure in academia, and in 1953 began anew his roaming in Spain, France, England, Scotland, and elsewhere.

“What do I really have to say as a writer or a person?” Graves asked in his journal in 1954. “This era of suspended breathing and fright in which we live—how can you say anything worth saying about it? You’d be better off ranching or farming or doctoring or in some other of the unquestionable occupations. This mood will pass but it is relevant. I would like so God-damned much to write something worth writing, and if I had the conception I am now competent enough with words to do it. But the conception is hard to come by.”

Graves didn’t know it, but he had stated in his frustration a couple of the occupations he would both practice and write about: ranching and farming. What would make them possible was a book he would publish in 1960, the now-classic *Goodbye to a River*. Some of the royalties paid for 400 acres of land close to Glen Rose, Texas, not far from his

native Fort Worth. Graves named his acquisition Hard Scrabble; he wrote a book by that name in 1974, and later a collection of essays about making the place productive, *From a Limestone Ledge* (1980). He told of raising goats and cattle, clearing brush, keeping bees, mending fences, and the thousand and one other chores that I, as a Texas farm boy, considered agrarian torture and fled for good at age 13, but for which he had more tolerance.

Graves wrote *Goodbye to a River* after paddling up the Brazos for three weeks with his little dachshund to bid farewell to a river he had explored all his life—both on the water and by land—before much of it was to be flooded out of existence by the construction of seven dams. He blended in history, folktales, Indian wars, the hardships of settlers, his youthful memories, and his mournful sense of loss. Ironically, much of what worried him never happened: The bureaucrats decided to build but one dam, not seven. Even so, John Graves got a fine book out of it, as well as the money to buy the hard-scrabble acres he still occupies four decades later. They don't call him "The Sage of Glen Rose" for nothing.

—LARRY L. KING

**MERCE CUNNINGHAM:**  
*The Modernizing of Modern Dance.*

By Roger Copeland. Routledge. 304 pp. \$26.95

"The high carriage, the flexible head, the level gaze, the ultra-articulated feet, the aura of sang-froid. . . ." This is not a description of classical ballet but of the first Merce Cunningham dance company, founded in 1953. Roger Copeland, professor of theater and dance at Oberlin College, sees in Cunningham an updated classicism and a welcome respite from the overwrought romanticism of modern dance as exemplified by Martha Graham.

For Graham, modern dance was a quest for



Merce Cunningham (*in air*) rehearsing with his dance troupe in 1957.

"wholeness," the physical-emotional state of harmony presumed to exist among "primitive" people and to lie buried in the civilized unconscious. Its guiding spirit was Carl Jung, and as Copeland notes, it pervaded both modern dance and abstract expressionism—they shared a cult of spontaneous gesture and a commitment to art as an inner journey.

Toward abstract expressionism Copeland maintains a certain objectivity, but toward Graham's version of modern dance he is unapologetically dismissive, recalling his youthful aversion to its "primitivism": "The very *names* of [Graham's] characters, so literary, so burdened with overly generalized Meaning, tended to put me off: 'He Who Summons'; 'She of the Ground'; 'The One Who Speaks' . . . all of which made me feel like 'The One Whose Head Ached from Allegory.'"

Copeland's cure was "the icy, dandified virtuosity" of Cunningham, who, collaborating with composer John Cage, eschewed instinct, intuition, and inspiration in favor of random procedures, what Cage called "chance operations." The two men also severed the connection between movement and music: Cunningham's rigorously trained dancers moved in ways unrelated to Cage's music.

If Graham is the foil for the first half of Copeland's book, the foil for the second is the aesthetic that has largely supplanted Cunningham's high modernism: the diverse