

Shelley read Latin, French, and Italian and was tutored in science, history, and literature. Those destroyed documents? They were writings that she feared might anger her hostile father-in-law and damage her son's chances of inheriting his estate.

Shelley specialists have examined the penmanship of *Frankenstein*, letter by letter, concluding that Percy Shelley wrote at least 1,000 and possibly more than 4,000 words of the finished volume of roughly 270 pages. They say that Percy Shelley changed spelling, grammar, and awkward phrases, but the book remains Mary Shelley's creation. Her husband's work was little more than the contributions of an editor. "Perhaps those of a *very* good editor," Gross says.

ARTS & LETTERS

Brooklyn Dodgers

THE SOURCE: "Wonder Bread" by Melvin Jules Bukiet, in *The American Scholar*, Autumn 2007.

A WARM-AND-FUZZY POX HAS infected Brooklyn, New York's newly hip borough. There, a clique of extremely successful young writers has taken up residence and begun producing Brooklyn Books of Wonder (BBoWs). BBoWs, says novelist and Sarah Lawrence College writing teacher Melvin Jules Bukiet, are produced according to a sure-fire recipe: "Take mawkish self-indulgence, add a heavy dollop of creamy nostalgia, season with magic realism, stir in complacency of faith, and you've got wondrousness."

Among those infected with wonder are Jonathan Safran Foer, Dave Eggers, Myla Goldberg, and Nicole Krauss, all of whom have written briskly selling novels (in Eggers's case, a novelistic memoir, *A Heart-breaking Work of Staggering Genius*) in recent years. Others belong to this writing school in spirit. Pulitzer winner Michael Chabon, for example, is a wonder boy, though he lives in the San Francisco Bay area and is slightly older; Alice Sebold is an out-of-state lady of the club. It's time, Bukiet suggests, that these books come in for the shaming they deserve.

Most BBoWs display several of the following symptoms: child protagonists (often orphans); triumphs over great adversity; epiphanies and lessons learned; "mothy, softcore sex" and "pallid, softcore religion"; wisdom doled out by sage elders; and escapist fantasies "garnished with intellectual flourishes."

Take Sebold's 2002 novel *The Lovely Bones*, which is narrated by Susie, a 14-year-old who has been raped and murdered and looks down on her family and friends from heaven. The real crime in *The Lovely Bones*, according to Bukiet, is the healing handed out to everybody. Even the heaven-bound Susie eventually gets to experience beautiful sex vicariously by occupying a young friend's body during the act.

Ditto for Foer's treatment of the Holocaust and the 9/11 attacks, the subjects, respectively, of *Everything Is Illuminated* (2002) and *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* (2005). In both books, wonder is history's antidote. The young protagonists' quests for personal

answers to grand tragedies evoke "deep nostalgia" for the past and an inability to confront the "grotesque reality" of the present.

Yet people buy BBoWs "by the truckload" because they "instantly trigger the 'Awww' reflex of narcissistic empathy," Bukiet sniffs. To make matters worse, some BBoWs are actually well written, rendering them even more "insidious."

Serious fiction sharpens reality, Bukiet says, while BBoWs rescue us from it. "Your father is dead, or your mother, and so are most of the Jews of Europe, and the World Trade Center's gone, and racism prevails, and sex murders occur. What is, is. The real is the true, and anything that suggests otherwise, no matter how artfully constructed, is a violation of human experience."

ARTS & LETTERS

At Odds Over Architecture

THE SOURCE: "America's Favorite Buildings" by Witold Rybczynski, in *Wharton Real Estate Review*, Fall 2007.

WHEN IT COMES TO GOOD architecture, the public and the professionals don't always see eye to eye, but just how rarely they agree is disquieting. Almost three-quarters of the "most important buildings" selected by architects in a recent survey didn't show up at all on a new list of the American public's favorite buildings.

The three best-loved structures on the people's list are the Empire State Building, the White House, and the Washington National Cathedral, designed by men most

Americans have never heard of. Architects chose the work of stars: Fallingwater and the Robie House, by Frank Lloyd Wright, and the Kimbell Art Museum, by Louis I. Kahn.

The public gives great weight to the symbolic role of a building, writes Witold Rybczynski, a professor of urbanism at the University of Pennsylvania. This explains its admiration for the White House and the Washington National Cathedral, and perhaps even its somewhat surprising regard for the 1998 neoclassical Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, home to *The Wilson Quarterly*, which came in at 79th. Americans like public buildings, Rybczynski notes. All of their top 25 favorites fit that definition in some sense, whereas the Frank Lloyd Wright buildings were built as private homes. Popular admiration for modern architecture over-

Americans give great weight to the symbolic role of a building, and tend to favor the old over the new.

all is lukewarm, with only the minimalist Vietnam Veteran's Memorial and St. Louis's Gateway Arch making the top 25.

All but three of the public's 50 favorites were built before 1980. Old railroad stations outpooled new airports. Old churches beat out contemporary houses of worship. Old museums trumped new ones. The one post-1987 edifice that managed to make the popular top 25, the Bellagio hotel and casino in Las Vegas, has caused "consternation" within the profession, Rybczynski says. The building includes a faux-Tuscan lakeside village, and its style is

sneered at by critics and architectural prize juries.

When judging movies, the public goes for the latest and the most modern; in architecture, tradition triumphs. But the architectural profession's low regard for the nation's most cherished buildings shows the gap that now exists between professional and public values. The professionals' fixation on novelty and design innovation causes them to dismiss the wide staircases and tall columns so loved by the average American.

The point, Rybczynski concludes, is not that architects should imitate designs of the past, but that they should recognize their appeal and produce work that will speak to the public in the future. A building that is actively disliked, no matter how architecturally innovative, is one that has failed.

OTHER NATIONS

Indonesia's Vulnerable Strivers

THE SOURCE: "Lasting Impacts of Indonesia's Financial Crisis" by Martin Ravallion and Michael Lokshin, in *Economic Development and Cultural Change*, Oct. 2007.

ONE OF THE REMARKABLE things about the 1998 financial crisis in East Asia was how quickly some of the victims seemed to recover. In Indonesia, the world's fourth most populous

country, the number of destitute people doubled in a single year, but the poverty rate improved immediately as the economy stabilized. Infant mortality rates in urban areas surged, then fell back. By 2000, the economy of the archipelago had begun to expand again. In 2006, it grew by about six percent.

But a detailed statistical analysis

by World Bank economists Martin Ravallion and Michael Lokshin shows that the crisis followed an unexpected pattern. The poorest of Indonesia's poor were not its most vulnerable. The slightly less poor areas—villages better integrated into the national economy, such as those that had moved beyond subsistence farming and were engaged in trade—were more vulnerable. Areas that were desperately poor before the crisis stayed that way; the people it struck hardest were those who had begun to climb the economic ladder.

Indonesian living standards had been rising robustly for more