
HUCK'S PICKS

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Anthony Dye's work is now exhibited at prominent galleries and museums and also featured in a recent *Washington Post Magazine* spread. He was recently released from prison and is now our first Artist in Residence. His memoir, *A Short Memoir of an Imprisoned Artist*, traces the moving trajectory that took him from a rural Georgia upbringing to twenty years in prison. Along the way we meet three generations of Dyes, including a great grandfather who fought in the Civil War, unfortunately for the wrong side. We learn that Dye's childhood involved cold baths in a washtub filled with well water and visit to a slave cemetery on the adjoining property. Dye has numerous amusing anecdotes, all with a rustic theme, but as he grew older, the scenario changed.

Diagnosed with Ricketts, he underwent many surgeries that eventually straightened his legs, but the disease limited his height to a mere five feet, which naturally made him a target for the other kids

in school. Small wonder he dropped out. From there, bad led to worse. Experimenting with Quaaludes, he meets Tammy, picks up a rape case when he and Tammy disagree about the consensual nature of their attempted reconciliation, does 6-1/2 on a 15-year sentence, and eventually paroled after earning a GED and an associate's degree. As Dye explains it, "A woman can make a man do a lot of self-destructive things."

While on parole, Dye yields to temptation, gets drunk, and picks up another twenty for crimes resulting from mistaken identity. Add to this jackpot persistent bad news from home, and you begin to wonder why Dye didn't just check out. But there is a positive side to the story. While working on the new twenty, Dye discovers a talent for art, specifically collages, which he has to make from old magazines, toilet paper, coffee, creamer, and cardboard. Along the way, he meets a mentor and eventually connects with Dennis Sobin, our director. With Dennis's encouragement and support, Dye begins to market his art and discovers a promising career, something he needs after being abandoned by his family,

Anthony Dye's memoir is a combination of tragedy and farce, but it also a lesson in determination and how artistic talent can grow and flourish if given the opportunity by someone who cares enough, in this case, Dennis Sobin. Even in the face of staggering financial and legal obstacles, Dye has become much more than a prison number. He is a successful artist and a necessary reminder that ex-cons don't have to be what the system insists we are. (memvv)

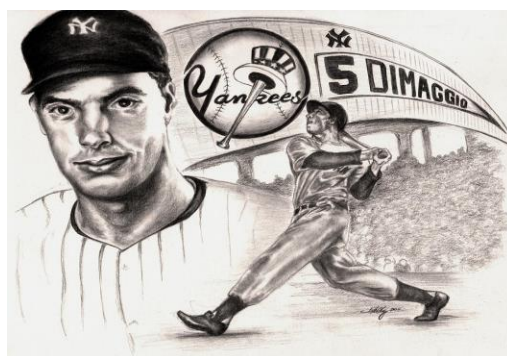
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In any hagiography, one expects to encounter a certain amount of hyperbole, and Gene McCann's new book, *A New Look At Joe DiMaggio*, certainly contains the usual enthusiasm, supported with copious statistics that clearly indicate DiMaggio's superiority in a sport famous for the number of exceptional athletes. McCann urges us, for example, to consider his hero's truncated career, interrupted by three years of military service and repeated bouts with

various injuries. Calculating the average per year of home runs, RBIs, etc., we see that DiMaggio's performances eclipse those of today's superstars--and without steroids or human growth hormone.

McCann also does his best to destroy the myth of the belligerent and rude DiMaggio, enumerating many incidences of his kindness and generosity. He takes one author to task for writing a hatchet job on DiMaggio and then bringing out the book after DiMaggio's death. Most people will acknowledge that nasty sells more than nice, so it's easy to agree with McCann's analysis.

And, of course, a book about the Yankee Clipper wouldn't be complete without a segment about his marriage to Marilyn Monroe and her tragic suicide just prior, according to McCann, to their remarriage. Apparently, DiMaggio never believed her death to be a suicide, and his annual gesture of roses on her crypt marked his enduring love for her. This small book helps flesh out the heroic image of one of baseball's most impressive legends. I live in New England and am obligated to hate the Yankees, but I can't help admiring the astonishing accomplishments of this extraordinarily talented man. (nonfictvv)



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Children's books are notoriously difficult to write, requiring an ability to anticipate a child's response and create characters and a story that will hold his or her attention. Steven Deay's choice of characters in his *Three Children's Stories* results in a magical doll, a frog, and an ostrich, all three set in situations that instruct as well as entertain. We learn about the magic that often distinguishes a child's imagination. We discover that there really is no place like home, even if home gets a little boring at times. And we realize that ignoring reality is no way to deal with problems and, indeed, often makes them worse. There are only happy endings in Deay's stories, which is how any child's experiences should progress. They will grow up all too quickly and discover the alternatives, but for now, Deay's narrative takes them where they are entitled to go. (fictvv)



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Sean White's play, *The Meaning of Life*, is a chilling story with an tragically familiar theme: a vicious stepfather (Vernon) and a mother who is helpless to stop the abuse. Ten-year-old Franklin has been caught kissing a classmate, which prompts a conference with his teacher and a physical response from Vernon. Granted, kids should learn boundaries, but the punishment seems wildly disproportionate to the "offense." After repeated beatings, Franklin finally outgrows his nuclear family, escapes, and has a family of his own. He eventually discovers his mother at Vernon's grave. No surprise that Franklin expresses joy that Vernon is toes up and stinking, even as his mother weeps at his callousness. This brief but powerful drama serves as a reminder that childhood abuse runs long and deep in the victims, frequently urging them to employ the same pathological solution to perceived problems. Fortunately, Franklin escapes that trap, but he still bears the psychological scars. (dramavv)



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Subway by Damien Phillips is an intriguing and insightful commentary on human nature. Phillips offers a short story followed by a play. In an unusual literary inversion, the play is longer than the short story. In both, we meet Dana, riding the train on her way to work. A malfunction stops the train and plunges the car into darkness, during which the interactions among the passengers is so revealing. All the suppressed emotions, raw and without the thin veneer of civilization, come out: racist attitudes, religious prejudice, political bigotry, even predatory instincts. In the exchanges, passengers can hide behind the anonymity

of darkness. When the lights come back on, Dana, who is blind, and therefore has always had a better grasp of their genuine natures, laughs and lectures them about their hypocrisy.

The play follows, same format but with a more expanded cast of characters, both on and off the train. Phillips uses them in a series of discussions into political and social issues, covering a broad range of topics from "reality" TV shows, child support, immigration, gun control, and drugs, to the Abu Ghraib debacle during the Iraq war. The conclusion is the same, a pronounced awkwardness when the lights return and Dana tells them who they really are. It's impossible to miss the vampire metaphor at work here. Only at night do the genuine personalities emerge, hidden by day in the coffins of their hypocrisy. As Dana tells her fellow travelers, they might eventually get it together, but that is somewhere down the road. (dramavv)

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The Wabash Valley Correctional Facility in Indiana has a theater ensemble called T.O.T.A.L., which appropriately stands for Theater of Tears and Laughter. The group has written a remarkable play, *Tuesdays with Mortie*. The work is actually a play within a play. No, not *The Mousetrap* in *Hamlet*, intended to evoke overwhelming guilt in Claudius. This particular piece emphasizes forgiveness and takes for its inspiration *Les Miserables*, with inmates at a fictional prison adapting Victor Hugo's classic, then acting in specific roles. Focusing on the famous scene in which the priest forgives Jean Valjean for stealing the church's silverware, the play presents the fundamental themes of mercy and the redemptive power of love.



Playing off the drama's theme, we have Ted, a terminal cancer patient whose wife was killed by one of the troupe's members. Ted's hatred is paramount, eating him alive, much as the cancer he has contracted. But even Ted eventually learns to forgive, a feat most of us could never manage but facilitated by a letter from his wife's killer. Attending to both Ted and the prison players is Dr. Kevorkian, a well-known expert on death and an apostle of forgiveness who provides an alternative to the standard retributive justice model now employed in the US.

Add in *Mortie*, a canine version of Camus, and the result is an irresistible panoply of characters who emphatically demonstrate the philosophical and existential advantages of forgiving transgressions, instead of harboring hate and a desire to see one's enemies drawn and quartered. The play should be entered in the competition for a performance at the Kennedy Center, and I urge anyone in the neighborhood to see it when, not if, that happens. (dramavv)

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Clarity by Patricia Prewitt is a brief but extraordinarily powerful one-act play that opens a window on the abuse that has become endemic inside women's prisons. One can't help sensing that, given the protagonist's name, the play is autobiographical in nature. Even if it isn't, however, the events portrayed ring true for anyone, female or male, who has ever been behind the walls and witnessed or suffered the abuse of authority manifested by some guards. Rape is rape, and it doesn't matter what uniform the victim or the rapist is wearing, although some in uniform seem to think a number on a woman's shirt entitles them to take whatever they want. In Prewitt's play, at least, the standard routine didn't work. Kudos to the protagonist for her courage in standing firm and daring the pervert to do his worst. If you want a real look at what goes on inside women's prisons where male guards are assigned, you'll want to take a look at Prewitt's work. I promise you won't forget it. (dramavv)

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The members of I-WISH (Incarcerated Women Inside Seeking to/for Help) at the Maryland Correctional Institute for Women have, courtesy of Betty May, produced *Faces*, a drama in ten scenes with ten characters, all

prisoners convicted of various crimes. The production is intended to enlighten a naive audience about the dangers of surrendering one's autonomy to another person, gang, or dysfunctional lifestyle. Each character relates her personal story, from childhood, through high school, growing up, and the specific crime she committed. Also included are narratives about each trial, the prison experience, the limited future, and, perhaps most important, advice for the audience on how to avoid the perils and pitfalls each woman in the cast has suffered.



None of the characters evades responsibility for any crime, but the underlying theme of violence directed against women is unavoidable and an obviously contributing factor. Having lived with the male side of the equation for nearly forty years, there were no surprises for this reviewer, simply an overwhelming sadness at the despair voiced by the cast, countered, however, by a newly discovered strength of character. As Joyce tells her audience, "I found the Good in me and I love her. I love her fiercely!" Therein lies the key to personal growth and the determination to be more than the number on her shirt. And as Denise reminds her listeners, "Bad choices destroy. Be smart: Don't let them." This is followed by other cast members who remind everyone that, contrary to stereotypes, prisoners are human. Indeed, as Tammi and LaSchelle confirm, "I am a person . . . Just like you."

This play is not a "poor me" whine but a thoughtful and powerful examination of both gender roles and social pressures, both of which can work to compromise a vulnerable woman with a limited support system. It thus performs a valuable service for both cast and audience and along the way educates the rest of us who might still be living in the 19th century. (dramavv)

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Stressed Out! by John Hines and Journey Rodriguez is a short take on what happens when a country boy from Louisiana discovers how different things are in the big city. Jesse meets Ida May, and the two have a, ahem, ball together until Ida's grandfather gets a restraining order to keep them from making little rednecks. Ida is apparently worth the risk, so Jesse ignores the order, only to be confronted by Ida's angry father, who clearly has something better in mind for his little girl. Harsh words lead to threats, which lead to one dead father, killed with his own knife during the struggle. Naturally, the city folk aren't going to believe some swamp rat refugee from an oil spill, so off goes Jesse to prison, never again to sample the charms of lovely Ida May. Anyone who thinks all's fair in love and war needs to see this play, keeping in mind that other, more reliable axiom: if you play fair, you're fair game. (dramavv)

POETS' CORNER

Charley McMurtry's *Woman, You Are Poetry* is a collection of 69 poems, all of which, as the author hopes, will "capture the complex images of the female character, essence, heart and soul." If that sounds like a big order, it is, but McMurtry is equal to the task. As a result, his poems are a startling blend of the sensuous and the philosophic, with his artwork emphasizing each poem's theme. His dedication reads "For all women" and includes a list of over thirty (when I stopped counting) men and women who have inspired this poetic adventure. These poems should succeed in offering comfort to all women, especially those who have learned to doubt the existence of any man who understands and appreciates them. Above all, McMurtry urges women to be fearless, because the "joy of the journey may/outweigh the rest." Good advice from any source. (poemv)





Robert Fisher is an angry man, but then, living with a death sentence for 25 years tends to nurture that kind of attitude. The title of his poetry collection, *Compromised Illusions*, reflects the internal and external battles Fisher has waged with himself, society, and the criminal justice system during that time. The poems also reflect the natural fatigue experienced by such a protracted battle: "Even the strongest wings get weary." In "Anger and Acknowledgment," he expresses an air of resignation, but this is tempered with a faith in a

higher power, prayer, and the belief that things will eventually get better. Unfortunately, Fisher's repeated use of "rotten" to describe people, events, and places makes that seem unlikely.

Interspersed with these stark observations are meditations on the beauty of nature and an emphasis on memory as a coping mechanism. Clearly, the poet misses the real world, a special woman, and a child growing up without a father. And yet, Fisher has an uncompromising ability to accept his current situation and the grim future in front of him. Someone once asked the difference between a pessimist and an optimist. The pessimist is the one with the experience. As Fisher tells us in another poem, "I believe in miracles!" Considering his situation, he needs to. (poemvv)

One of the many lessons that one
learns in prison is, that things are
what they are and will be what they
will be.
Oscar Wilde