



Continuing in the tradition of the Journal's Editors Emeriti ...

The books for this month are a holiday gift list:
books to broaden the library and the mind,
to provide pleasure and enjoyment,
to give to oneself and others.

The lyrics of Cole Porter, the history of the French language, a popular novel chronicling desire and identity, the great American pastime of baseball, and a history of modern minimalist art are all highlighted in these reviews. We express a great measure of gratitude to Drs. Andreasen and Nemiah for initiating this annual feature of the *Journal*.

Cole Porter: Selected Lyrics, edited by Robert Kimball.
New York, The Library of America, 2006, 200 pp, \$20.00.

Like most Americans, I do not read much poetry. After a long day with patients, I'm ready to relax with some football, some episodes of "24," or maybe a good novel. I do have a tiny twinge of guilt when I skip over the *New Yorker* poems, but it quickly passes. Imagine my surprise when the American Poets Project published *Cole Porter: Selected Lyrics*. I had always wanted to read the lyrics of his fabulous songs and now they were available as bona fide poetry.

Cole Porter (1891–1964) was born to a wealthy family in Peru, Indiana, and was somewhat of a musical prodigy as a child. He attended Yale University, where he sang with the new a cappella group called the "Whiffenpoofs" and composed a host of college songs, including one for the football team that concludes with the semi-immortal lines:

When the sons of Eli
Break through the line
That is the sign we hail
Bull dog! Bull dog!
Bow, wow, wow
Eli Yale!

My immediate association is the chorus of frogs in the play by Aristophanes, which probably means that I am either hopelessly overeducated or mind-addled.

After a series of Broadway flops, Porter proceeded to settle in Paris, marry a rich American divorcée, avoid the military draft, falsely claim enlistment in the French Foreign Legion, and spend most of the next 20 years traveling lavishly in Europe and around the world. In 1928 he burst back onto the Broadway scene with the musical *Paris* and his first major hit song, the witty "Let's Do It (Let's Fall In Love)." In the song,

among those who "do it" are "little cuckoos in their clocks," "courageous kangaroos," and even Boston beans.

In the 1930s Porter produced an incredible number of hits that earned him a place in the pantheon of American songwriters. Unlike his contemporaries George Gershwin and Irving Berlin, Porter wrote both the lyrics and the music for all his songs. In the sad song from the Great Depression, "Love For Sale," a streetwalker offers only "slightly soiled" love and invites the buyer of her wares to follow her upstairs. Porter wrote very passionate songs about taunting and teasing, deceiving and deserting, but in his lyrics love always lasted until death, because "so in love with you am I." He wrote often about the uncertainty of love. Is it a "dream come true"? Or will it, like the moon, grow dim and fade away in "the chill, still of the night"? Porter wrote about love affairs that were "too hot, not to cool down" in "Just One of Those Things"; about languorous, tropical love in the cynical "Begin the Beguine," where women are all the same in the dark; about desperate love in "Down in the Depths (on the Ninetieth Floor)"; about sugar-daddies; and about existential love, wondering if love is a kiss on the lips or just a kick in the pants. His greatest score was the show *Anything Goes*, with such songs as "I Get A Kick Out Of You," "All Through The Night," "Anything Goes," "Blow, Gabriel, Blow," and everybody's favorite, "You're The Top," in which two lovers compare each other to the "tread of the feet of Fred Astaire," as well as an "O'Neill drama," "Whistler's mama," and "Camembert."

In 1937, a tragic horseback riding accident left Porter crippled. He endured 33 orthopedic surgeries and suffered from severe depression. He was one of the earliest patients to receive electroconvulsive therapy. The depression lifted but the chronic pain remained. Critics feel that the quality of his songs declined during this time, yet he wrote his most financially successful show, *Kiss Me Kate*, in 1948 and other major Broadway hits such as *Can-Can* in 1952, *Silk Stockings* in

1955, and *High Society* in 1956, which featured his last hit song, "True Love." Although he had several long-term homosexual relationships over the years and had separated from his wife in the early 1930s, they reunited after his accident. His leg was amputated in 1958 and he never wrote another song.

If you are a Cole Porter fan, you must get this book. If you do not know about him, you are missing a glorious piece of Americana. Many artists have recorded his songs but I strongly recommend the 1990 release "Red Hot + Blue." It contains modern versions of his songs by such artists as U2 and Deborah Harry. The compilation was produced as part of an AIDS benefit series, and in that context, the song "I've Got You Under My Skin" takes on a whole new meaning. I absolutely guarantee that when you hear the drums go wild in the song "Don't Fence Me In," you will crank up the stereo and, at least for a few minutes, feel overcome by youthful exhilaration.

In truth, Porter was a good but not great poet. There's no mistaking him for Robert Frost or T. S. Eliot (thank God!). But when he set his words to music, the results really were "delightful...delicious...de limit...deluxe," and "de-lovely."

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Book review accepted for publication September 2007 (doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2007.07091487).

***The Story of French*, by Jean-Benoît Nadeau and Julie Barlow. New York, St. Martin's Press, 2006, 496 pp, \$25.95.**

This is a wonderful book by the authors of the cleverly titled *Sixty Million Frenchmen Can't Be Wrong*, which explored the history, sociology, and modern trends of French culture. Both authors are Canadian and attended McGill University, but as their names reveal, one is French-Canadian and the other Anglo-Canadian. The two are married and write very well together.

Why do I say the book is wonderful? Well, because it once again mixes history, sociology, polemic, and modern trends, this time about the French language and, even more interestingly, the English language. At times the authors sound defensive and protective of the French and the French language, but for the most part they are surprisingly undefensive. It is also wonderful because one learns something with almost every page; for example, I learned that the term "zydeco" is a corruption of *les haricots* (French for "the beans"), that the name Clovis morphed into Louis, and that some words the French think are anglicisms are actually French in origin.

The book starts with a section on the origins of the language, essentially revealing that it is derived from the Indo-European language family and not Latin; that only 100 Gaulish words survive today (one of which is *sapin*, or "fir"); that Norse settlers contributed such words as *crabe* ("crab"), *homard* ("lobster"), and *vague* ("wave") and that the Franks contributed *gant* and *robe* ("glove" and "dress"), as well as *champion* and *guerre* ("war"); that many words were borrowed from Arabic (*amiral*, *alcool*, *coton*, and *sirop*); and that the split between the languages of northern (*oil*) and southern France (*oc*) persist to this day. Script was introduced in the 12th century and accents were only introduced in the 1530s; the battle for supremacy between Latin and French went back and forth.

While Anglos, especially Americans, have many preconceptions about the French Academy, or *Académie française* (namely that it is some form of language police), it's intriguing to learn that it was composed largely of amateurs (in the English sense) and not language experts, authors, or professors. The eight editions of the official dictionary published by the Academy have sometimes taken as long as 70 years to write (the view predominated that each word must have only one unique meaning, meaning no synonyms).

The second section deals with the spread of the French language, including as an instrument of building empires and as a means of diplomacy, the uses of French-based creole languages, and how in the French Revolution, language became a foundation of national identity (one of the reasons behind the creation of the national public school system was to teach proper French to all, as well as taking teaching out of the Catholic Church's hands).

Some things I learned that I had only a glimmer of before: in 1790 only 3 million of 28 million persons spoke French; there are still 30 dialects spoken today; and even in 1999, 12% of the French population claim to speak a regional language. In addition, French friends have told me that despite years of instruction, the French are reluctant to speak English for fear of not being perfect, the result of a strong tradition of dictation, writing, and speaking without fault (which would be akin to a sin for the French).

The third section is on adaptation of the language; more specifically, how French (and English) is an instrument of foreign policy, cultural importance, and power. The stories of how French became the second "working language" at the United Nations and why ex-colonists "chose" to continue teaching and learning French are wonderful.

Finally, the authors deal with changes to the language in the concluding section. I suspect that unless you watch French news every night (especially "Les Guignols de l'info") or eavesdrop on adolescents speaking the Arab-influenced language of the *cités* (suburban high rise buildings for the poor) or *verlan* (similar to "pig Latin" in English), you won't be much interested in what's happened most recently. However, readers should be interested in how the *passé simple* has been done in by the *passé composé*, how French has adapted to the Internet and the computer, and the battle between English and French in Europe and North America.

In sum, if you love words, grammar, and French in any form, get this book. One can indeed still learn something new every day.

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Book review accepted for publication September 2007 (doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2007.07091488).

***Call Me By Your Name*, by André Aciman. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007, 256 pp, \$23.00.**

Before Freud, there were the novelists, and they continue to contribute their own unique wisdom of the human condition. This is the first novel for André Aciman, author of the classic memoir *Out of Egypt*, and perhaps another classic. It is an exquisitely detailed portrait of the erotic experiences of a teenage boy filtered through the razor-edged intelligence and acuity