

New Writing From the Northwest

by Gregory McNamee

"Every kind of writing is good save that which bores."

—Voltaire



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Sailor Song

by Ken Kesey

New York: Viking; 533 pp., \$23.50

Young Men and Fire

by Norman Maclean

Chicago: University of Chicago Press;
288 pp., \$19.95

Nothing But Blue Skies

by Thomas McGuane

New York: Seymour Lawrence
Houghton Mifflin; 349 pp., \$21.95



The Pacific Northwest of the United States, embracing Oregon, Washington, Idaho, and western Montana, has long been a major source of agricultural and mineral wealth. For generations it has also served as a center for the fine arts, but only recently has it done the same for literature. Since the end of the Second World War, when the region experienced rapid growth, a loosely allied group of writers have

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claimed the Northwest's places as their own. The most visible of them have been natives Richard Hugo, William Stafford, William Kittredge, Norman Maclean, Ken Kesey, Raymond Carver, Ivan Doig, and James Welch, along with transplants like Annick Smith, Rick Bass, and Thomas McGuane.

These writers have collectively produced a large shelf of books in the last two decades at, or so it seems, an ever-quicken pace. Bass, for instance, an accomplished young writer, is working simultaneously on 18 books, surely a record for ambition. Soon after the publication of his monumental anthology of literature about Montana, *The Last Best Place*, William Kittredge completed his newly released memoir *Hole in the Sky*, which seems destined to become a standard. Each season brings new offerings from the flourishing Northwestern states—which as recently as a decade ago were considered, in the words of journalist Joel Garreau, “the empty quarter.” The fall of 1992 boasts three of special interest: Ken Kesey’s long-awaited novel *Sailor Song*, Norman Maclean’s *Young Men and Fire*, and Thomas McGuane’s *Nothing But Blue Skies*.

Ken Kesey, a native of Oregon, achieved

notoriety three decades ago as the leader of the so-called Merry Pranksters, drug-devouring free spirits who prefigured the rise of hippiedom in all its glories and excesses. Before diving into the counterculture, however, Kesey had published two astonishingly strong novels, *Sometimes a Great Notion* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, both of which remain classics of postwar American fiction. Sidetracked by LSD and self-absorption, Kesey failed to follow up on that early promise, and his writing has been only marginal for thirty years. His sprawling new novel concerns a Pacific Coast town full of old hippies who have been stewing over the rape of the environment and the collapse of constitutional virtues. They decide to strike back, and Kesey’s story wends its leisurely way to a sort of goofy apocalyptic ending.

The book aches with nostalgia for the 1960’s. Its epigraph is taken from a lyric by Leonard Cohen, the poet of gloom and doom; the novel’s resident rock band is called the Dreadful Great, a transparent twist on the group that provided atmosphere for Kesey’s legendary LSD fiestas of three decades past; its characters sport weird hippie names like Louise Loop, Billy Bellisaurus, Alice the

Angry Aleut, and Greer the Viking Rastafarian (“I be a Viking from Bimini, by yumpin’ yiminy”). But *Sailor Song* eludes pure anachronism by tackling matters of immediate concern. Set in a small Alaska town called Kuniak at the turn of the next millennium among forests “choked by thick air, cooked and confused by the Anarchy of the Age,” it raises the green flag of ecology at every turn. The earth then is in even sorer shape than it is today. “From Alaska there’s no place left to go,” its protagonist notes. “There was Brazil, but they cut it down to pay their Third World debt to the First and Second, who fed it to McDonald’s. Over ten zillion sold.”

“They,” of course, are the shadowy captains of industry and government, cartoon figures where they enter at all in Kesey’s narrative. They appear largely in the corpulent form of a Sydney Greenstreet-like Hollywood tycoon called Gerhardt Steubins, whose production company invades unsuspecting Kuniak to film an extravaganza called *The Seal*—in real life a children’s story Kesey published not long ago—complete with sex, violence, high-tech special effects, and a legion of sea mammals. The story might have benefited from sporting a more believable villain, but Kesey is after all a Prankster.

Ike Sallas, Kesey’s hero, does not take kindly to the invading let’s-do-lunch horde from the South. “A decorated veteran railing against the same flag that had awarded him the Navy Cross,” he has emigrated to the Alaskan woods to stake out a bit of *fin-de-siècle* paradise and is prepared to go to war to protect it. The movie industry has ruined more than one town, he reasons, and Kuniak is ripe for the plucking. Never mind that it seems to have been plucked enough already. Kesey portrays the town as something of a countercultural Disneyland, full of rock bands, skyplanes that spell out the name of Japanese commodities, a rising generation of carefree youth “nimble as lizards in their black leather briefs,” and all the requisite drugs.

You would think a dose of Hollywood would be mere icing on the cake for such a place, and Sallas even catches himself thinking that “maybe they were going to cut the whole town in on the action, make everybody rich and famous.” Movie types call this a continuity problem; for maximum effect, Kuniak really ought to be an unspoiled

Eden, like the Scottish village in Bill Forsyth’s film *Local Hero*. Whatever the case, Sallas takes up a monkey-wrench—his Backatcha Movement is clearly modeled on the real-life Earth First! ecosabotage cause—and sets out to save Kuniak from itself. (Naturally enough, everything is done by committee in his politically correct time, but Ike is a lone wolf.) He does so by temporarily removing mogul Gerhardt Steubins from the scene, unaware that a legion of assistant directors and wardrobe specialists and focus-pullers will roll right along without the boss, determined to come in on schedule and under budget.

The plot of *Sailor Song* lends itself everywhere to slapstick and buffoonery (imagine the result if Kurt Vonnegut had taken it on), but Kesey mostly steers clear of cheap tricks even when striving for laughs. To be sure, he tosses off plenty of “in” jokes: Nicholas Levertov, Steubins’ chief toady, and a singularly unctuous one at that, shares his name with Beat poet Denise Levertov (why is anyone’s guess); assistant director Leonard Smalls is the namesake of the biker villain of Joel and Ethan Coen’s cult film *Raising Arizona*; and the village priest, Father Pribilof, takes his surname from that of the great Russian explorer of Alaska, Gerasim Pribilof. Kesey indulges himself in all this, and it seems a wasted enterprise.

In the end good prevails, as in all of Kesey’s works. But it wins out in a way just twisted enough to keep the reader entangled. The novel is candy, not solid sustenance. Still, Kesey is incapable of writing a bad sentence, and a little candy between meals won’t kill you.

On August 5, 1949, lightning came crashing down in the vast spruce forest above Seeley Lake, Montana, touching off a roaring blaze. Now every Westerner knows that lightning means fire, but the fire that raged through Mann Gulch, Montana, that morning was unlike most others. For one, it grew huge, the sort of conflagration that occurs only every few decades. For another, a battery of paratrooper-firefighters, many of them fresh veterans of the Second World War, had been anticipating it. They thrived on fire, on the thrill of confronting and extinguishing it, and as they sprang into action they bore their pride openly, as crack soldiers will. Before the day ended, 13 of these “smokejumpers” lay dead, their charred remains

evidence that something had gone terribly wrong.

Montana-bred Norman Maclean, the celebrated author of *A River Runs Through It*—recently made into a film under the direction of Robert Redford—saw his share of fires as a teenager, when he battled in place of men sent off to Europe during World War I. When news of the Mann Gulch fire and its terrible toll spread across the nation, Maclean was teaching English literature at the University of Chicago, well embarked upon a career as one of the foremost Shakespearean scholars of his day. The tragedy haunted him, and when he retired from teaching in 1973 he turned to his yellowing files and fading memories and sat down to write the story that would become *Young Men and Fire*. His initial thoughts lay in the horror of dying by fire. At the beginning of his tale he dwells at length on that horror, and the result is not reading for the squeamish:

As a fire on a hillside closes in, everything becomes a mode of exhaustion—fear, thirst, terror, a twitch in the flesh that still has a preference to live, all become simple exhaustion. So upon closer examination, burning to death on a mountainside is dying at least three times . . . first, considerably ahead of the fire, you reach the verge of death in your boots and your legs; next, as you fail, you sink back in the region of strange gases and red and blue darts where there is no oxygen and here you die in your lungs; then you sink in prayer into the main fire that consumes.

The young men died, Maclean argues, for a number of reasons, none defensible. First, the “escape fire”—a counterblaze that turns an approaching fire to one side or another—that their supervisor ordered them to build was ineffective. Second, explaining the first, the smokejumpers had received only three weeks of training under the tutelage of the United States Forest Service. Third, and most damning, bureaucratic infighting and ineptitude led to many instances of miscommunication: where the firefighters should have approached the fire by a side canyon, they were ordered to advance straight up a hillside leading to Mann Gulch. The fire racing downhill caught them before they could

act to save themselves. Maclean tracked down a few of the forest rangers who sent these men to their doom. Many of them retained scars of their terrible culpability; others, professional desk jockeys, maintained their innocence. Surviving firefighters were not so quick to forgive, and their hard words are hallmarks in Maclean's narrative.

As Maclean notes, the lessons of August 1949 did not go unlearned despite the Forest Service's efforts to cover up official malfeasance. Since the disaster, firefighters have received a rigorous course of instruction designed to avert others like it. The burial benefit to firefighters' heirs was also doubled to a whopping \$400. (There has been no need to claim it; no smokejumper has perished in the line of duty since the Mann Gulch debacle.) And the Forest Service began to understand that not all fires need to be fought, that fire tends to benefit most ecosystems by clearing dead undergrowth and fertilizing soil with ash. For that reason, the Mann Gulch-sized blazes that swept across Yellowstone National Park in 1989 were allowed to rage on, and today the area is as lush as ever.

When Maclean died in 1990, his manuscript lay unfinished. It was up to the editors of the University of Chicago Press to cobble it together, divide the text into chapters, and silently complete a few of the author's thoughts. In the main they have done their job well. Maclean would have done better, and the present book is not quite up to the grace and power of *A River Runs Through It*, a masterpiece of contemporary prose and perhaps the single book that best captures the spirit of the Northwest. But for all that, *Young Men and Fire* offers a riveting detective story and stands as a fitting testimonial to those 13 brave men who died needlessly in the woods of Montana 43 years ago.

Thomas McGuane has consciously carved out a niche in American literary history as our contemporary Hemingway, even by tracing the old man's footsteps from place to place. In the 1960's and 70's McGuane was associated with Key West, where he kept a house and produced his earliest novels. He had a reputation as a hellraiser then, seeking to match his distinguished literary ancestor drink for drink and spouse for spouse. But twenty years have passed, and McGuane has mellowed. He now

lives on a ranch in the Paradise Valley of Western Montana, where he devotes his time to raising cattle, reading, and writing. Now a mature man in his mid-50's, McGuane has abandoned most of his youthful pursuits, and his *roman à clef*, *Nothing But Blue Skies*, shows it.

Frank Copenhaver, the lonely hero—or antihero—of this novel is a sorry sight to behold. He is lost on that great sea of grass verging on Montana's western mountains, near Livingston, where his creator just happens to live. Montana may be the very definition of wide-open spaces, but for Frank Copenhaver its vastness more and more resembles a prison with each passing day.

Copenhaver's world is unraveling before his eyes. His marriage of many years is imploding; as the novel opens his wife, who runs a Cajun restaurant called Amazing Grease, is preparing to leave him for parts unknown. He is well in his 50's, and the years aren't treating him well. His neohippie daughter is dating a man his own age. He has taken to driving down back roads screaming, "My empire is falling!" and has lost connection with the world. A lover of fishing and wilderness, like any true Montanan, Copenhaver spends his days and nights indoors, making business deals, sending faxes, and poring over the *Wall Street Journal*. All for naught because—of course—his contracting business is falling to pieces along with the rest of his universe. How Copenhaver extricates himself from the mess he has made of his life is the meat of McGuane's story. A fully fleshed, believable character, he makes a botch of nearly every attempt, as we all do. He picks barroom fights with big cowboys, taunts local politicians with cries of "fascist," and generally does things just the way he knows he should not. By twists and turns McGuane allows Copenhaver to grope his way to something approaching a happy ending, but not without major pratfalls.

Nothing But Blue Skies is appealing on any number of fronts—certainly more so than the dismal *Something to Be Desired*, published in 1984. An especially fine touch is McGuane's respectful treatment of his women characters, another welcome sign of maturity. Copenhaver's wife Gracie is thoroughly likable, and he shows no rancor toward her for having abandoned him. He has plenty of likable women friends as well, true friends and not mere

objects of desire. The most intellectually attractive of them, June, isn't at all "astonished to find out that life was a fight," as the narrator observes. "So her feistiness lacked the indignation, the bruised quality, that gave relationships between men and women these days their peculiar smelliness."

Unlike his early novels (*Panama, The Sporting Club*, and *Ninety-two in the Shade*), McGuane's new novel is no *tour de force*. *Nothing But Blue Skies* is, however, a well-considered study of a man confronting a mid-life crisis and, in the end, overcoming it by sheer force of will. (In that regard it beats Robert Bly's weepy *Iron John* by a long shot. Frank Copenhaver despises pop-psych solutions, remarking "I'm much too old for that sort of thing. The messages of my formative years all came from Little Richard, who never soiled himself with an inner journey.")

Ironic, precise, and in full command of his language, McGuane delivers sharp observations on our deteriorating world. Along with Ken Kesey, who takes a slapstick view of the future, and Norman Maclean, who casts a cold eye on the past, he is helping to elevate the literature of the Pacific Northwest to national prominence. 

LIBERAL ARTS

TOUCHÉ

"The August 19 'Family Values'-fest at the Republican convention almost left me comatose. . . . I was concerned that the tenor of the meeting had cast an ominous shadow on the possibility that any non-traditional 'family' ever had a chance of living a happy, safe or 'decent' life here in the U. S. A.

"Just as my despair began to mount, the music from the band swelled dramatically. What? Could this familiar tune be what I thought it was? No! It couldn't be! But yes, yes it was! 'The Best of Times' from *La Cage aux Folles*! My faith in America had been renewed."

—from an August 26 letter by Kevin D. Kouba to the *Courier-Journal* in Louisville, Kentucky.

Credit Socialism

by Llewellyn H. Rockwell, Jr.

Money of the Mind: Borrowing and Lending in America From the Civil War to Michael Milken

by James Grant

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux;
512 pp., \$25.00



In May 1991, Risa Kugal, a fortyish New York woman who said she was unemployed and supported by her mother, appeared at court in Brooklyn. She was there, as James Grant tells us, to have \$75,000 in credit card debt wiped off the books under Chapter Seven of the federal bankruptcy code. She owed \$18,000 on five Citibank cards, more than \$17,000 on three American Express cards, and smaller amounts on a host of accounts like Macy's. Her assets, she said, were \$750.

The bankruptcy process is supposed to be long and arduous, but Judge Conrad B. Duberstein takes less than seven minutes, on average, to forgive the profligate and stick the federal government's thumb in their creditors' eyes. Kugal, unusually, was questioned on how exactly she had come to owe so much money on credit cards. "I used one to pay off another," she answered, and was promptly cleansed of her obligations. Another bankruptcy judge, Marvin Holland, hoped Kugal didn't feel bad. He announced: "I don't want anybody to leave this court feeling uncomfortable, guilty, or ashamed. You should walk out of here with your head held high. You should feel proud." This is a microcosm of America. Holland's message is sent by Washington, D. C., to all its clients, from welfare bums to S&L bandits. How have we come to this?

There are two official schools of thought on the 1980's: the left-Clintonian, which condemns the decade as one of greed and social Darwinism, and the *Wall Street Journal*-supply side, which praises it as the eschaton immanetized (Wall Street got rich, the masses got rhetoric, the government got bigger, and the neoconservatives got jobs). No one has yet told the true story

of the age of Reagan (suggested title: *Betrayal*), but we do now have a revisionist, Old Right history of money and finance that rescues truth from the distorters.

James Grant is editor of *Grant's Interest Rate Observer*, the most influential (and sardonic) publication of its kind. For him, the 1980's were the years of easy money and credit socialism sold as conservatism. A paleolibertarian, Grant recognizes the essentially collectivist nature of the Reagan boom, fueled as it was by central bank credit expansion rather than tax cuts. Bankruptcy became a snap, and banks and "thrifts" made money making profligate loans the American people are now asked to repay. But credit socialism did not begin with Reagan, and Grant surveys money, borrowing, and lending from the National Banking Act of 1864 to the five-year loan on the Yugo, a car that doesn't last that long.

Money and banking have always been contentious areas of American policy. Among the Founders, the Jeffersonians favored hard money for reasons of limited government, the Hamiltonians inflation as part of their big-government program. (Although in fairness I should add that today's neocon makes Hamilton look like John Randolph of Roanoke.) From the Polk administration until Lincoln's war of centralization, we had the excellent Subtreasury system, under which government could not inflate and circulating money consisted of gold and silver coins. Banking was "free," meaning there were few restrictions on entry and each bank issued its own notes. Bankers—distrusted throughout most of American history—could issue more notes than they had specie on deposit, but without a national banking system, there could be no widespread business cycles (today's are possible only through government-contrived increases in bank credit). But Lincoln's depreciating greenbacks and income tax couldn't pay all the costs of attacking and pillaging the South, so the rump Congress passed the National Banking Act of 1864. Under it, certain banks were designated national and only they could issue bank notes, which had to be accepted at par by other national banks and by the Treasury, even if the issuer were insolvent. In return for

this privilege, the national banks bought all of the Treasury bonds issued.

By 1879, the United States had worked itself back to a gold standard. "As the Constitution restricted the freedom of action of the Justice Department," says Grant, "so did the gold standard curb the activities of the Treasury. Bound by a legal definition of money, the government could not print its way out of a jam," nor could it "bribe the voters." This was not a satisfactory system to big debtors, however, who understood, says Grant, that "a debt is a promise to pay a sum of money. Cheapen that money, and the burden of debt becomes lighter."

Grover Cleveland opposed inflation. It would align, he said, the country "not with the enlightened nations of Christendom, but side by side with China, with the republic of Mexico, with the republics of Central and South America, and with every other semi-civilized country on the globe." But the banks wanted inflation and a cartelization of their industry, so that they could profit from expanding credit without fear of bank runs. And the government wanted more power. The result was the Federal Reserve System. The *Wall Street Journal* had pleaded with Congress "to give us what every other civilized country possesses, a central bank," and we got it.

When the Federal Reserve Act was signed on December 23, 1913, the United Cigar Stores Co. ran full-page ads hailing it as the equivalent of the Declaration of Independence. Panics, it assured Americans, had now "become ef-fete." The Fed, added Representative Carter Glass of Virginia, is "an altruistic institution" and the key to permanent prosperity. Really a special interest institution, it has brought us nothing but trouble.

During World War I, the Fed created massive amounts of credit to fund the war, as it has done for other unnecessary wars. Since heavy inflation requires at least the unofficial abandonment of the gold standard, it became unpatriotic to use gold coins rather than paper money, or even to give a gold piece as a Christmas present. The Fed stopped the artificial boom in 1920 by ceasing to inflate (something it must always do eventually to avoid hyperinflation), causing a sharp, short depression. But then,