

Christianity. Dr. Pagels' failure to discuss these roots is remarkable.

Similarly, her book lays great emphasis on Jewish-Christian conflict at the time of the great Jewish-Roman war of 66-73 A.D., a pivotal event reflected in the Gospel of Mark, the "wartime" polemic with which Pagels begins her study. It would be embarrassing for her thesis to have a prewar Christian account which is thoroughly imbued with Satanic imagery, but which fails to associate the devil with the Jews or the Jewish leadership: probably what we possess in the hypothetical Gospel of Q, the reconstructed common source of Matthew and Luke. It is Q which shows us the devil offering Jesus the kingdoms of this world, of which he is master; Q shows Jesus being accused of exorcising through Beelzebub, prince of demons; controversially, Q may be the source of Satan falling like lightning from heaven. In Matthew's reading, the Q passage known as the Lord's Prayer ends with the often mistranslated petition to be delivered not from evil as such but from the Evil One (*ho Poneiros*). Q, in short, suggests an early Christianity thoroughly familiar with the diabolical and demonic, but absolutely not in the context of the Jews or the Jewish leadership. Only with a substantial dose of special pleading can Dr. Pagels sustain her "Satanic = Jewish" interpretation of the canonical Gospels.

There is a great deal wrong with this book, in its basic argument no less than its horrid editing. Quotations and ideas are generously repeated, as for example in the paragraph from Origen which makes a nice point on page 139, and returns like an old friend eight pages later. But for all its flaws, the book clearly meets a public demand: like *Miles' Biography*, it spent several weeks at the head of *Publisher's Weekly's* chart of best-selling religion books in hardcover, and it is likely to remain on the reading lists of church discussion groups for years to come. As with her earlier *Gnostic Gospels* (1979), this popular appeal is at least as interesting as anything in the book itself, and demonstrates the immense success of her own strong religious agenda. Pagels' readers seem hungry for a religion rooted in familiar Christian ideas and terminology, but lacking traditional constraints, and they believe they find it depicted in the work of a certified scholar willing to reject boring or difficult orthodoxies, and to rediscover the thought of those daring "radi-

cal Christians." *Origin of Satan* finds notions of absolute supernatural evil not only to be founded on the ephemeral controversies of the first century, but also associated with horrifying religious bigotry. Progress in religion is to be achieved by replacing the archaic concept that "otherness is evil" with Jesus' declaration that forgiveness is divine.

We might take Pagels' book to illustrate the exact opposite point. If she shows so convincingly that the very earliest Christian thought is so pervaded with notions of the diabolical, is it really possible to imagine a genuine modern Christianity which ignores the element of supernatural evil, which speaks of redemption and salvation without daring to imply what one is being redeemed or saved from?

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Highway Music

by Gregory McNamee

**A Thousand Miles from Nowhere:
Trucking Two Continents**

by Graham Coster
New York: North Point Press/Farrar,
Straus & Giroux;
275 pp., \$20.00



American literature, Wallace Stegner once observed, is not so much about place as motion: we are a restless people, and we write restless books that hurtle us from A to B with a blur to mark our passage. Discounting Stegner's own lovely evocations of place in books like *Wolf Willow* and *Crossing to Safety*, one has only to think of the *Pequod* and Huck Finn's raft, of Francis Parkman's horse and Neal Cassady's convertible, of Ken Kesey's magic bus and Tom Wolfe's chrome Spam-in-a-can rocket ship, even of John Muir's bunions, to see his point.

It is strange that in the catalog of contraptions and creatures that have propelled our literature, the semitruck should not figure more prominently

than it does. Why do we have no great novels about Macks and Roadmasters and Peterbilts, no epic poems about balling the jack doing double nickels on the dime? Country music would be markedly poorer without our native leviathans; where would Red Sovine and Hank Snow be without them? Transcontinental trucks have left scarcely a dent in our writing, although the image of them rolling down the endless highways of America is a ready-made metaphor, and the whine and hum of 18 wheels on asphalt is an authentically American idiom, as indigenous to these shores as jazz and popcorn.

That it should take a British writer to introduce the diesel-belching rig to us as an object of literary investigation is another curiosity. That is just what the novelist Graham Coster—the author, fittingly, of a book called *Train, Train*—does with *A Thousand Miles from Nowhere*, a good serious book of literary journalism that coincidentally marks the return of the North Point Press imprint.

The British have always produced fine travel writing, a body of work sometimes marked by a certain snotty disdain for the local subjects and a quickness to take credit where credit is not always due. Among American travel writers, only Paul Theroux seems to have imported these attitudes, but Coster will have none of them. He has an open humor and a pleasant way, as when he explains that in his own country, his interest in trucks is not widely shared:

In Britain we like trains. We invented them. Therefore we don't like trucks. Trains keep to their own neat ribbons of rail and stop at stations a mile out of town; trucks barge through half-timbered high streets and vibrate our Victorian sewage systems to pieces. A railway track says 'within limits'; the tidal wave of spray that smacks you sideways on a rainswept M4 says 'free for all.'

When Coster undertakes to learn something of how a big rig—"artics" they're called in Britain, misspelling included—is driven, he enters a world of power and terror. An instructor tells him, "You will be in charge of a very large killing machine," and he learns that in guiding 11 tons that stretch 50 feet behind the driver's seat, "you're an oceanliner captain looking through your tele-

scope for icebergs,” icebergs that include Volkswagens, horse-drawn carts, and just about every other vehicle Europe can toss out on the highways.

Theoretical education behind him, Coster is off to Russia—“straight on past the Pizza Hut, left at the Kremlin”—and ready to give the reader lessons in economics, sociology, and history. To the truckers of the European Economic Community, we learn, Hungary is the pirate nation of the highway, underbidding at catastrophically low rates to secure trucking for its huge state-run conglomerates; to sail under Hungarian colors is to hoist the Jolly Roger. In Europe, as in America, trucks account for more than 90 percent of all goods hauled, and, with markets expanding everywhere, Coster does not quite come out and say that nationalist tensions are likely to enter into the business with increasing frequency. The internationalist tensions are strange enough: thanks to EEC rules, Coster remarks, a contract trucker will haul a trailer full of ice cream from England to Russia, only to pick up another trailer full of ice cream in Germany to cart back across the channel: coals to Newcastle, sops to the tutelary spirits of overregulated trade.

Coster is generous with details, remarking that truckers are obsessed with the cleanliness of their vehicles not only as a mark of pride but also as a matter of economics; he is told dark cautionary tales of one driver “whose dedication to squalor had managed to knock a good thousand [pounds] off the resale price of his truck.” As a travel writer must, he instructs in local custom, especially the ubiquity of Snickers bars as the ultimate road food. “They are as nutritious and healthy as a plate of eggs and bacon,” he writes without irony. He is less forthcoming with other elements of the trucker’s diet; as Bruce Chatwin said in *The Songtimes*, the interiors of Australia and other vast inland empires were settled by big trucks and amphetamines.

Longtime English haulers, Coster writes, dream of trucking America, piloting an “indestructible Kenilworth, the Harley-Davidson of trucks, with a wide road and a distant horizon to itself.” The second half of *A Thousand Miles from Nowhere* takes Coster from the Eurasian plain to the interior of America, and here he can only marvel at the differences. “Continental truckers in Europe had the border queues for Russia and Hungary,” he writes. “In America you had Texas.”

In Europe, truckers keep their trailers spotless; in America, Coster finds them festooned with slogans like “If You Can’t Run with the Big Dogs Stay on the Porch,” “Intellect Is Invisible to the Man Who Has None,” and “Nothing Needs Reforming So Much as Other People’s Habits,” leading him to remark brightly, “If Schopenhauer had had the chance to visit Truckworld . . . he’d have seen that the Road Kill Café T-shirts said it better.”

A Thousand Miles from Nowhere works at every level, but it leaves a few things unsaid. I wish, having marveled throughout my travels in the mountainous West why more big rigs don’t go plunging off the cliffside ledges that often pass for highways in these parts, that Coster had given us a bit more “thick description”—or even a heavier dose of gonzo—on the actual business of operating a truck. I would like him to have explained why

truckers find it necessary to dog the tails of small cars at great rates of speed in the most inclement weather, why they eat like Elvis, why so many people are lured to a hard life of hemorrhoids and bad coffee on the road.

But I am glad to have what Coster gives us here: a good antiromantic look at the world of trucking, a glimpse inside the cab. “Travel writers may still essay transnavigation of the globe by antique steam-engine or renovated sail-boat, but trade doesn’t,” he remarks, and his devotion to the real world is welcome. It is also a challenge to American writers to do him one better on their own turf, and to bring the big rigs within the scope of our literature.

Gregory McNamee’s newest books are *In the Presence of Wolves* and *The Sierra Club Desert Reader*.

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Letter From Inner Israel

by Jacob Neusner

The Goyim Aren't Always Wrong



A small people with a distinctive religion, the Jews throughout history have tried to avoid imitating the Gentiles (that is, everybody else), lest assimilation destroy the faith and the group that embodies it. In fact, Scripture's passionate denunciation of idolatry led the ancient rabbis, "our sages of blessed memory," to condemn certain practices under the rubric of "the ways of the Amorite," meaning, don't do things the way *they* do. Philip Roth captures the psychology in *Portnoy's Complaint*: "They'll eat anything, and they'll do anything too."

But there is assimilation, and then there is *assimilation*. Some decades ago, the Chancellor of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, Gerson D. Cohen, gave a lecture, "The Blessings of Assimilation in Jewish History," that scandalized the faithful, because he saw good in adopting Gentile virtue and the beauty of other faiths. As between segregationists and integrationists, most American Jews concur and opt for integration, while preserving their own distinctive character. They do so because most Jews in this country take a more positive view of Gentiles. They wish to maintain a distinctive group life, but in ways comparable to those of their Gentile friends and neighbors.

True, federal racism has encouraged homogenization by classifying Jews as "whites," just as the Israeli system assigns American Jews to the class of "Anglo-Saxons," which would certainly have surprised not only Ethelred the Unready but also King Edward I ("the pious"), who found our forebears insufficiently Anglo-Saxon and booted them out of England. But the upshot is, we do not live behind ghetto walls and do not want to.

Still, the advent of Christmas brings an annual crisis into Jewish homes. Starting in early October and ending in January, the season underscores our differences: that it's a rite we Jews cannot and do not practice. But while underscoring our difference, the holiday season also highlights our sameness. With the Supreme Court's declaration that Christmas is really a secular, cultural occasion, the yearly explosion of greed and sentimentality in the name of piety no longer requires even the pretense of a religious occasion. True Christianity—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox alike—sees matters otherwise and now joins Judaism as another minority, one exiled from a common culture that has ruined its sacred occasion. Only Easter, more eggs and bunnies than the Risen Christ, still reminds the world that, once upon a time everywhere, and here and now in some isolated sectors, Christianity was and remains a great religion, not merely an excuse for giving, getting, and gorging.

One Christian practice that I admire is the lighting up of homes for the holy season. Here in St. Petersburg, where I live on the shores of Tampa Bay, the practice proves especially compelling. The lighted homes across the bayou, casting colored shadows on dark water, meet the light of the yachts on the bay nearby. On a spit of land, on one side of an inlet, Hanukkah candles are lit, from night to night, and across the waves, on the other side, Christmas lights respond. Somehow the dark knights of the Militant Separationists have not found their way to our corner of the world, to drive our holidays of light, both Judaic and Christian, off public property.

Ever since making our home here five and a half years ago, my wife and I have enjoyed the lights over the water. Last year, I got a leaflet offering a curious service: "We will light up your home, in your own design, supplying the wiring, lights, and the rest, putting up the decoration by December 1 and taking it down January 15, for \$500." What a great idea, I thought—I can have them light our house by the bay, with its balcony overlooking the park and the beach and the gentle waves, with a huge Hanukkah Menorah covering the front of the

house, perhaps, too, a picture of Judah Maccabee, and a splash of light to stand for the enduring oil lamp. Since the Christians use green and red, we might use orange, blue, and white. Cooler heads prevailed.

But that led me to wonder, what would be so bad if we did? After all, living in the benign mixture of Southern and Midwestern culture that defines west-central Florida, who would misunderstand? Our neighbors would be no more bemused than they are by the *sukkah* (tabernacle) where we eat our meals from one fall to the next in our backyard, covering it with palm branches cut from our, and our neighbors', palm trees (they are instructed by me exactly what date to have their palms trimmed, so they follow the lunar calendar to make sure that, on the first full moon after the autumnal equinox, we have plenty of front for the *sukkah* covering). True, my neighbor at first thought it was an outdoor Jacuzzi, and (fully clothed) we eat meals there (at least, at night, when it is cool enough).

Why not celebrate our holiday by adopting a practice that our Christian neighbors use to mark theirs—only in a Judaic manner? After all, some of our most valued rites and holy occasions are adaptations, and the principal events of the Christian calendar, Easter and Pentecost, not to mention the Sabbath/Sunday, come to Christianity from Judaism. In fact, Jews give gifts on Hanukkah, so their children will not feel left out, and no one today deems us less distinctive for that. If it makes our kids feel good to define "being Jewish" as getting gifts for eight nights, instead of only one day or night like their Christian friends, so be it.

Indeed, I can think of other Christian practices that would make Judaism a stronger and more distinctive religion in this country—regular church-going in large numbers, rather than the pitiful pick-up crowd that the Reform and Conservative synagogues get Sabbath mornings; self-respect and pride in their public celebrations, rather than the Marrano-type dissimulation that all but the Orthodox Jews pretend. Indeed, in my view, the most American of all Judaisms is Lubovitch Hasidism, with its huge menorahs in front of city halls all over