

watching a corpse," when they conversed on serious subjects, Johnson stretched Boswell's mind to the utmost. When his great friend died, Boswell wrote: "He has made a chasm, which not only nothing can fill up, but which nothing has a tendency to fill up . . . No man can be said to put you in mind of Johnson." He then dedicated himself to the task he had been preparing for throughout his adult life and settled down to write the greatest biography in the English language.

Jeffrey Meyers has recently published Orwell: Winty Conscience of a Generation (Norton), Privileged Moments: Encounters with Writers (Wisconsin), and Hemingway: Life into Art (Cooper Square).

## The Way Forward Is With a Broken Head

by J.O. Tate

### The Way Forward Is With a Broken Heart

by Alice Walker  
New York: Random House;  
201 pp., \$23.95



**S**ymptoms: Health fine until reads Walker latest. Immediate somatic distress of all systems incl. pulmonary; digestive crisis, upper, middle, and lower; cardiac irregularity; low and high blood pressure; skin rashes and lesions; emerging hyperallergenic reactions to paper, ink, reading process. Psychosomatic reactions: delusions of persecution, fears of apocalypse, entropic anxieties, all leading to reaction formation of unjustified bipolar despair/joy.

Toxins Indicated: Walker syntactic breakdown, sentence fragments, logical void. Word processing/chat room/cultural inversion induces paranoid hostility. Walker notes for first draft publ. as "book" = other books on shelf/outrage<fraud. Self-serving smarm and lack of craft and coherence>nausea. Narcissistic twaddle palmed off as "art." Deserves "F" in community college "creative writing" class. Identity crisis: Countercultural pose sanctioned by big-time establishment publisher w/book tour =

demonstration of big lie. Counterculture = establishment.

Gnosis: Political and other antinominism, cornball sentiments, approves of *The Bridges of Madison County*. Alice Walker subject = Alice Walker. "Autobiographical" "stories" = failure of imagination but needs new book for book tour and money, tax write-offs. Problem: how to retain victim status while exploiting success. Solution: self-absorbed recitals of thinly disguised but entirely self-serving blathering about victimization — race, poverty, civil-rights movement, writing, resentments of family, divorce, feelings, feelings about feelings. Account of divorce = account of her sensitivity then and now; ex-husband not entirely friendly about divorce = male shortcoming. Alice Walker motifs throughout "book" repeat familiar themes for dissertations about Alice Walker being written even now. Motifs: approving citations of communist dictators such as Fidel Castro (compare Maurice Bishop in previous essay); numerous accounts of men hitting women and men betraying women (though no man wrote *this* junk); crying a lot (though only this book itself justifies tears); unassimilated references to food, lesbian stories, and acknowledgments of self-absorption and such demonstrations of ignorance as "I asked him Why not and he said that white male writers, like Faulkner and Hawthorne and Mark Twain never wrote about themselves, and that they were masters at it. And I asked him whether this didn't come out of a tradition of being a writer but needing to keep quiet about the slaving and gunrunning and Indian killing in your family tree. In other words, I said, if white men wrote truthfully about themselves, how could they continue to fool the rest of us?" Acknowledgment of wealth problem, in exceptional statement of grammatical order: "Today I own large, beautiful houses, overcompensation for the shacks in which I was raised; and when I travel, my hotel suite is nearly as large as our old house." Footnotes to names of characters, denying that they are real names, bizarre in book of stories — confusion of complete self-absorption trumps any generic/conventional considerations. Reading Alice Walker = entertaining alien "thoughts." To do that = psychic crisis.

Diagnosis: Alice Walker problem superficial — only part of larger cultural crisis which shatters reason, identity, and knowledge. Reaction essentially healthy

= rejection of chaos. Indignation righteous. Therefore: return to order with good, not bad, art. Reaffirm sound values. Health issue takes care of itself if strip malls, contemporary popular music, and toxic anti-discourse are avoided.

Prescriptive Psychic Antitoxins: Attend Latin Masses. Read Bible in spite of her reading it. Read Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas. Read fiction with care for syntactical/logical reaffirmation: Smollett, Fielding, Austen, Waugh. Go to museums, looking only at representational art at least 200 years old. Practice "male gaze" on provocative sculptures. Tour Europe, ignore teenagers and traffic. Look at cathedrals and castles. Listen to Bach, Mozart, Beethoven. Rent John Wayne videos, films noirs ditto. Cultivate phallogocentric restoratives: open doors for women, flirt, etc. Practice good manners especially when that annoys countercultural aliens.

Physical Therapies Recommended: Tobacco (filters). Alcohol (ladies' cocktails counterindicated). Wine with pasta and other eurocentric foods. Hitting things (baseballs, golf balls, hockey pucks). Kicking things (footballs, soccer balls, doors). Running (not jogging). Boxing, martial arts. Swearing, good for lungs and head. Join gun club, obtain license to carry, practice quick draw and aim, avoid hearing damage from hours of shooting. Acquire shotgun (twelve-gauge pump, buckshot) for residential protection. Cultivate manliness at all times. To keep on toes, accept offers to step outside of bars.

Rx (Homeopathic Remedies, Caution Indicated): To ease transition into debased *Zeitgeist*, immerse in destructive element. Sample Richard Simmons *Sweatin' to the Oldies* videos, Julia Roberts movies, Hillary Rodham Clinton photos daily in newspapers, Oprah Winfrey whining about weight and wealth problems daily on television, etc. Check out political pronouncements of Alec Baldwin, Barbra Streisand, Barney Frank, and Jerrold Nadler. Memorize Al Gore unctious about "saving the integrity of our democratic process." Approach Alice Walker "books" with forked stick. Take two aspirins and call in morning.

J.O. Tate is a professor of English at Dowling College on Long Island.

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# Letter From Rockford

by Scott P. Richert

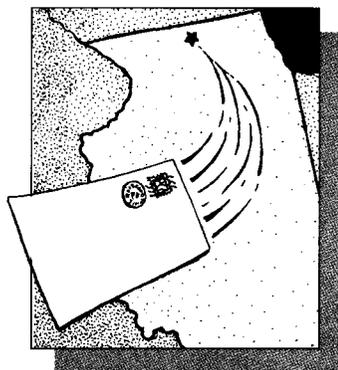
## I've Got a Secret

Back in November and December, while Republicans across the country were writing letters, calling in to talk radio, and even taking to the streets to protest Al Gore's attempt to steal the election in Florida, their fellow party members in Rockford remained strangely silent. They must have found it disquieting when the Bush campaign kept insisting that machines are more accurate than humans. After all, it's been a staple of local Republican belief for almost 20 years that Rockford Democrats have manipulated computerized counting machines to steal at least three of the last five mayoral elections.

In theory, at least, it's possible. As James J. Condit argued in *Chronicles* four years ago ("A House Without Doors," *Views*, November 1996), the same technology that simplifies the process of counting votes also makes it much easier to steal an election. Since computerized counting is conducted at central locations, ballots must be moved, which means there's an opportunity to substitute pre-punched ballots for the ones voters actually used. If that fails, the counting machines' computers can be programmed to return the desired result.

While I have been a pollwatcher during one local election and have observed the vote counting after another, I've seen no evidence that local Democrats have actually tampered with either ballots or counting machines. But I am convinced of the truth of a related conspiracy theory: Most politicians in Rockford are heavily influenced by a small group of public contractors and real-estate developers. Their own campaign-finance disclosure statements on the Illinois Board of Elections website ([www.elections.state.il.us](http://www.elections.state.il.us)) provide plenty of evidence.

But if everyone here in Rockford has heard that the last two mayors have simply been pawns of monied interests (and everyone has), then why have the Democrats won the last five mayoral elections in a city routinely described as Republican? The simple answer could be that local voters just don't care.



There may, however, be more at work here. When most people—in Rockford or elsewhere—hear the word “conspiracy,” they think of a cabal aimed at overturning the will of the people. That's certainly the way popular literature, movies, and TV shows portray conspiracies. But if you were trying to gain power (or wealth) in the modern world, why would you set yourself against the people? It's much easier to present yourself as their champion. Give them what they want, and they will return the favor.

Both Dostoyevsky's Grand Inquisitor and the Cigarette-Smoking Man on *The X-Files* understood this. So, too, did the interests that backed Rockford Democratic mayoral candidate John McNamara in 1981. A blue-collar town heavily dependent on the aerospace industry, Rockford had been hit hard by the recession of the late 70's and early 80's. Unemployment was over 20 percent; factories were closing; new businesses weren't taking up the slack. Rockford was on its way to becoming a ghost town.

Helped along by the Reagan military buildup (which revitalized Rockford's industries), John McNamara gave the people what they wanted—economic recovery—while enriching his benefactors through a series of public-works projects (knocking down Rockford's historic buildings and erecting Soviet-style ones), tax breaks, and zoning changes that encouraged private development. By the time McNamara left office in 1989, Rockford's economy had not only rebounded but added a service sector (read: strip malls and chain restaurants). The public-works contractors and real-estate developers who had supported him were firmly entrenched, and he was able to handpick his successor: our current may-

or, Democrat Charles Box. Box has nurtured the city's relationship with McNamara's benefactors, and McNamara himself became president of the parent company of the chief public-works contractor, Rockford Blacktop.

Because many of us don't like the intimate connection between Rockford Blacktop and our city government, we often forget that most people in Winnebago County don't mind as long as the roads that Blacktop builds make it easier for them to drive from the vinyl-sided ranch houses they bought from Gambino Realtors to the strip malls that Sunil Puri's First Rockford Group built. In other words, those who supported John McNamara in 1981 have triumphed—not by working against the people, but by recognizing what they wanted and using that knowledge to gain power and wealth. (If government weren't involved, libertarians would undoubtedly proclaim this a stunning example of the virtues of the free market.)

That doesn't change the fact that a small elite dominates the government of Rockford and Winnebago County for its own enrichment, but it changes the political dynamic. Those of us who recognize what's wrong here in Rockford can't count on setting it right by winning elections—particularly since politicians in both parties realize which side their bread is buttered on. Our next mayoral election (in April) will pit a Democratic state representative with strong ties to the McNamara/Box machine against a Republican businessman who shares a campaign-finance chairman—and several key supporters—with the current Democratic mayor. What's the point of having two parties?

At its root, the degeneration of modern democracy is a cultural problem, not a political one. Once political power is vested in the people, all that stands between oligarchy and freedom is the virtue of the masses. In the 18th and 19th centuries, “popular” revolutions failed because the revolutionaries didn't realize the extent to which the people were still attached to throne and altar. But now, the throne is occupied by the likes of Bill Clinton and the altar is attended by Jesse