I argued in chapter 1 that contemporary literature in English has been strangely and unconscionably overlooked in our current debates over literary and cultural studies. Since the previous three chapters have not touched on literature at all, except to gesture, at the close of the last chapter, toward the importance of literature in a cultural studies curriculum, readers may well be asking by this point why I should have made such an argument in chapter 1, and how, if at all, it informs my own practices as a reader, writer, and teacher. I am no expert, after all, in Michael Ondaatje or Buchi Emecheta; indeed, if English departments became departments of “literatures in English” tomorrow I would be among those faculty who would need to begin reading more
widely in contemporary literature in order to stay current with the
discipline.

What's more, I know full well that whatever reputation I have as a
critic has not, for the most part, depended on my skills as a close reader
of literary texts. This state of affairs has begun to strike me as odd, not
only because I spent my undergraduate and graduate years doing nothing
but producing close readings of literary texts (I still have a sinuous
argument about Book IV of the Faerie Queene if anyone's interested),
but particularly because my courses at the University of Illinois have
been, with only two exceptions, courses in American and African Ameri-
can literature. At the end of my first five years at Illinois I calculated that
I had assigned over sixty different American writers, from Nathaniel
Hawthorne and Harriet Jacobs to Willa Cather and Henry Roth to Toni
Morrison and Richard Powers. To my surprise and delight, I had even
taught a couple of courses in contemporary literature, usually under the
heading of Postmodernism and American Fiction. I had even published
a first book, Marginal Forces/Cultural Centers, in which I described,
among other things, the gap between "creative writers" and "critics" in
the academy. But in my own life, the gap between my writing career and
my teaching of literature was only growing wider.

Then one day in 1992 Charles Harris of Illinois State University sent
me a long letter in which he took up the argument of Marginal Forces
and gave me a chance to do something about it: inviting me to contrib-
ute to a special issue of Critique that would be devoted to the work of
nonprofit presses in the United States, he asked whether I would consider
the work of Fiction Collective 2 as a place where contemporary "creative
writers" and contemporary critics/theorists might meet. I accepted the
invitation, and spent many months in 1993–94 reading here and there
in the Fiction Collective 2 list, getting a feel for the terrain and trying to
figure out what I could say about the cultural status of nonprofit "avant-
garde" publishing houses that were supported in part by federal grants,
private enterprise, and university subsidies. Was it possible, I wondered,
to have an academically subsidized avant-garde, or was the concept of
the "avant-garde" itself a modernist hangover from which we would do
well to recover?
In March 1997, these questions were answered dramatically when the cultural status of Fiction Collective 2 was placed firmly on the national agenda—and not by me, either. While cultural studies and most of the literary academy were ignoring FC2, Representative Peter Hoekstra (R.-Michigan) was discovering that the press sometimes publishes sexually explicit material, some of it involving intimate physical relations between woman and woman. The guilty text in question was a collection titled *Chick-Lit 2: No Chick Vies*, edited by Cris Mazza et al. (about whom I’ll have more to say below), and the reason it was important was that it gave congressional Republicans the ammunition they wanted to defund the National Endowment for the Arts once and for all. The argument, of course, was that taxpayer dollars should not be spent to help produce sexually explicit representations of same-sex couples. There is an obvious (and entirely democratic) counterargument to this position, a counterargument that has nothing to do with likening Hoekstra and his allies to Nazis who crusade against “degenerate” art. It goes like this: despite what Republicans want to believe, same-sex couples who enjoy sexually explicit representations in literature (not to speak of heterosexual couples who enjoy sexually explicit representations of same-sex couples) are actually part of the current population of the United States. Indeed, they make up far more of the citizenry of the Republic, in proportional terms, than the portion of the national budget that goes to Fiction Collective 2: since FC2 received $25,000 in fiscal year 1996, or approximately $0.00000017 of a total budget of $1.5 trillion, and $0.00000017 of the current U.S. population (250,000,000) happens to be four, it’s probably safe to say that FC2’s portion of the national budget does not exceed its popular mandate.

All of a sudden, the 105th Congress had found its Mapplethorpe—except that this time, in an unprecedented move, elected officials were targeting an entire publishing house rather than a specific text or artist. Even the fact that literature was under attack had a kind of exotic or antiquarian feel to it, as if we’d been catapulted into fundamentalist Iran or whisked back to the days of the U.S. *Ulysses* trial in 1933: our national debates over sexually explicit representations have been almost entirely taken up with visual pornography since the 1960s, just as most pornogra-
phy tends to be visual as well (so much so that it is almost unheard of to come across an “adult books” store that actually does a brisk business in quality fiction). At this writing I am not sure that FC2 or the National Endowment for the Arts will survive this latest attack, so I do not want to sound glib or facetious in describing what I want to call the long-awaited Return of Comstock. Likewise, even though there’s much to hope for in Representative Hoekstra’s attack (perhaps Republicans will begin reading more widely, and perhaps FC2 will benefit from the general publicity), still, there’s a real danger here that the always vulnerable National Endowments will be eviscerated by the forces of privatization and plutocracy—and, more to the immediate point, there’s every chance that the Fiction Collective 2 list, in all its diversity and richness, will get lost in the Capitol Hill Shuffle. That list, as I hope to show in this chapter, is in some sense “subversive,” and it contains plenty of sexual explicitness, too—more than enough for any Helmsman or Orrin Hatchetman (or their henchmen) in the U.S. House or Senate. But as usual, the material under scrutiny here is more complicated and rewarding than most of our democratically elected cultural fascists can account for.

The Fiction Collective was founded in 1974 at Brooklyn College by Jonathan Baumbach, Steve Katz, Peter Spielberg, and Mark Minsky. The year before, Richard Kostelanetz had published his incendiary book, *The End of Intelligent Writing*, which basically accused the entire publishing industry of being a closed shop of logrolling think-alikes—and, more accurately, pointed out the extraordinary coincidence between the amount of ad space bought by various publishers in the *New York Times Book Review* and the amount of review space allotted to those publishers by the editors of the *Review*. The Fiction Collective, from its inception, meant to shake up that arrangement. Through the 1970s the collective thrived, turning out wave upon wave of innovative, exciting fiction, garnering critical acclaim not only from variously *avant* folks like Robert Coover and Jerome Klinkowitz but also, on occasion, from *Newsweek* and the *New York Times* to boot. Raymond Federman’s *Take It or Leave It*, Ron Sukenick’s *Long Talking Bad Conditions Blues*, Baumbach’s *Chez
Charlotte and Emily, Spielberg’s Crash-Landing, Clarence Major’s Reflex and Bone Structure, Fanny Howe’s In the Middle of Nowhere—all were Fiction Collective books, and all helped establish FC’s reputation in the publishing world, in the academy, and among “serious” writers and readers. Fiction Collective writers found champions like Rachel Blau du Plessis, Toni Morrison, and Morris Dickstein, and the original FC group itself was unified enough to appear as a “school,” with an identifiable brand name and trademark: whether it was called “surfiction” (Federman) or “post-contemporary” (Klinkowitz), FC fiction was distinguished by its bad attitude toward réportage, its narrative reflexivity, its typographical oddities, its penchant for addressing readers directly—you know, its general preference for ludicity over lucidity.

But by 1987, FC was down to publishing only one or two books a year from the five to six a year of the 1970s. Part of the problem was the Fiction Collective itself: originally a small, close-knit boys’ club dedicated to publishing weird writers frozen out by the onset of MergerMania and MallFiction, the collective had grown downright unwieldy over a decade and more—partly because each new writer became part of the collective upon publication of his or her work, an arrangement that eventually presented the group with the headache of coordinating something like forty voting members. The collective also had its image problems, as well, in the form of an annoying habit of representing itself as more-avant-than-thou, the vanguard’s vanguard—and aside from people like Clarence Major or Fanny Howe, its constituent writers were as overwhelmingly white and male as any corporate boardroom. But at the same time, the collective would sometimes be the publishing world’s answer to Broadway Danny Rose, taking on talent that no one else would touch—until the talent got hot and moved on to the big time.

Fiction Collective 2 was therefore born from FC’s ashes in 1988, and is now run by the leaders of the new school, Ron Sukenick and Curtis White. Like many other small presses, FC2 now publishes a very healthy ten to twelve books a year, including the new Black Ice series (inaugurated in 1993) and a series begun in 1991, On the Edge: New Women’s Fiction. Each year FC2 also publishes the winner of its national fiction competition, as well as the annual Charles H. and N. Mildred Nilon
Excellence in Minority Fiction Award. The current collective writers no longer constitute an identifiable school, but at the same time (and for the same reasons), what FC2 has lost in brand-name clarity it has gained in heterogeneity and vitality.

Until it became material for congressional testimony, however, the FC2 lineup was not nearly so newsworthy as was the original FC cast. Even though FC2’s brand of experimental fiction is, by and large, every bit as good as experimental fiction ever was (say, since Tristram Shandy), and the rejuvenation of FC2 is an extraordinarily bright sign for dissidents, punks, and strange writers everywhere, it’s so far been much less visible to the literati than was its earlier incarnation—largely thanks to the fact that the mainstream trade press reviewing apparatus has shriveled drastically in the past fifteen years. If Richard Kostelanetz thought it was hard for an independent publisher to draw major review attention in 1973, he surely knows that by now it’s nearly impossible. Nonprofit publishers get even less space from generalist reviews than does contemporary literary theory, which means you probably won’t find Newsweek or the New Republic trumpeting any FC2 titles in the near future. But like contemporary theory, FC2 work is finding more responsive (and responsible) audiences in the pages of the alternative press—from the Village Voice and the San Diego Reader to the more “specialized” readerships of Science Fiction Eye and Maximum RocknRoll (the nation’s largest and longest-lived review of punk and post-punk culture). And the market for FC2 books, though considerably less “academic” than the market for theory, is roughly the same size: new books usually appear in runs of two or three thousand, which means that FC2 work is very likely competing for some of the same .00001 of the American public that buys the work of those jargon-addled theoreticians and talented small press poets and fiction writers no one’s ever heard of (.00001 is only 2,500 people, but don’t forget that .00001 of the national budget is still a hefty $15 million). If there tends to be a good deal of hostility, suspicion, and mutual indifference circulating among the avant FC2 crowd, the theory-laden MLA crowd, and the trad-fiction MFA crowd (and the volume of anti-academic rhetoric among trad and nontrad writers is but one index of this), that’s not only because their intellectual
enterprises are often at odds; it’s also because they’re all fighting for the same small subculture of active, intellectually engaged readers—whether in the pages of the TBR, the AWP Chronicle, or Maximum RocknRoll.

As Sukenick has it, the transition from FC to FC2 is not so much a change in style or cultural location as a change in the collective’s approach to the idea of a “popular” audience: whereas FC, like New Directions, tried to exist against or despite the mass market, FC2 is actually trying to break into the mass market. Sukenick’s analogy—and you can find this in the promotional material for Black Ice—is “the recent explosion in the alternative music scene.” But that analogy only begs the question: sure, it would be wonderful if FC2 emerged from the garage, like Nirvana, to reach the mass market unmodified and reshape the industry. But the “explosion” in “alternative” music is also an explosion in the meaning of the word “alternative”—as evidenced by the fact that the turgid Pearl Jam and the blandomatic Bud Dry are marketed as “alternative” bands and beers. So perhaps the challenge for marginal cultural producers in the 1990s and beyond will be to come up with an alternative to “alternative.” All the same, FC2’s relation to alt-pop and alt-mass does indeed signal an important cultural shift in independent publishing. Small quality presses like New Directions were defined by the romantic-modernist dream of preserving Great Books from the detritus of mass culture and the corruptions of the marketplace; the original Fiction Collective, too, participated in that dream, trying to create a small enclave in which “the market” would have no force over the production of new literature. FC2, by contrast, characteristically tries to exploit the logic of the market (with its new series, its streamlined structure, and its wider distribution), and bore into the mass from within. This strategy suits its younger Avant-Pop writers just fine, since it enacts the strategies pursued by their own writing. What’s odd about this configuration, though, is that it leaves us with an “avant-garde” that doesn’t actually take up the “pure” cultural position of an intellectual vanguard. If you’re sympathetic to Andreas Huyssen’s cogent account of postmodernism as a “post-avantgarde” culture, then, the distinctive thing about FC2 is that its texts and readers are as likely to show up on Internet or post-punk fanzines as in small cafés, disseminated as circu-
itously and as unpredictably through the culture as is postmodernism itself.

In 1980, Peter Quartermain’s *Chicago Review* article on the Fiction Collective noted that most of its leading writers were academics or authors of scholarly studies, and that “one would expect it to take a theoretical or programmatic approach to the art of fiction” (67). Today, although FC2’s work can still be called “theoretical” (but not necessarily “programmatic”), its authors tend to describe themselves as artists, law students, dog trainers, playwrights, musicians, drifters, poets, and, on occasion, teachers and academics too. Some of them, like Cris Mazza and Richard Grossman, publish with both FC2 and other small presses (in Mazza’s case, Coffee House; in Grossman’s, Graywolf). Others, like Mark Leyner and Gerald Vizenor, published with the collective in the 1980s and have since “crossed over” to wider audiences.

Leyner’s first book, *I Smell Esther Williams* (1983), offers twenty-six short somethings; I’d call them “stories” but for their cumulatively antinarrative effect. The opening piece, appropriately titled “Launch,” gives some idea of the whole: beginning with “I’ve given the raft with the woman you’ve been waiting for a little push so you should be receiving her any day now” (3), the four-page piece quickly complicates the idea of woman-as-exchange. “If it is late at night,” Leyner writes, “we pretend that we have lost the right to vote and that we have been sterilized by missionaries” (4). Leyner has the courage to insist “it’s about time that the young American poets took Marianne Faithful off her pedestal” (78), to write solemnly of “the anonymous citizens of Targetgrad” (185), and to proclaim that “the slightest pang feels isometric and giddy and wanton like so many handfuls of hair, because I have drawn asbestos dust into my lungs and drunk the milk of Michigan and dragged you out of an impending marriage for twelve hours in plain night” (35). But it seems somehow disappointing, not to say smoothly orange-rind, that the title story itself—at twenty-seven pages by far the longest thing in the volume—neglects even to mention Esther Williams. But then, it was Leyner’s first book.

If Leyner offers us what Fredric Jameson called (in another context) “surrealism without the unconscious,” Gerald Vizenor’s second novel
and only FC2 title, *Griever: An American Monkey King in China* (1987), gives us surrealism amid myriad double consciousnesses: the Native American protagonist, Griever de Hocus, is "a mixedblood tribal trickster, a close relative to the old mind monkeys" (34) who loves "women, heart gossip, stones, trees" and collects "lost shoes and broken wheels" (21). He's on something like a Fulbright, teaching in the China of 1983; his opaque and sinuous narrative begins in hallucinatory visions of fire bears, black opal rings, and birchbark manuscripts, and ends with the brutal death of Hester Hua Dan, whose father, Egas Zhang (Griever’s supervisor, as it turns out), murders her when he learns she is carrying Griever’s child. What begins in dream and comic rebellion—as when Griever liberates chickens from the market square in Tianjin and replaces Chinese patriotic music with John Philip Sousa on the campus loudspeakers—gradually turns deadly serious, as Griever interrupts an execution caravan (freeing a drug dealer, a thief, a prostitute, an art historian, and three rapists), disrupts the patriarchy that kills Hester Hua Dan, and finally escapes with Kangmei (Hester’s half-sister by an American father) on an ultralight aircraft shipped to him from the reservation of his birth. The birchbark manuscript, filled with occult writings that remind Griever of “the tribal medicine scrolls from the reservation” (18), turns out to contain nothing but recipes for blue chicken. The personal becomes the political, the cryptic becomes the quotidian, and the trickster runs afowl of the state. Of Vizenor’s trickster tales, *Griever* is often considered the most difficult; but among FC2 offerings, it looks right at home.

FC2’s 1990s list, as best I can make it out after perusing roughly two dozen titles, more or less falls under two major headings, neither of which is definitive; any individual author will exceed them in some way. On one side there’s the forbidding narrative experimentalists, carrying on one or another modernist tradition regardless of whether the AWP, Time Warner, or Vintage Contemporaries acknowledges its existence. On the other side you have the more diffuse Avant-Pop bunch, less inclined to fine writing than to visceral affect. (The Black Ice series tends to feature the Avant-Pops; Black Ice books are small and cheap—backpocket size, $6 or $7, just right for the coffeeshop habitué on the go, tuft
of chin hair optional.) Under the neo-modernist heading I put writers like Rosaire Appel, Kenneth Bernard, Lou Robinson, Jacques Servin, D. N. Stuefloten, Yuriy Tarnawsky, and Kathryn Thompson; under Avant-Pop I'll put Mark Amerika, Ricardo Cortez Cruz, Eurudice, Bayard Johnson, Philip Lewis, and Derek Pell. And then for writers like Omar Castañeda, Cris Mazza, and Richard Grossman, you can make up your own designation.

I'll confess to being more comfortable with the neo-mods than with the Avant-Pops, but I also have to admit that the A-Ps usually provide the steeper and faster roller-coaster rides of the two. Bayard Johnson’s *Damned Right* (1994) seems to me in many ways the most promising of the crop so far. Mixing Kerouac’s manic energy with Nathanael West’s apocalyptic black humor, Johnson has written an all-roads-lead-to-L.A. novel that manages to be exhilarating and poignant even when it’s recycling a few on-the-road American-lit clichés. The narrator’s ambition is to drive his homemade car at speeds over two hundred miles an hour, at which all things assume an “ethereal clarity” (24), and to take his gospel of high speed and inner peace to the L.A. freeways where it can do the most good to all those drones mired in the sludge and dreck of post-urban Southern California. “Oh, the patience of bovine human, requiring no shepherds, no cowboys and no packs of gaunt coyotes to keep them in line. Only concrete abutments” (101).

On the freeway, the narrator has the same illusions about freedom that Huck had on the raft, and his desire to stop moving is roughly equivalent to Huck’s ability to drift northward. His car runs on pure alcohol, and comes equipped with peel-back layers of paint to help him dodge state troopers—as well as a few other design idiosyncrasies: “There’s no backing up on the freeway. That’s rule number one. Not that there are any rules. But when we built the transmission we didn’t bother putting in a reverse gear. Who needs the extra clutter? We aim to go ahead” (40–41). The novel itself, appropriately, is one long chapter, its narrative pace averaging just under the magic two hundred mark. But that’s why it’s so striking to run up against lyrical passages like the narrator’s evocation of undone jigsaw puzzles, pieces “scattered like gems through a forest,” “precious as antique coins, raining down upon the city.
like hailstones" (109), or his empathetic reading of the terrified face of a homeless woman covered in a sweater of crushed aluminum cans, who reminds him of the homeless man covered in kelp:

And she's looking at me that same way: Do I have it right? She doesn't know either, that she isn't the only one who suspects she doesn't. Isn't this how they do it? They stash their wealth and their valuables close to their chest, I've seen them. Don't they? Don't they! What is it, oh God what in the world is it. . . . Please can't you see, I'm the one who's scared. (61)

Shortly thereafter, D-9 Cats bulldoze the homeless encampments into the ground, and the bulldozers appear again in a surreal scene at the end of the novel, clearing a freeway jammed with newly abandoned cars whose owners have squeezed out of their windows just in time to avoid being compacted. Meanwhile, with the unlooked-for aid of a disabled artist-sculptress, the narrator fulfills his other mission, finding his twin sons in Orange County and instilling in them, if no one else, his love of freedom and velocity. The narrator rides off at two-hundred-plus next to an oddly similar alcohol-burning car whose driver is unknown to us, but surely we will be hearing from Bayard Johnson again before too long.

The rest of Avant-Pop promises more than it delivers, but I'm beginning to suspect that's the nature of the beast. Mark Amerika's hyperactive hypertext, The Kafka Chronicles (1993), jumbles journal entries, Gregor Samsa, sex, drugs, the adventures of Blue Sky and Alkaloid Boy, and the CNN ratings coup known to Amerika as "Amerika at War: The Mini-Series." Interesting and at times genuinely corrosive, but only in Donald Wildmon's America could sex and violence carry the weight of political subversion they're laden with here. (Of course, we may wind up living in Donald Wildmon's America, in which case Mark Amerika should become required reading.) Philip Lewis's Life of Death (1993) dissipates its initial energy in a similar fashion, by losing it in scene after scene of adolescent-anarchic sex and relentless caricature. The narrator, Louie Phillips (cough), opens with caustic wit and some politically pointed signifying on the signs of the times: his father's "Third World" bookstore.
fails when he’s outhustled “by those other book-runners next door to him, young white hippies and ganja-smokers who, apart from selling Gaddafi’s Green Book, took heed and stocked The Closing of the American Mind” (11–12). Living in a dystopian-multicultural suburb of D.C. composed of warring “Africans and Indians and Jamaicans and Nicaraguans and Vietnamese and Cambodians” (33), Phillips leaves home, drops out of school, and takes a typical Reagan-era job at the Dummheit Café, a mall restaurant owned by a multinational up to its ears in South Africa. Here he learns “what they mean when they say ‘equal opportunities’ these days—everyone’s got an equal opportunity to get his ass kicked high and wide” (25). A strong beginning, and an accurate sense of labor in the post-Fordist economy, too. By page 50, however, Lewis’s satire gets repetitive, which means it stops being satire. But then, it is his first book.

Eurudice’s F/32 (1990) tells the story of Ela’s vagina, which is stolen from her not long after it is severed from her body by a blind black man who removes it with a knife on upper Fifth Avenue while a curious crowd looks on. Apparently someone swiped the jar Ela was carrying it in after it was severed, and replaced it with a 35 mm wide-angle lens. Well, that explains the book’s title: the lens “shuts at aperture f/32, the smallest opening in any lens” (133). Soon Ela is searching for her cunt (the book calls it this a few thousand times) by way of the Village Voice personals. The thief, meanwhile, tries to seduce the cunt by playing it some “sexy watery music—Jarre’s Equinox” (155), but it escapes, only to appear later as a guest on late-night talk shows. As in Pynchon’s V., characters search frantically for a character known as V who’s apparently responsible for all kinds of random destruction; this V, however, just happens to be a cunt. It’s about this time that killer female genitalia terrorize the New York metropolitan area. Ela and her cunt are eventually reunited (I will refrain from puns about wholes), and the novel closes with a first-person excursion on sex and mirrors: “in the beginning of all there was the mirror, on every side, wide open. . . . [F]rom my safe mirror view, this and the other side were identical” (273). Gogol meets Lacan, and the two tiptoe through the tulips, speaking together. Eurud-
ice’s *F/32* embodies the best and worst of FC2: annoyingly outrageous, hyperliterate, funny, theoretically sharp, and really revolting. Sometimes all on one page.

Much of the same can be said of Derek Pell’s contribution to the collection titled *Avant-Pop*, an S/M version of Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style* (“by the Marquis de Sade, with Revisions, an Introduction, and a Chapter on Writhing”) that starts from Roland Barthes’s claim that Sade’s “pornographic messages are embodied in sentences so pure they might be used as grammatical models.” Ricardo Cortez Cruz’s *Straight outta Compton* (1992) also contains its share of anything-goes sex-n-violence, coded not by de Sade or E. B. White but (as the title suggests) by gangsta rap à la N.W.A. Much of the novel reads as if Cruz is to Ishmael Reed what Reed is to Richard Wright; characters’ dialogue turns out to be samples from *She’s Gotta Have It, Star Trek*, and funkster Morris Day, and at one point Reed himself is signified upon: “while it was dark outside,” writes Cruz, “Rachel practiced hoodoo—whatever that is” (55–56). Rodney King figures prominently; Chris Rock’s *New Jack City* crackhead can be spotted in the wings; and old-school rap giant Doug E. Fresh puts in a cameo as well, and gets his shoes stepped on by boyz n the hood. The novel as a whole reads something like naked lunch in South Central, which is to say (among other things), incoherent, powerful, and savvy about a world Burroughs didn’t much acknowledge.

Overall, Avant-Popsters generally require of their readers more hybrid cultural literacies than do their neo-modernist cohorts, as well as a greater tolerance of bad taste, anarchist political farce, and sexually explicit shenanigans. To this last item, a feminist neo-mod like Lou Robinson might respond, “Why does everybody talk about the body? All the best states leave it behind. It is a launching pad, a jetty” (*Napoleon’s Mare*, 3). Or, to put the distinction more simply, one might say A-P characteristically appeals to a younger readership than the rest of FC2’s list; but since I myself, by accident of a 1961 birth, am either the youngest sibling of the boomers or the oldest specimen of Generation X, my demographic loyalties are somewhat divided on this score. I’ll take Bayard Johnson’s narrative euphoria, for instance, over the crafty but deliberately dreary sentences of Yuriy Tarnawsky, whose *Three Blondes and Death* (1993)
declares that it is written according to an intricate mathematical formula devised by its author. That formula escapes me, though I did manage to notice that the novel's four-hundred-odd pages are filled with short, affectless sentences none of which contain any punctuation other than periods. When the principal character, the unpronounceable Hwbrgdtsse, rapes a girl in chapter 47 of part 4, the narrative effect of Tarnawsky's sentences is downright terrifying. Most of the rest of the time, though, they seem . . . well, methodical, as if they were generated by a mathematical formula devised by the author. Where Avant-Pop smells like teen spirit, Three Blondes and Death sounds like late Beckett without the cadences.

Narrative experiments every bit as forbidding yet (on the whole) less clinical can be found in Lou Robinson's Napoleon's Mare (1991), D. N. Stuefloten's Maya (1992), and Rosaire Appel's transiT (1993). Robinson's novel is the least narrative of the three, and it's published along with some of her "prose poems" that don't look all that different from the "novel" they follow. Her protagonist "makes balance" by practicing a kind of cut-up technique, collecting and juxtaposing words and pictures culled from various magazines: "a giraffe next to a sandstone arch" (5), "a spitting bobcat next to Bernadette Devlin facing it with a glistening snarl" (12). If the clarity and asequentiality of the images suggests echoes of Mark Leyner, the book as a whole registers a much deeper debt to Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes—as when, in the section entitled "A Lesbian Is a Memoir," we read, "A lesbian is a woman who reads without respecting anything. Where is the authority in these words? A lesbian or a memoir neither has nor answers to authority. . . . Who can say. Who can say what? Who can say what a lesbian is. A memoir is a manifesto is a lesbian fucking literature" (21–22). Now, let's see what T. S. Eliot would make of that.

Rosaire Appel's transiT swirls around a series of overheard conversations or half-glimpsed, ill-understood scenes, developing a kind of vorticist narrative whose vortex is a café we enter again and again at different times, from different angles. Sourceless italicized passages appear—and then reappear in the mouths of unnamed characters; men and women have crises and converse intensely in hot, claustrophobic rooms; someone
misses the last train; someone climbs a hill, parched with thirst; someone else dreams of climbing a hill, parched with thirst. The café conversation returns, different snippets overheard this time. Threading through it all are Appel’s voices, some flat and toneless, others of quite distinctive pitch and timbre: “I turn and look out the window. Because of the smoke it feels like dusk, all afternoons are like this. The sky injected with the fat of our lives turns sullen and bloated, a stench comes with it” (37). The overall effect is less like “applying the ideas of painting to fiction,” as the author’s bio blurb suggests, and more like dreaming in Robbe-Grillet.

D. N. Stuefloten’s Maya begins with a literal version of Dos Passos’s “camera eye,” recording by way of stage-direction prose the filming of three actors, before proceeding into a ferocious vision of film, rape, and “theaters” of war. “Maya” could have something to do with ancient peoples of the Americas, or with the Hindu concept of illusion personified as a woman; and as it happens, Stuefloten hinges much of his depiction of American illusion (in Hollywood) and American militarism (in Central America) on the figure of a woman, Virginia White, an aging American actress who (rumor has it) once entertained the troops in Vietnam nude from the waist down. (Stuefloten’s imagining of this unlikely scenario implicitly refers to the “Playboy bunny” scene in Apocalypse Now, a film to which much of this book is clearly indebted.) When at last the narrative frames are ruptured—when the American military has obliterated the village where the actors are located, and like Ronald Reagan we are no longer sure what’s movie and what’s history—the person on whom the weight of Stuefloten’s outrage falls is the woman herself, who is repeatedly raped and brutalized by American servicemen as sundry machines from Sikorksy, McDonnell-Douglas, and Grumman drop their ordnance. The epilogue attempts some leaky damage control, when Stuefloten writes of the writing of the novel, and is rebuked by his lover: “‘You are hard on women,’ she said. ‘I don’t think you can claim innocence in this affair. To some degree you must admit Virginia White is your creation’” (135). But since the chapter and novel end with Stuefloten and his lover having sex (despite her initial resistance), reenacting in the process one of the scenes from the “camera eye” section of
the book as well, it’s clear that the author has the last word, as the novel contains his lover’s critique only to “contain” it.4

It’s not hard to spot the modernist master lurking behind Kathryn Thompson’s Close Your Eyes and Think of Dublin: Portrait of a Girl (1991). The novel revisits not only Joycean language and narrative pyrotechnics but also some of Joyce’s primary obsessions, sex and Catholicism chief among these. Some of Thompson’s re-Joycing is done by way of Adrienne Rich, as in “molly she chose life in the great good indisputable Bloomsbook as readily as the deer chose his appointment in the tack room” (190) or “like Hester Prynne and St. Joan I find I am the real women all dressed up in men’s words; you’ve got to get to know the scrolls and nuts of the instrument that defiles you, eats you alive” (41). Such passages call to mind “Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law,” particularly the lines that reply to Yeats’s “Leda and the Swan,” “A thinking woman sleeps with monsters. / The beak that grips her, she becomes.” Molly herself turns up on occasion, once mouthing her famous final words to an abusive creep who bombs abortion clinics in his spare time, and later telling us, “I learned them gibberish words what with beer commercials the conflagration of souls it’s what you men talk about chewing with your mouths open behind our backs along the Strand” (189). Thompson herself, when she’s not paring her fingernails like the God of creation, gets off a few zingers about Joycean fathers and sons—“Father, son, and holy ghost, sounds like another bachelor party, another gangbang another spring break at Lauderdale where yours truly jumps out of the cake (god’s most intelligent creature after man)” (86)—and leaves no doubt why her portrait of a girl can’t look much like Joyce’s chronicles of Dedalus:

I wasn’t allowed up there, in the sacristy, as a girl, except to vacuum and dust at six a.m. before mass and before I was even up and the way the priest had spoken that word sacristy I knew it was the place where men played poker and rolled the everlasting die at night. . . . I should like to know if that is where they keep the wives and children, if that is where Hester Prynne was taught the one letter Alphabet. (81–82)
And the reason she’s meditating on gender, the sacristy, and power/knowledge is that sure enough, her alcoholic grandfather has died on Bloomsday.

As Joyce is to Thompson’s Portrait, so is Kafka to Kenneth Bernard’s haunting, strangely evocative From the District File (1992). The novel’s first half is benign enough, narrated by one of those citizens who was never so rudely awakened as was Joseph K.—one of the “retired and disabled clerks of division two level of the municipal civil services” (20) whose life, like ours, consists of minutely dissected hassles at the post office and supermarket. The occasional disruption—the disappearance of Mr. M., a brutal beating by Grodek—fails to disturb his torpor and equipoise. It is only when he comes of age and joins one of his society’s mandatory “burial clubs” that things turn sinister. The clubs are composed of groups of twelve, contracted to meet socially on a regular basis—attendance is taken and reports are filed—and, most of all, arrange and attend each other’s funerals (clubs are replenished when their numbers sink lower than four). Our unassuming narrator comes across subversive burial clubs doubling as refuges for “youths who had been expelled from school for laziness, disruption, or rudeness, who had been in trouble with one authority or another, who in some cases had been branded criminals” (83). Like a bad librarian from the land of Borges, he begins to slip undetectable errors into his official accounts of the club, creating “false cross-references” and “meaningless abbreviations, like ‘born 1931, vit.’ or ‘retired at sixty, O.B.C.’” (72). But as in Kafka, the undetectable is detectable, as a “minor clerk in district headquarters” says to him over coffee that “she had begun to notice some extremely minor but regular errors in my otherwise perfect reports” (84). The club’s annual culture entry, “Herring Gulls at Dawn,” attracts notice for its lack of moral and plot, and the club is disbanded and restocked with company goons. Despite the narrator’s conviction that he is “no enemy of the state” (112–13), he begins to fear that his new burial club comrades plan to murder him. He soon lights out for the forgotten margins of the metropolis, where the former street performers have been banished, where he lives out his last days in a landscape half Paul Auster’s City of Glass and half Ray Bradbury’s Fahrenheit 451.
Rounding off my account of the neo-mods is Jacques Servin, whose eccentric collection of cosmicomics, *Mermaids for Attila* (1991), marks him as the unacknowledged child of Gertrude Stein and Italo Calvino. In “Life (A Porn Story),” the foreman surrounded by bloodhounds sees how it all ends:

“I am safe,” the foreman speaks in the desert, his toe designing arabesques, as the bloodhounds fall from the sky like entertaining confetti. The world is over, all over, all done, and the foreman is safe. The sky rains down its miraculous bloodhounds, replacing the web of information that never stops, and the foreman gazes with perfect solemnity at the clear, smooth expanse of void that he knows is the darkness of space right beyond the ionosphere of his planet, the earth. (18)

Like a good symbolist poet, Servin shows us time and again that his craft can sustain itself on sound alone, regardless of sense and syntax. But like a good Dadaist, he also intersperses his forays into “pure” poetry with visions of the irreality of political history: “the president has recuperated from his violent death by opening dialogues with the worlds of the ancient Irish” (40). That line, of course, comes from the story “Regarding the Uncustomary Events of 1989 Which Occurred Here and There around Northern Europe,” and if you don’t believe it, you can ask Hitler, who appears in one story shouting, “Placebo! . . . The ungulate memorize! The fecund ‘isms’ of my lunacy growl up the spiny decorum of the alma mater” (36). With a little reshuffling of the file cabinet Servin could conceivably find himself listed under Avant-Pop, next to whimsical musical duo They Might Be Giants.

My personal favorites from FC2, though, are the unclassifieds, Omar Castañeda, Cris Mazza, and especially Richard Grossman. Castañeda’s *Remembering to Say “Mouth” or “Face”* (1993) is a motley assortment of stories, ranging from realism to surrealism to magic realism to just plain magic. The title refers to the narrator of the first story, “On the Way Out,” as he begins to recover from a coma, his body “a coil of shattered pieces each screaming out in its own anguish, each begging for relief” (27). “I Tell You This” does indeed tell you this, narrating its own
composition until “this final paragraph, this vertiginous whorl that finally stops at a very curious ‘you’” (36). “Crossing the Border” tells a harrowing tale of a trip from rural Guatemala to el norte, initiated by a dead man, his concerned friends and relatives, and the traveling shyster who insists that the corpse be buried in To-Bend-Word, a/k/a Klouwer Town, somewhere in the northern United States. Upon crossing the border, the As I Lay Dying journey adopts a new currency, as the travelers are set upon, sexually assaulted, and shot by seven young drunken Texan men.

The border crossings in Castañeda’s stories turn out to be still more challenging than this: after “Crossing the Border,” the collection follows with a section called “Remembering,” consisting of six stories derived from the Mayan Popol Vuh, the sacred book of the Quiché Indians, which was destroyed in the sixteenth century by Spanish conquistador Pedro de Alvarado. The stories tell various creation myths and birth narratives, chiefly centered on characters such as Blowgunner and Jaguar Sun, twin sons of Blood Girl, who is banished from Xibalbá after being impregnated by the fruit of a tree. What’s particularly odd about this full-scale reproduction of Quiché tales from the Popol Vuh is that the story before “Crossing the Borders” narrated a very different border crossing, a sketch of a writer and his anthropologist lover, whose relationship does not survive the tension created when he receives a fellowship to study the Guatemalan Maya and she doesn’t—despite the fact that the Indians of Guatemala are her specialty, whereas he knows nothing about them whatsoever. As if his Popol Vuh stories weren’t already alien enough, in other words, the Guatemalan-born Castañeda is out to make sure we don’t assume too readily that the border is more permeable North to South than it is for his ill-fated travelers trying to move South to North.

Cris Mazza’s third FC2 book, Revelation Countdown (1993), is among the Black Ice series, but Mazza herself—author of Animal Acts (1988) and Is It Sexual Harassment Yet? (1991)—looks somewhat out of place among the slash-and-burn fictions of Avant-Pop. She’s an accomplished, deadpan portraitist, whether she’s detailing the private bodily dissipation rituals of a professional photographer driving aimlessly cross-country after a big book-signing tour (in “Revelation Countdown”), sketching
the psyche of an abducted young woman who commandeers and steals her abductor’s pickup truck (in “Guys with Trucks in Texas and California”), or rendering the brief romance between a male senior editor and a female assembly-line worker in a romance novel factory (in “Wistfully”). In a different decade Mazza’s ear for hopelessness and her muted prose style would have pegged her as a minimalist; in this decade she plays quite another role, unwillingly testifying to a phenomenon of which Roland Barthes could not have dreamed—the Death of the Midlist Author. Yet she’s capable of a few roller-coasters of her own, as in the title story of Is It Sexual Harassment Yet? whose dual, side-by-side columns tell two versions of a restaurant’s “hostile environment” that are so drastically at odds (and each so internally coherent and convincing) as to make Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill look like Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. The closing story in Revelation Countdown, “Between Signs,” sums up the collection’s concerns by juxtaposing vignettes of a couple driving through the Southwest in a mutual sexual frenzy to what appear to be banal, crass, or meaningless road signs like “Make a Bee-Line to ROCK CITY” and “Gospel Harmony House Christian Dinner Theatre.” You’re encouraged, in short, to read between the signs, where the intimate details of “private” experience seem to carry the spiritual significance and human import lacking in the “public” announcements of truckstops, roadside attractions, and dangerous curves. It turns out, however, that a few of those signs are of greater human and social significance than anyone’s sexual desire for anyone, such as

WARNING:
THIS ROAD CROSSES A U.S.
AIR FORCE BOMBING RANGE
FOR THE NEXT 12 MILES DANGEROUS
OBJECTS MAY DROP FROM AIRCRAFT

—or “STATE PRISON Do Not Stop for Hitchhikers.” Once you’ve seen a few signs like these, you look again at “Ice Cream, Divinity, Gas, Picnic Supplies / Real Indians Performing Ancient Rites,” and you find that Mazza has managed to deconstruct private and public, banal and uncommon, almost without signing her intention at all.
Richard Grossman’s novel *The Alphabet Man* is nothing less than a psychotic and singularly moving tour de force. Its narrator/protagonist is Clyde Wayne Franklin, famous parricide and foremost poet in the United States. If you can imagine a world where a crazier Charles Baudelaire and a milder Charles Manson inhabit the same body, you’re on the right track; and if I tell you that Franklin is the unwitting pawn in an elaborate (Pynchon–meets–Oliver Stone) plot to kill the likely Democratic nominee for president, a wildly popular anti-Pentagon lefty (that’s the tip-off that you’re dealing with fiction here), I’m really not giving away much of what makes Grossman’s novel worth getting lost in. (Though it should be noted that Franklin is chosen as the assassin not only for his psychological instability but also for his name, which fits the three-bland-name pattern of Lee Harvey Oswald, James Earl Ray, and Mark David Chapman.) Franklin’s introduction, “America loves a murder, and I am a murderous American” (17), isn’t great; it’s certainly not as inspired as the opening-and-refrain of Robert Steiner’s *Broadway Melody of 1999* (1993), “Munchkins littered the yellow brick road” (7). Indeed, *The Alphabet Man* initially promises to be a morning talk show gorefest, or at best a cross between the demeanor of Dashiell Hammett (as Franklin turns gumshoe, tracking down his erstwhile prostitute lover) and the morbid fascinations of Thomas Harris (whose Hannibal Lecter novels have given us the films *Manhunter* and *Silence of the Lambs*). *The Alphabet Man* looks, from this vantage, like standard 1990s fare from the police blotters of the blood-soaked U.S. of A.: just another American psycho. Besides, building a novel on the “confessions” of criminals is an idea that went out with Daniel Defoe.

But over the course of four hundred typographically peculiar pages, Grossman weaves together a luminous, deeply lyrical story out of the unlikeliest assortment of cast-off materials and popcult trash—not just old detective novels, but also the kinds of stories of child abuse, multiple personalities, and psychotic clowns that you find more readily among the accounts of Elvis sightings than in the pages of “quality” fiction. Much of the novel is narrated by the voices that live inside Franklin, as Grossman blends Bobcat Goldthwaite, Ring Lardner, and Mister Bones from John Berryman’s *Dream Songs* into a heteroglossia as dazzling as it is maniacal:
I know that you got it all tied up, but Jeez Al (don say dat word)
I said Jeez Al (I say don say it or else) I said OK I won’t say,
now look fella that Clyde guy he treats me like his chicks man
and he’s got me all penned up out here in the Encino of his
head, I mean the man is one sick motherfucker, and I have to
follow this grisly plot of his and stick in my four bits, and he
just goes off, he keeps his nose on the ground plowing through
the crap and then he just flies, he goes off and I’ve got to pick
up the pieces. (115)

The novel closes with one of Franklin’s poems, a 170-line lament called
“Barathrum”; as Franklin’s friend and editor L. Jerome Dalls notes, “a
barathrum, from the Attic Greek, was an ancient pit in which con-
demned prisoners were thrown, and hence has come to mean the depths
of hell” (431). The poem is remarkable not only in its own right but also
because it pulls off the unlikely feat of concluding the novel in the mode
of threnody:

_ Oseh shalom bi’m’romav, hu ya’aseh shalom aleynu v’al kol yisrael, v’imru _
_ amen _
_ these pits are cicatrices of earth over deep peopled wounds we shall _
_never recover the scars are ours forever and ever. Amen. _

The poem in turn refers us back to one of the novel’s epigraphs: “A
Hassidic tale recounts the story of an illiterate man who could not read
the prayers for Yom Kippur. The man left the synagogue and walked out
to an open field to recite the letters of the alphabet, one by one, asking
God to put them together to form a prayer. God received the man’s
prayer and was pleased.” Not least among Grossman’s many achieve-
ments in _The Alphabet Man_ lies in the poignancy of how the novel itself
becomes Clyde Wayne Franklin’s prayer of atonement, a prayer whose
alcoholic, schizophrenic vessel winds up being one of the most memora-
ble characters I’ve encountered among the American fictions of this
century.

It will doubtless be clear by this point that there is no single thread
running through the recent work published by FC2; on the whole, this
work is generally more shocking, more difficult, or more iconoclastic
than your average offering from Knopf, Morrow, or the Congressional Budget Office, but it’s impossible to chart FC2’s cultural location in the pseudomilitary terms of *avant* and *garde*. Nor is it possible to predict where you’ll hear of this work next: it was, for instance, the lunatic multiple-streams-of-consciousness of *The Alphabet Man* that got a friendly notice from *Details* magazine, the high-gloss bible of fashion-conscious twentysomethings, and Ricardo Cortez Cruz’s hip-hop hype, *Straight outta Compton*, that got props from the *Nation*, the no-gloss paper of record for unファッションable lefties.

But I can predict one thing safely: whatever happens to the NEA, ten or twenty years from now, *Alphabet Man* and *Straight outta Compton* will still be around. As large houses cut more and more unprofitable midlist writers from their rolls, FC2 may pick up more writers like Cris Mazza and Kenneth Bernard, whose writing, in a less profit-driven fiction market, would certainly be accessible enough for a few of the smaller conglomerates. And FC2 will always be the place for utterly unmarketable or extremely abrasive work, such as Samuel Delany’s *Hogg* (1995), which can make some of the grisliest scenes from *Naked Lunch* look like teatime with Jane Austen. Yet one truly crucial thing about FC2’s publishing enterprise is usually overlooked: like many small presses and academic publishers, the collective does not take works out of print if they’re not “selling.” Three hundred copies left in the warehouse? Fifteen sales last year? Doesn’t matter, the book stays available. And as a result, you can still get your hands on Clarence Major’s and Peter Spielberg’s novels from the 1970s even though the contemporary work of less experimental writers is no longer for sale. What’s more, FC2’s backlist will likely remain of greater interest than will that of most university presses: it may not matter much to the world if a twenty-year-old study of nature imagery in Faulkner remains somewhere in the remnant bin for only three dollars, but it’s important that *Reflex and Bone Structure* is still at your fingertips, just as it will be important in 2020 to be able to get *The Alphabet Man, Damned Right*, or *Napoleon’s Mare* simply by filling out an order form.

This, then, is the most important thing about the press, to my mind: whatever else it does, Fiction Collective 2 performs the critical task of
sustaining this nation’s weirder literary heritages against the logic of Time Warner and the Sears Financial Network, which will foster “novelty” only so long as it is quickly succeeded by more “novelty.” FC2’s novelty, by contrast, is here to stay. Among the many functions undertaken by FC2 as a nonprofit “cutting-edge” press, it is of signal and lasting consequence that the collective be a literally conservative force for the preservation and transmission of Avant-Pops, neo-mods, and unclassifieds everywhere.

**EPILOGUE: FC2, THE DALKEY ARCHIVE, AND THE UNIT FOR CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE**

One fine April day in 1994, again at the invitation of Charles Harris, I drove an hour up the interstate to the new Unit for Contemporary Literature at Illinois State University in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, where Richard Grossman would be reading from *The Alphabet Man*. The reading took place in the studio of noted painter and sculptor Nicholas Africano; the reception, during which Grossman handed me a card that said “Dick” and nothing else, was held in a building called the Orphanage across the street. Actually, I learned, until 1978 the building was an orphanage: Africano recently bought up the ten outlying buildings that were its residence halls, and his own studio and living quarters were once the recreation center or something. The whole place had that same weird former-institution atmosphere you used to sense in converted Soho lofts fifteen or twenty years ago (only sadder—I mean, orphans, for Chrissake, many buildings of them). Attendance was great: the studio was full, plenty of post-literate folks, interesting hair configurations, great design sense, sparse, stylish furniture, chain smoking, and a couple of Kathy Acker look-alikes thrown in for good measure. And if I were still the parochial New York expatriate I was in 1983 when I ventured out of the New York City metropolitan area for the first time, I would have wasted a good portion of the evening thinking to myself, *what is all this doing in Normal, Illinois?*

The Unit for Contemporary Literature began its programs in February 1994; it’s mainly an umbrella group for FC2 and its sister press, the Dalkey Archive, but its other current projects include researching and
publishing a study of the history of small American literary presses. And then when Ron Sukenick folded the University of Colorado (Boulder) branch of FC2, Normal also picked up publication of the *American Book Review*, one of the nation’s liveliest general-purpose reader’s guides to everything.

All this from a place that also publishes periodicals such as the *Spoon River Review*, the *Review of Contemporary Fiction* (via the Dalkey Archive), *Mediations* (journal of the Marxist Literary Group), and the *Exquisite Corpse*, a quirky pamphlet-sized writers’ forum for prose poems, disjecta, and curios (the first copy of the *Corpse* I picked up pointed out the uncanny parallels between *Love Boat* and *Star Trek: The Next Generation*—Gopher/Data, Troi/Julie, Doc/Riker, and the bald guy who adjusts his uniform when he’s flustered—and it did so many months before Time Warner’s *Entertainment Weekly* pointed out the same parallels in less hallucinatory prose). Almost all these journals started elsewhere; *Exquisite Corpse* may have covered more miles than your average chain letter. But there are apparently many roads to Normal, and if my visit (on only one of those roads) is any gauge of things to come, Normal may be on its way to becoming the alternative press capital of the United States.

Having perused the FC2 list, I returned to Normal in 1995 to learn a few things about the Dalkey Archive Press. Curiously, FC2 and the Dalkey Archive have gradually become something like complementary contrasts. Where FC2 solicits the as-yet-unheard-of writers of the 1990s and 2000s (whatever we’ll call that decade), the Dalkey Archive has been retrieving valuable writers of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s from the remainder bin with an energy that provokes both admiration (Gilbert Sorrentino! Paul West!) and alarm (John Barth’s *Letters* is out of print?). In other words, as worthwhile literature drops out of print and out of sight, the Dalkey Archive steps in and preserves it cryogenically. It also publishes promising contemporary writers like Aurelie Sheehan, author of *Jack Kerouac Is Pregnant* (1994), or Carole Maso, whose densely lyrical *AVA* (1993) and *The American Woman in the Chinese Hat* (1994) have won well-deserved rave reviews and the usual small-but-devoted follow-
...ing—though not devoted enough to keep her original publisher, North Point Press, in business. That too, as I’ve noted above, is very much a sign of the times: North Point, a small commercial publisher, reportedly needed 7,500 sales of each book to stay afloat, and even though it did come up with a few best-sellers, it couldn’t manage to snag the requisite .00003 of the American public on a regular basis.

For the most part, though, the Dalkey Archive, unlike FC2, works the side of the street populated by great dead writers down on their luck and talented living writers who’ve been cut from the backlist: in 1994, for instance, it reprinted Ford Madox Ford’s The March of Literature, and in 1995 it followed this feat by reprinting Gertrude Stein’s notoriously vexing magnum opus, The Making of Americans, all 962 pages of it. Together with its parent-and-affiliate publication, the Review of Contemporary Fiction, the Dalkey Archive has practically become the country’s Djuna Barnes headquarters: the Review did a special issue on Barnes in 1993, and two years later the Dalkey Archive brought out a definitive edition of her 1936 masterpiece, Nightwood—including all the material T. S. Eliot and Barnes’s friend Emily Coleman cut from the original manuscript when it couldn’t find a publisher, along with Barnes’s drafts for the novel and an introduction by Penn State assistant professor Cheryl Plumb. In 1990, likewise, the Dalkey Archive had republished Barnes’s novel Ryder—although that text, eviscerated on publication in 1928, cannot be restored as can Nightwood. As Paul West’s afterword explains, once the book was censored by the New York Post Office, “Djuna Barnes and Charles Friede, an editor from Liveright, sat there in Paris removing passages having to do with body fluids” (243); which body fluids particularly PO’d the PO we’ll never know, but I’ll bet that Representative Peter Hoekstra and his friends don’t like them either.

Barnes, Stein, Ford, and Company: it sounds like a modernist investment group—and it is, in a way. Even the Dalkey Archive’s new writers, like Lauren Fairbanks, author of Sister Carrie (1993), or Christopher Sorrentino of the Flying Sorrentinos, author of Sound on Sound (1995), have roughly the same relation to high modernism as FC2 writers like Kenneth Bernard, Kathryn Thompson, or Jacques Servin. Whether
working in the tracks of Kafka, Woolf, Joyce, Beckett, or Breton, these people do what modernist fans used to call *writerly* writing—making readers work for their money, chronicling the relations between sound and sense, giving language a well-deserved holiday or putting it on the double shift. The result is either modernism made new again or a post-postmodern profusion: but together, the presses of Normal are producing almost three dozen books every year, many of which either revive modernist classics, pay homage to modernist legacies, or revisit and critique modernism from cultural positions all over the map.

In a sense, though, that debt to modernism isn’t surprising. The Dalkey Archive’s first reprint, back in 1984, was Gilbert Sorrentino’s *Splendide-Hôtel*, which had just been dropped by one of modernism’s initial clearing houses, New Directions Press: the pass of the baton could hardly be clearer. But according to DAP founder John O’Brien, becoming a new NDP wasn’t in the original game plan at all; his half of the Normal consortium, unlike the Fiction Collective, started out with no specific agenda or long-term goals. In fact, the Dalkey Archive grew out of the *Review for Contemporary Fiction* (and not the other way around), which began in 1981 simply as an effort to put some contemporary and postwar writers on the table for discussion—Hubert Selby, Paul Bowles, Julio Cortázar, Jean Rhys, Ishmael Reed—whether or not anyone paid attention. “I figured we’d run five years or so, sell maybe 150 copies, and then vanish,” says O’Brien. “Then we’d become the kind of journal about which people say, ‘whatever happened to that?’” But initial sales surpassed these humble expectations, and O’Brien, faced with a surplus after only three years, decided to take a chance and reprint *Splendide-Hôtel*; two years later, on a similar lark, he took a new book, Paul Metcalf’s collection of short stories *Where Do You Put the Horse*. “Again, I figured ‘just this once’—and it was our only book for 1986,” O’Brien told me. Nine years later, the Dalkey Archive houses no fewer than 168 titles, including treasures like Felipe Alfau’s *Chromos* (1990), Viktor Shklovsky’s *Theory of Prose* (1991), and, of course, Flann O’Brien’s *The Dalkey Archive* (1993). Now that’s entertainment.

Few cultural institutions can say so much for themselves; fewer still have done so much in so little time. And yet the prospects for DAP,
FC2, UCL, and ABR at ISU are thoroughly mixed; the dominant mood of the place runs from pride and joy to cautious pessimism. In part that's because their writers and their enterprises are so wildly various, the writers themselves ranging from the renowned to the unknown, the brilliant to the boring. But it's also because the cultural weather is so volatile: both enterprises are very heavily dependent on the continuing kindness of strangers, and though many strangers have been kind indeed, O'Brien admits that the Dalkey Archive simply would not exist if not for the National Endowment for the Arts and granting agencies like the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. “The Review might be able to make it,” O'Brien says, adding, “just barely. But the press wouldn’t stand a chance.”

I spoke with O'Brien in 1995, and his words now sound chilling to me in 1997, as FC2 has become the stick with which Peter Hoekstra is trying to flog the NEA. On the other hand, as I think back to Richard Grossman's reading and that eerie feeling of doing the wine and cheese routine on the grounds where scores of Dickensian waifs once timidly held out their bowls for gruel, I wonder whether there isn't some reason for hope. Despite the shrinking of the imprints, the intransigence of Republicans, and the question of whether Normal, Illinois, can keep up all this manic publishing activity—despite all this, there's something piquant, even encouraging, about the thought of orphanages being converted into Units for Contemporary Literature somewhere in the heart of the heart of the country: few cultural developments, I think, could run more directly contrary to the zeitgeist of the Age of Newt. Perhaps, indeed, that is the real reason the nonprofit presses of Normal now find themselves under assault.

NOTES

1. Individual Fiction Collective writers have, however, fared better in academic criticism than the collective as a whole. Sukenick and Federman are often cited alongside Coover and Pynchon as 1970s postmodernists; Major and Dixon are sometimes mentioned in the same breath as Ishmael Reed. To date, however, I have only found one article devoted to the Fiction Collective qua Fiction Collective (see Quartermain).
2. *Maximum RocknRoll* publishes monthly. Its circulation figures are hard to come by, since its distribution is so broad, but I do want to point out that its "street" credibility is unquestioned: any alternative noise-producing musician will tell you it's the most authoritative review in the business. Harald Hartmann of *MRR* reviewed two of the first Black Ice books—Mark Amerika's *Kafka Chronicles* and Cris Mazza's *Revelation Countdown*—and gave them both a very rare *MRR* thumbs-up. In other words, Black Ice's affiliation with academe was not a barrier to *MRR*, and that really is saying something.


4. This is the only politically correct point I'll allow myself in the body of this essay. For, after all, some FC2 stuff is seriously offensive not only to literary but also to "liberal" sensibilities, as it no doubt should be: Philip Lewis's *Life of Death* is an equal-opportunities slamfest of ethnic slurs, *F/32* is obviously multiply PI despite its witty takes on pornography, *Griever* is highly unflattering to the Chinese, and depictions of sexual mutilation and violation abound throughout the catalogue. My own attitude is that readers who can't stomach this stuff, be they congressmen or choreographers, should turn instead to the Hallmark industry for sweetness and light. There's just one thing. As the parent of a child with Down syndrome, I do wish Eurudice and Kathryn Thompson would go hit the gym and work off their weird aggressions toward "mongoloids" (Thompson) and "pug-faced, red-eyed, excessively salivating, Downs syndrome dwarves" (Eurudice). OK, I feel better now.

5. For a more thorough analysis of the Dalkey Archive, see Barone; for a historical overview of alternative press publishing in the United States, see McLaughlin; for an account of the contemporary crisis in nonprofit and avant-garde publishing, see Harris.