



RICHARD E. Miller

Richard E. Miller is professor of English and the executive director of the Planigere Writing Center at Rutgers University. He received his BA from St. John's University, his MA from the University of Massachusetts at Boston, and his PhD from the University of Pittsburgh. He is the author of *As If Learning Mattered: Reforming Higher Education* (1998), *Writing at the End of the World* (2005), and, with Kurt Spellmeyer, a textbook, *The New Humanities Reader* (third edition, 2008).

Throughout his career, Miller has looked at schooling in the United States and, in particular, at the required curriculum in English—a literature course and a composition course—and he has asked big questions. For example, in *Writing at the End of the World*, he says:

In a secular society, education is the most powerful resource citizens have to ensure a brighter future for themselves. But what is one to do when the future includes a radioactive wasteland in the northern Ukraine? The smoldering ruins of the World Trade Center? Looted museums in a bombed-out Baghdad? No meaningful discussion of the humanities can proceed without confronting such examples of human depravity and indifference. Who, surveying the ruins at Chernobyl, would be persuaded either by Matthew Arnold's argument that we are ennobled by studying the best that has been thought and said in our time or by those who maintain that the work in the humanities provides the foundation for a critical engagement with the world? (pp. ix-x)

Here is what Miller says about his own teaching. Since he is referring, in part, to his teaching in first-year writing courses, a course occupying the same curricular slot as the one you are taking, this is worth quoting at length.

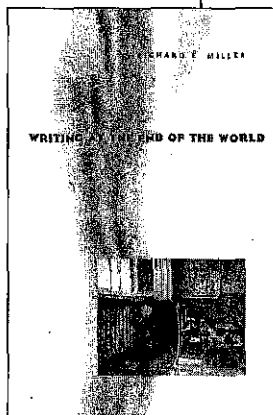
When I am back in the classroom, I work at getting the students to use their writing not just as a tool for making arguments, but also as a lens for exploring complexity and a vehicle for arriving at nuanced understandings of a lived reality that is inescapably characterized by ambiguities, shades of meaning, contradictions, and gaps. That's a long way to try to take undergraduates in one course in one semester, but

this is what I believe the function of a secular public education should be: to provide training in the arts of solving the problems of this world, training that recognizes that people, who never leave behind their embodied histories and their cherished beliefs, can't be revised the way papers can. (pp. 196-97)

His goal, he says, for himself and for his students, is

learning how to speak in ways that others can hear, in finding a way to move and be in more than one world at once. This isn't the only answer and it isn't always the answer, but learning how to look for such answers and finding out how to implement the evanescent solutions the search itself suggests is the primary function of the humanities as I conceive them. The practice of the humanities, so defined, is not about admiration or greatness or appreciation or depth of knowledge or scholarly achievement; it's about the movement between worlds, arms out, balancing; it's about making the connections that count. (p. 198)

Miller is a brilliant essayist and an innovative thinker. He has turned his attention increasingly to multimedia composition, composition in digital environments, both in his own writing and as a necessary next step for the teaching of English. For an example of this work, at nmc.org you can access a presentation he gave to the Modern Language Association: "This Is How We Dream, Parts 1 and 2."



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The Dark Night of the Soul

Though they may already have faded from memory, driven off by more recent and yet more spectacular horrors, for a few short weeks in 1999, the events at Columbine High School mesmerized the nation. There was the live footage of students fleeing in terror across the green, the boy with the bleeding head being dropped from the window, the SWAT teams moving in. There was the discovery of what lay beyond the eye of the camera: fifteen dead, a cache of weapons, a large homemade bomb made with two propane tanks and a gasoline canister, the eventual disclosure of an even more sinister fantasy that involved hijacking a plane and crashing it in New York City.¹ There was the ongoing effort to present fuller and fuller portraits of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, the two young men who masterminded the slaughter: they were outsiders, video-game enthusiasts, members of the Trench Coat Mafia, neo-Nazis, two boys who couldn't tell their alcohol-fueled dreams from reality, a leader and a follower, a smart kid and a loser, specimens of a middle-class value system in crisis, proof of the need for stricter gun-control laws. And finally, there were the funerals, the white caskets covered in writing from those left behind, the doves released into the air, and all those inspirational speeches about healing and hope.

Any major social cataclysm produces in its wake two responses; First, there is the search for causes: Why did this happen? Who is to blame? And second, there is an appeal to some greater authority to assist in preventing such upheavals in the future. Following Columbine, fingers were pointed at everyone and everything: inattentive parents, indifferent guidance counselors, insensitive jocks, the entertainment industry, powerful gun lobbyists, the media, the Internet, the military-industrial complex, a president who couldn't keep his pants on.² And then, as one would expect, there were calls both for increased external controls — new laws, regulations, supervisory agencies — and for increased internal controls — educational interventions, moral training, prayer. Surely, more laws, more education, and more religious instruction would bring these violent students back into line.

Despite heightened sensitivity and increased security, however, the schoolyard massacre has proven to be a remarkably durable and recurring social cataclysm. In February 1997, a sixteen-year-old in Bethel, Alaska, entered his high school and murdered the principal and another student. In October 1997, another sixteen-year-old, this one living in Pearl, Mississippi, killed his mother, then went to school and killed two more students. In December 1997, a fourteen-year-old took aim at a prayer circle in West Paducah, Kentucky, killing three. In March 1998, two boys,

eleven and thirteen, pulled a fire alarm and gunned down students exiting Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Arkansas, leaving five dead. And the list goes on with additional shootings over the past five years at high schools in Fayetteville, Tennessee; Springfield, Oregon; Richmond, Virginia; Conyers, Georgia; Deming, New Mexico; and Cold Spring, Minnesota. In March 2001, a skinny kid, whom classmates called "Anorexic Andy," walked into his high school in Santee, California, to reenact his version of Columbine. He killed two and wounded thirteen before being subdued. And in April 2002, Robert Steinhaeuser returned to Johann Gutenberg High School in Erfurt, Germany, to avenge his expulsion for forging a doctor's note: he killed two students and thirteen teachers before turning his gun on himself.

It's reassuring to think that either the work of the legal system or the educational system can reduce or eliminate altogether the threat of the unpredictable and the unforeseen. This is why we have childproof medicine bottles, penalties for not buckling up, informational literature on family planning for students in junior high school: these are all examples of reasonable responses to known problems. But the schoolyard massacre seems a problem of a different

order. What legal or educational response could be equal to the challenge of controlling the behavior of so many students from such varied backgrounds? Just how much surveillance would be required to bring the marginalized fraction of the student population back into the fold? How invasive would a curricular intervention have to be to succeed in instilling a set of preferable values in those who currently feel so deeply alienated while at school? While the

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answers to these questions are unknown, what we do know is this: the day after Columbine High School reopened, after all the public and private soul-searching in the community about the killings, after all the media coverage and analysis, after an enormous pep rally replete with bouncing cheerleaders, enthusiastic athletes, and all the mandatory school spirit one could ever hope for, swastikas were found scratched in a stall in one of the high school's newly painted bathrooms.

Eric Harris certainly didn't accept the idea that anyone was to blame for his actions or that anything could have been done to stop him or Dylan Klebold in going forward with their plan. Anticipating speculation of just this kind, Harris wrote in his diary:

i want to leave a lasting impression on the world, and god damnit do not blame anyone else besides me and V for this. dont blame my family, they had no clue and there is nothing they could have done, they brought me up just fucking fine, dont blame toy stores or any other stores for selling us ammo, bomb materials or anything like that because its not their fault.

i dont want no fucking laws on buying fucking PVC pipes. we are kind of a select case here so dont think this will happen again. dont blame the school. dont fucking put cops all over the place just because we went on a killing spree doesnt mean everyone else will and hardly ever do people bring bombs or guns to school anyway. the admin. is doing a fine job as it is. i dont know who will be left after we kill but dammit don't change any policies just because of us. it would be stupid and if there is any way in this fucked up universe we can come back as ghosts we will haunt the life out of anyone who blames anyone besides me and V.³

If one accepts Harris's assertions, then the events at Columbine are largely without motive or meaning: the killing spree was a misguided grab for immortality by two young men at loose ends. If one rejects Harris's assertions, though, and persists in the pursuit for causes, one is left with the inescapable fact that the hierarchical, exclusionary environment of mandatory schooling fosters feelings of rage and helplessness that cannot be contained. The law drives everyone into the schoolhouse; the educational system then sifts and sorts its way through the masses, raising expectations and crushing dreams as it goes. Eventually, something has to give.⁴

What is to be done? What is to be done? Only those utterly indifferent to the suffering of others can forestall asking this question for long. And, after any tragedy that involves the death of young people, it doesn't take long for someone to make the case that the problem lies with advanced technology and all the fantasy factories that it has spawned, which together have blurred the line between fact and fiction. After the Columbine shootings, Pat Schroeder, the former congresswoman from Colorado who now runs the Association of American Publishers, was among those who argued that we've reached the point where suburban kids are becoming mass murderers because we've created domestic spaces that isolate individuals in a technological sea of entertainment—the TV, the VCR, the computer, the entertainment center, the Internet, a different toy for everyone. "This is the beautiful family of America living the American dream," Schroeder observed wryly. "But we need some ways to relate to each other as human beings. We need to work on getting connected." Convinced that the virtual connections available in cyberspace tend to be divisive, Schroeder has committed herself to protecting the practice of reading books. Schroeder believes that book clubs and coffee bars provide a kind of embodied community unavailable on the Internet. These places where people go to discuss the printed word are, she says, "among the few civil institutions left. [They are] places to go see other people" (qtd. in Gross).

I share Schroeder's desire for a future where physical communion with others is still an option. You might say, in fact, that Schroeder and I come from the same secular faith tradition, that we share the same belief in reading's potentially redemptive power. And yet, there are dark days when I doubt the activities of reading and writing have much of a future. Indeed, after Columbine, it seems almost ludicrous to suggest that the social, psychological, and biochemical problems that

contributed to this massacre might have been peacefully resolved if only Harris and Klebold had spent more time talking about what they were reading. Does reading really possess such curative powers? Does writing? Does group discussion?

Reading, writing, talking, meditating, speculating, arguing: these are the only resources available to those of us who teach the humanities and they are, obviously, resources that can be bent to serve any purpose. Harris and Klebold, in fact, wrote and produced for all different sorts of media; they read a range of material that supported their beliefs and that taught them how to put together their incendiary devices; they hung out with like-minded individuals and discussed their ideas. They relied on writing to post their scathing observations about their peers on Harris's Web site; they composed poems in their creative writing class that their teacher described as "dark and sad"; they created a video for a class project in which they acted out their fantasy of moving through the school gunning down their tormentors (Pooley 30-32). Harris even had the affectation of an English teacher, declaring on his Web site that one of the many habits he found unforgivable in his peers was the tendency to pronounce the "t" in "often": "Learn to speak correctly, you morons," he commands (Barron). They read, they wrote, they talked. And at the end of the process, they tried to kill everyone they could.

For some, it will hardly come as a surprise to learn that reading and writing have no magically transformative powers. But for those of us who have been raised into the teaching and publishing professions, it can be quite a shock to confront the possibility that reading and writing and talking exercise almost *none* of the powers we regularly attribute to them in our favorite stories. The dark night of the soul for literacy workers comes with the realization that training students to read, write, and talk in more critical and self-reflective ways cannot protect them from the violent changes our culture is undergoing. Helen Keller learning to see the world through a language traced into the palm of her hand; Malcolm X in prison memorizing the dictionary word by word; Paulo Freire moving among the illiterate masses in Brazil: we tell ourselves and our students over and over again about the power of reading and writing while the gap between rich and poor grows greater, the Twin Towers come crashing down, and somewhere some other group of angry young men is at work silently stockpiling provisions for the next apocalypse.

If you're in the business of teaching others how to read and write with care, there's no escaping the sense that your labor is increasingly irrelevant. Indeed, one way to understand the dark, despairing character of so much of the critical and literary theory that has come to dominate the humanities over the past two decades is to see this writing as the defensive response of those who have recognized but cannot yet admit that the rise of technology and the emergence of the globalized economy have diminished the academy's cultural significance. And so, to fight off the sense that words exercise less and less power in world affairs, one can declare that discourse plays a fundamental role in the constitution of reality. Rather than concede that

reading as an activity has come to consume less and less time in the average person's life, one can insist that the canon wars are the ground upon which the nation's political future is being determined; rather than accept the fact that technological advances have taken control of publishing out of the hands of the few and transformed everyone with access to the Internet into a potential author and critic, one can decry the movement of our culture's critical center from the university to the sound stage of the Oprah Winfrey Show. What is unthinkable in such pronouncements about the centrality of academic work is the possibility that the vast majority of the reading and writing that teachers and their students do about literature and culture more generally might not be all that important. It could all just be a rather labored way of passing the time.

I have these doubts, you see, doubts silently shared by many who spend their days teaching others the literate arts. Aside from gathering and organizing information, aside from generating critiques and analyses that forever fall on deaf ears, what might the literate arts be said to be good for? How — and in what limited ways — might reading and writing be made to matter in the new world that is evolving before our eyes? Is there any way to justify or explain a life spent working with — and teaching others to work with — texts? These are the questions that animate the meditations that follow. Those who have never felt the inner urgency of such questions need read no further.

THE PRINCE OF DARKNESS

In a million millennia, the sun will be bigger. It will feel nearer. In a million millennia, if you are still reading me, you can check these words against personal experience, because the polar ice caps have melted and Norway enjoys the climate of North Africa.

Later still, the oceans will be boiling. The human story, or at any rate, the terrestrial story, will be coming to an end. I don't honestly expect you to be reading me then.

— MARTIN AMIS

The Information

In *The Information*, Martin Amis's bleak and scorching send-up of the literary professions, the following beliefs are gleefully debunked: that reading makes you a better person; that writers of merit are driven to write by virtue of their deep insights into the human spirit; that a world filled with artistic creations is superior to one filled with the castoffs of consumer culture; that writing provides access to immortality. To stage his skewering of these cultural commonplaces, Amis pits two writers against each other: Richard Tull, the author of artistic, experimental (that is to say, unreadable) novels; and Gwyn Barry, who is vapid and soulless, but whose eventless, multicultural, utopian novel, *Amelior*, has become an international phenomenon. To the degree that *The Information* has a plot, it revolves around Tull's repeated efforts to punish Barry for having met

with popular literary success. To Tull's way of thinking, Barry's greatest literary achievement is a work of no consequence: as he describes it, *Amelior* "was about a group of fair-minded young people who, in an unnamed country, strove to establish a rural community. And they succeeded. And then it ended. Not worth writing in the first place, the finished book was, in Richard's view, a ridiculous failure" (28). And yet, in the world Amis has created for his readers, pretentious, sentimental slop of this kind has adulation heaped upon it, while work like the kind Richard Tull produces — work that strains mightily to achieve a high seriousness, work that is replete with veiled literary references, work that endlessly announces its indebtedness to the earlier classics — actually physically harms the few who can bear to read it, causing migraines, seeing disorders, and even forced hospitalizations.

Tull, who is unable to find a publisher and whose previous novels are out of print, can only view his friend's success as a cruel joke the universe is playing on him, one he's determined to counteract. But, as Tull eventually discovers, there's no fighting the ways of the universe. In the grand scheme of things, he is insignificant, and what lies in store for him is what lies in store for us all — a story of increasing humiliation. In fact, *The History of Increasing Humiliation* is one of the many books for which Tull has received an advance but has yet to write, one which is to contain his theory about "the decline in the status and virtue of literary protagonists" (92). As Tull sees it, there's a direct connection between the decline in the status of heroes in the novel and the growth in our understanding of the dimensions of the universe: with each advance in astronomical studies, "we get smaller" (93). We can see the effects of this in our literary creations, Tull argues: "First gods, then demigods, then kings, then great warriors, great lovers, then burghers and merchants and vicars and doctors and lawyers. Then social realism: you. Then irony: me. Then maniacs and murderers, tramps, mobs, rabble, flotsam, vermin" (92). And indeed, Amis uses Tull as a vehicle to prove this theory, assaulting the pieties of those who would privilege the acts of reading and writing by showing artists to be indistinguishable from criminals. By this, Amis does not mean that all criminals are like Hannibal Lecter, all-knowing virtuosos who transgress and transcend social bonds at will. Rather, as Amis puts it, "the criminal is like an artist (though not for the reasons usually given, which merely depend on immaturity and the condition of self-employment): the criminal resembles the artist in his pretension, his incompetence, and his self-pity" (76). One could hardly say that the status of the criminal has been elevated through such a comparison.

When Tull's initial efforts to harm his rival fail, he turns to Steve Cousins, a financially secure, semi-retired criminal, who now entertains himself by pursuing "recreational" adventures in his profession: his specialty, as he defines it, is "fuck[ing] people up" for sport (116). And, for reasons that are never quite clear, "Scozzy," as his mates call him, is determined to hurt a writer, preferably Gwyn Barry. Scozzy may be motivated by his own hatred of *Amelior*, which he refers to as a "total crock" and

"complete crap" (114); he may be driven by the autodidact's sense of inferiority (113); he may be acting out the aggressions of an abandoned child (Amis repeatedly links Scozzy to the wild boy of Aveyron). But to seek motivation for Scozzy's actions is, within Amis's cosmology, to misunderstand the criminal's place in the universe and our own as well. Asking why a Steve Cousins or an Eric Harris or a Dylan Klebold is violent is itself a meaningless act, not because the motivation is too deeply buried or obscurely articulated to ever be known, but because we no longer live in a world where human action can be explained. We have plenty of information; it just doesn't amount to anything. This is the logic of the history of increasing humiliation working itself out over time.

At one point in the novel, Tull's wife, Gina, is reading the newspaper in horror, trying to make sense of the actions of a child-murderer. "Words," says Gina, "— words fail me. *Why?* Won't someone tell me?" (123). Amis then interrupts this scene to introduce his own commentary on how we are to make sense of these senseless acts, the ones which rob us of speech, the ones which drive us to ask why. "A contemporary investigator will tell you that he hardly ever thinks about motive. It's no help. He's sorry, but it's no help. Fuck the why, he'll say. Look at the how, which will give you the who. But fuck the why" (124). There is no ultimate explanation for these acts of brutality, which is something the little boy, who apologized to the man who was about to murder him, could not understand: "the little boy was searching for motivation in the contemporary playground. Don't look. You won't find it, because it's gone. I'm sorry. I'm sorry" (124).⁵

As it goes with the world, so it goes with the novel: to seek out what motivates Tull to try to destroy Gwyn Barry, to try to understand why Scozzy would want to hurt Barry, to see some reason in Gina's betrayal of Tull—these are all fruitless acts in Amis's cosmos, where only the naive believe that violence is the result of some ultimately discernable act of volition. Tull understands that he lives in a world defined by random acts of violence and he is afraid, not for his own safety, but for his son's: "violence would come, if it came, from the individual, from left field, denuded of motive. The urban pastoral was all left field. There was no right field. And violence wouldn't come for Richard. It would come for Marco" (99). And, indeed, this very scenario is acted out in the conclusion to *The Information*, with Scozzy, bent on revenge for having been publicly insulted by Tull, heading to Tull's neighborhood determined to kidnap Marco. Unaware of the danger his son is in, drunkenly planning one final plot to bring Barry down, Tull stumbles into his apartment only to discover Barry in the act of sodomizing his wife. Meanwhile, outside in the park, Barry's bodyguards happen to intercept Scozzy before he is able to harm Marco. Broken and defeated, Tull belatedly realizes that he owes his son's life to the man he viewed as being in every way his inferior. As the novel ends, with Barry proudly sauntering off victorious, Tull climbs the stairs back to his apartment "working on a way of forgiving Gina. A form of words. Because if he forgave her, she could never leave him now. Who was he? Who had he been throughout? Who would he always be?" (373). Tull,

"a failed book reviewer who comes on like Dr. Johnson" (286), has been shown to be a fool who can't even read the intentions and the capabilities of those closest to him. Barry, the avowed fraud and hypocrite, gets everything — fame, fortune, even "the Profundity Requitall," which guarantees him lifetime support so he can devote himself to thinking about the social good.

Although Amis explicitly outlaws such a question, one can't help but wonder why a writer would produce such a scathing portrait of the literary world and its denizens. If this is Amis's assessment both of his peers and of the reading public, then why go on writing? Is he, like Gwyn Barry, just along for the ride, cynically "doing what every man would do if he thought he could get away with it" (286)?⁶ *The Information* might best be read as a meditation on the fact that sooner or later all writers encounter something that robs them of their sleep, something that deprives them of feeling that what they do matters. As the novel opens, Richard Tull is crying in his sleep, crying because the night had brought "all its unwelcome information" (4). And when he wakes, he considers calling Gwyn Barry, for whom "there would be no information, or the information, such as it was, would all be good" (5). Tull and Barry are both entering their forties and the information that awaits them on this threshold communicates different messages: Gina has given Tull an additional year to complete his latest and perhaps final novel, *Untitled*, after which time — the novel's failure being a foregone conclusion — Tull will have to commit himself to more gainful employment. Barry, on the other hand, has written two best-sellers; his marriage has been featured on the BBC; he's got an international promotional tour lined up; he's been nominated for the Profundity Requitall. Tull is having "a crisis of the middle years," a crisis Amis himself has been through. Citing what are presumably notes from his own writing journal, Amis observes, "intimations of monstrosity are common, are perhaps universal, in early middle age" (44). One form this takes is a preoccupation with the question, "how can I ever play the omniscient, the all-knowing, when I don't know *anything*?" (43).

So the information that comes with age, the information that comes at night, brings news of futility, ignorance, insignificance, humiliation: "When we die, our bodies will eventually go back where they came from: to a dying star, our own, five billion years from now, some time around the year 5,000,001,995" (45). With the aging of the body and the foreclosing of future possibilities, all the inbound information serves to turn one's attention to mortality: "the information is telling me to stop saying *hi* and to start saying *bye*" (89). Throughout the novel, Amis concedes that he is not in control of what is happening, that events are unfolding and characters are developing without reference to any greater design on his part. "I don't come at these people," Amis explains in the middle of the novel, "They come at me. They come at me like information formed in the night. I don't make them. They're already there" (190–91). Whether Amis is genuinely haunted by these characters or is only mocking the terror that lesser writers experience when they lose control of their material is a

matter of importance only to those who wish to argue over Amis's own literary achievements. For the purposes of this discussion, though, the salient point is to note the ways in which Amis's novel brings together the aging body, the activity of writing, and the inbound information to explore — and I would say produce — feelings of hopelessness. We live in the Information Age and all the information is telling us that whatever we have done, whatever we are doing, and whatever we plan to do will never have any lasting significance.

FOLLOWING THE WORD

You know, Eric, you can read about this stuff, but you can't understand it until you live it.

— CHRIS McCANDLESS in Jon Krakauer's *Into the Wild*

**McCANDLESS STANDS AS
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Chris McCandless's misadventures in the Alaskan wilderness are now well known, thanks to Jon Krakauer's best-selling account of the young man's disappearance and death in *Into the Wild*. These are the facts: after graduating from Emory in 1990, McCandless donated the remains of his college trust fund to Oxfam, burned what money remained, along with his identification papers, and disappeared. Two years later, in the fall of 1992, his emaciated body was found, along with his favorite books and his journal, in a school bus deep in the Alaskan wilds. Something about McCandless's quest and his ultimate fate captured the imagination of readers across the country. For some, the story is a tragedy, one that concerns a deadly conflict between youthful idealism and a brutal, unforgiving reality. For those reading this version of McCandless's life, the loss of a young man who wanted to commune with the natural world and the disappearance of a world untouched by the mercenary desires of human society are developments to be mourned. For others, though, McCandless's story is just another example of the foolishness of those who believe more in the power of books than in the power of the natural world. For these readers, McCandless is a stock figure, a suburban rube, a dreamer who neither understood nor respected the very forces he sought to embrace. For these readers, McCandless got what he deserved.

I am interested in McCandless not because of the debate his death has sparked, but because he provides us with an opportunity to consider a reader who differs from Amis's characters in one critical regard: regardless of whether or not Amis himself actually believes that knowledge of the size of the cosmos robs the activities of reading and writing of any lasting meaning, McCandless stands as evidence that there continue to be real readers who invest the activities of reading and writing with great

significance. In this respect, McCandless is just the kind of reader that Amis's character Richard Tull (and almost every English teacher) is looking for: a reader who savors the words that others have produced, who seeks guidance from the printed page, who dreams of inhabiting the landscapes that his or her most-admired authors describe in such loving detail. While one could argue that some similar utopian longing is there to be found boiling beneath Amis's bleak account of these information-saturated times, it is much more immediately clear that McCandless actually believed that it was possible to escape the bonds of the corporatized world and reach a space of greater calm. He knew this because his books told him so.

What makes *Into the Wild* remarkable is Krakauer's ability to get some purchase on McCandless's actual reading practice, which, in turn, enables him to get inside McCandless's head and speculate with considerable authority about what ultimately led the young man to abandon the comforts of home and purposefully seek out mortal danger. Krakauer is able to do this, in part, because he has access to the books that McCandless read, with all their underlinings and marginalia, as well as to his journals and the postcards and letters McCandless sent to friends during his journey. Working with these materials and his interviews with McCandless's family and friends, Krakauer develops a sense of McCandless's inner life and eventually comes to some understanding of why the young man was so susceptible to being seduced by the writings of London, Thoreau, Muir, and Tolstoy. Who McCandless is and what becomes of him are, it turns out, intimately connected to the young man's approach to reading — both what he chose to read and how he chose to read it.

After graduating from college, McCandless hopped in his car and headed west, embarking on a journey that, since Kerouac, has become a cliché for the dispossessed male. McCandless told no one where he was going or what his plans were. When his car broke down, he abandoned it and began hitchhiking. He renamed himself "Alexander Supertramp." He kept a journal and took photographs to record his adventure. He traveled to California, canoed down into Mexico, made his way toward Alaska. Along the way, he met people who looked out for him and he, more often than not, would return their kindness by encouraging them to read the books that had so moved him. To one, McCandless wrote: "Wayne, you really should read *War and Peace*. I meant it when I said you had one of the highest characters of any man I'd met. That is a very powerful and highly symbolic book. It has things in it that I think you will understand. Things that escape most people" (Krakauer 33). He took a job working at a flea market selling used paperbacks and lost himself in the pleasure of organizing merchandise and assisting in the very kind of commercial transactions he elsewhere despised. His boss reported: "Alex was big on the classics: Dickens, H. G. Wells, Mark Twain, Jack London. London was his favorite. He'd try to convince every snowbird who walked by that they should read *Call of the Wild*" (43–44). In the abandoned bus where McCandless's body was eventually found, there were books by Tolstoy and

Thoreau with highlighted passages celebrating chastity and moral purity (65-66). On some plywood he had written what Krakauer calls McCandless's "declaration of independence":

AND NOW AFTER TWO RAMBLING YEARS COMES THE FINAL AND GREATEST ADVENTURE. THE CLIMACTIC BATTLE TO KILL THE FALSE BEING WITHIN AND VICTORIOUSLY CONCLUDE THE SPIRITUAL PILGRIMAGE. . . NO LONGER TO BE POISONED BY CIVILIZATION HE FLEES, AND WALKS ALONE UPON THE LAND TO BECOME *LOST IN THE WILD*. (163; capitals and italics in original)

Like most readers, McCandless surrounded himself with books that reinforced his own beliefs—in this case, texts that confirmed his sense that he was living honorably by attempting to follow his beliefs *to the letter*. Alternately the evangelist and the pilgrim, McCandless moved through the world trying to convert others to his point of view and turning away from anyone who sought to make more intimate contact with him personally. As Alex, he was a hobo, a vagabond, the self-defined "super" tramp, someone who had neither the need nor the desire for human relationships: his books and his solo adventures satisfied his yearnings for connection. Or, as Krakauer puts it in his summary judgment of McCandless's motivations: "Unlike Muir and Thoreau, McCandless went into the wilderness not primarily to ponder nature or the world at large but, rather, to explore the inner country of his own soul" (183).

As much as Krakauer admires McCandless for having embarked upon such a spiritual journey, he is careful to point out that McCandless was ultimately undone by the great trust he placed in the written word. The harshest judgment Krakauer offers in his account emerges in his discussion of McCandless's way of reading Jack London's stories about life in Alaska: "He was so enthralled by these tales . . . that he seemed to forget they were works of fiction, constructions of the imagination that had more to do with London's romantic sensibilities than with the actualities of life in the subarctic wilderness. McCandless conveniently overlooked the fact that London himself had spent just a single winter in the North and that he'd died by his own hand on his California estate at the age of forty, a fatuous drunk, obese and pathetic, maintaining a sedentary existence that bore scant resemblance to the ideals he espoused in print" (44). What most interests me about Krakauer's critique of London is its vehemence: Krakauer's rage here is for an author whose life and words don't align. Because McCandless wanted to believe in the world London invented, because McCandless wanted to be enchanted, he failed to ask the question that Krakauer believes must be of concern to all readers: namely, what is the relationship between what the author says and the way the author lives? London used his writing as a place to store his fantasies about struggling to survive, about lonely battles against the elements, about the animal within, fantasies that have trapped and—Krakauer's language suggests—even killed some of those naive enough to believe them.

While Krakauer faults McCandless for being fooled by London's prose, he goes to great lengths to defend McCandless against charges of recklessness or incompetence. It is true, Krakauer concedes, that McCandless could have taken any number of actions to avoid dying in the woods. The young man could have taken a map with him; he could have done a better job exploring the banks of the suddenly uncrossable river that prevented him from returning by the route he came in on; he could even have started a forest fire to alert the authorities to his plight. But for those who see McCandless's death by starvation as irrefutable proof of his failure as an outdoorsman, Krakauer has another explanation: McCandless died in the woods not because he couldn't find enough food to survive, but because he ate seeds that no one knew to be poisonous. Relying on *Tanaina Plantlore* to guide his gatherings in the wild, McCandless trusted its author completely. As he grew weaker and as game grew scarcer, McCandless began to eat the roots of a species of wild potato that the book identified as nontoxic. The book said nothing about the seeds of the wild potato and it is Krakauer's hypothesis that, as he grew more desperate, McCandless took the book's silence on the seeds as permission to ingest them. If Krakauer is right, one could say that McCandless was killed off by a reading practice that placed too much faith in books, a practice that forgets that the world in all its infinite complexity and particularity will always exceed the explanatory grasp of any single text and, indeed, of all texts taken in their totality.

Whenever I've taught this book — and I've used it with first-year students, undergraduate literature majors, and advanced graduate students — the issue of trust inevitably arises as a problem. Why accept Krakauer's account when he is so obviously invested in defending McCandless from his critics? The fact that Krakauer is so openly identified with the subject of his research is a sign, I would say, that he is producing a kind of writing that can and should still matter. Because Krakauer has inhabited the same clichés that captured McCandless, because he understands their pull from the inside, he is able to offer an account of the young man's motivations that is simultaneously sympathetic *and* critical. By working on the materials of McCandless's life, Krakauer learns how to do what McCandless was unable or unwilling to do: he comes to understand and respect the thoughts of those who were appalled by his behavior. He is doing the work of making peace with his past. Thus, although Krakauer claims he is just trying to make sense of "why some people seem to despise [McCandless] so intensely for having died" in the Alaskan wilds, the truth is that Krakauer is equally interested in using McCandless as a vehicle for making sense of his own turbulent, and occasionally self-destructive, youth. As it turns out, McCandless and Krakauer had much in common. They read and were moved by many of the same authors; they fell in love, like many lonely, alienated, introspective young men before them, with a stark, unforgiving beauty that they could only find in books and in the natural world; and, finally, when the time was right, they both ran away from a world that did not live up to their expectations.

From a certain vantage point, McCandless's Alaskan odyssey and Krakauer's harrowing attempt to climb the Devils Thumb are clichés of modernity: they are the stories of young men, fed up with society, determined to get away from it all. (One version of this cliché involves heading off into the wild; a more recent version, as we've seen, involves entering the schoolyard armed to the teeth.) Now that he has safely made the passage into middle age, Krakauer can see that there's nothing particularly original about embarking on such a journey and he is reluctant to require that such adventures be treated either with reverence or with scorn. On his own journey, Krakauer discovered just how fleeting the profound and transformative experience of scaling a mountain peak can be. Less than a month after realizing his dream, he found himself back in Colorado, pounding nails into frames for townhouses. Over the years that followed, Krakauer came to a different realization: "I was a raw youth who mistook passion for insight and acted according to an obscure, gap-ridden logic. I thought climbing the Devils Thumb would fix all that was wrong with my life. In the end, of course, it changed almost nothing" (155).

Since Krakauer and McCandless moved through the same experiential world for a time, Krakauer seems to know, intuitively, where to look to find a final explanation for McCandless's aberrant behavior. Why would a young man with so much going for him throw it all away? Unlike Amis, Krakauer cannot accept a world without motive, so he continues to probe until he discovers what he believes to be the series of events that alienated McCandless from his family and friends. The ultimate cause of McCandless's disaffection, it would appear, was that his father had conducted an extended affair when McCandless was a small child. Years later, unbeknownst to his parents, McCandless found out about his father's double life and confided in his sister that this discovery made his "entire childhood seem like a fiction" (121-23). To some, it will seem that in uncovering this information, Krakauer has simply succeeded in moving McCandless from one familiar narrative to another, finding at the heart of his desire to escape nothing more than another primordial example of the Oedipal struggle. However accurate such an assessment might be, I would argue that the true significance of Krakauer's discovery lies elsewhere. Having learned this dark family secret, Krakauer is able to provide us with a glimpse of how McCandless responded when confronted with a reality quite unlike the one contained in the books he had chosen to surround himself with. With his childhood transformed into a fiction, McCandless understood himself to have received a warrant to embark on a new life. He believed he was alone. He believed he owed no one anything. He believed he was free.

ON MEDITATIVE WRITING AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

Several years have now passed since I first realized how numerous were the false opinions that in my youth I had taken to be true, and thus how doubtful were all those that I had subsequently built upon them. And thus

I realized that once in my life I had to raze everything to the ground and begin again from the original foundations, if I wanted to establish anything firm and lasting in the sciences.

— RENÉ DESCARTES, *Meditations on First Philosophy*

All these unhappy men, the betrayed and the betrayers, the real and the fictional. Is there any hope for them? Or for the wasted worlds they've left in their wake? Thinking about these lives, so deeply entangled with violence, neglect, and lies; watching the news, which is forever reporting that another angry man has entered some building or schoolyard, guns blazing; feeling the weight of these stories, and knowing their inevitable movement towards death, destruction, and humiliation: such thoughts only serve to plunge one deeper into the darkness. Amis's fiction clearly offers no escape from such ruminations. And Krakauer's real-life account confirms the fact that relying on reading as a mode of escape has its own unique set of dangers. Against the backdrop of Columbine (or Kosovo or Rwanda or September 11 or Afghanistan or Iraq — the news never fails to offer up another example), there is little these authors can do. The senseless loss of life always trumps the efforts of the meaning makers. Why bother with reading and writing when the world is so obviously going to hell?

One could say that the course of Western philosophy was forever altered by an encounter with a differently phrased version of this question. When Descartes reached that point in his life when he felt that nothing he had been told in the past could be

**WHY BOTHER WITH READING
AND WRITING WHEN THE WORLD
IS SO OBVIOUSLY GOING TO HELL?**

trusted, he, too, sealed himself off from the rest of society and contemplated the dark possibility that he might be doomed to live out the rest of his days in a dream world. This, at any rate, is the opening conceit of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. To rid himself of all the false opinions that he had been fed in his youth, Descartes tells us that he waited until he had both the maturity and the free time necessary to devote to the harrowing task of self-purification. In his mid-forties, he sits by the fire, in his dressing gown, all alone. He is transported by the idea that he can attack his past and demolish it. He, too, wants to be free. And so Descartes settles down to the task of dismantling and reassembling his cosmology, a process that takes him six days to complete.⁷

On the first day of his meditations, everything collapses under the force of Descartes' determined skepticism. There is nothing Descartes has ever thought or felt that cannot also be doubted. Since everything that comes to him through his senses is misleading, he finds it impossible to distinguish dream states from states of consciousness. He even imagines the possibility that there might well be "an evil genius, supremely powerful and clever" who whiles away his time deceiving him at every turn (62). While the first act of the God of Genesis is to separate light from darkness, Descartes' accomplishment, on his first day, is to plunge his readers into

the pitch of night. In the inverted world he has created with his skepticism, one dreams in the light and fears waking to toil "among the inextricable shadows of the difficulties" that have been produced by the workings of his mind (63).

On the second day, Descartes sets out to inhabit the world of doubt he has created: "I suppose that everything I see is false. I believe that none of what my deceitful memory represents ever existed" (63). Shorn of his past, of his body with all its misleading signals and vague impressions, Descartes discovers his true essence: he is first and foremost a "thing that thinks" (*une chose qui pense*) (65). And as a "thing that thinks," he determines that the senses are not to be trusted: in the midst of this meditation, Descartes looks out the window and believes he sees men walking by on the street. "[Y]et," Descartes asks, "but what do I see aside from hats and coats, which could conceal automata?" (68). To get to the essence of any thing, be it a man or a piece of wax, we must strip "it of its clothing" and "look at [it] in its nakedness" (68): we must remove all outward appearances and get to that which does not change.

On the third day, having shut his eyes, stopped up his ears, withdrawn all his senses, and abandoned his past, Descartes surveys the world of his creation and determines that he is alone. The only way out of this bleak environment that is haunted by malicious demons and the illusory reports of the senses is to posit the existence of a firm foundation, which, for reasons we'll discuss shortly, Descartes designates "God." Descartes' "proof" or "discovery" of God's existence is well known: God is the perfection that Descartes can conceive of but does not actually possess in his thoughts. Since Descartes' thoughts cannot be the cause of this state of perfection (because "what is more perfect [that is, what contains in itself more reality] cannot come into being from what is less perfect"), this perfection must exist outside of him (73). From this, "it necessarily follows that I am not alone in the world, but that something else, which is the cause of this idea, also exists" (74).

Alone with his God in the fourth meditation, Descartes turns his thoughts to an issue that has been at the center of our current discussion: how to distinguish between truth and falsity. For Descartes, the crucial task before him is to explain how God, who is perfect, could have created a thinking thing so defective that it struggles to distinguish fact from fiction, truth from lies. Setting to the side the question of *why* his creator elected to design him in this way, Descartes posits that his own errors result from the fact that he has been endowed by his creator with a will that has a much wider scope than his intellect. On the fifth and sixth days of his meditations, in a repetition that bespeaks a certain anxiety, Descartes once again proves the existence of God and then, after some deft negotiations, is returned to his body and the sensuous world. Before resting, Descartes looks back on where his thinking has taken him and concludes that "the hyperbolic doubts of the last few days ought to be rejected as ludicrous" (103). By doubting everything, he has found the firm ground

that is necessary for going on: there is a God; everything that happens is not a lie; the mind can provide us with direct access to the truth. Descartes, it would appear, is home free.

Why should the thoughts this lonely man had more than 350 years ago warrant our attention now? Descartes contributed to the larger effort to liberate reason from the prison of religious dogma and he did this, in part, by driving a wedge between the mind, which traffics in clear and distinct ideas, and the body, which transmits and receives the innately imperfect data of the senses. Fearful of how his thoughts might be received at the time, Descartes had his meditations published first in Latin in Paris and only later allowed them to be translated into French and reprinted in Holland where he was staying. He also placed at the front of his meditations an open letter "to the Most Wise and Distinguished Men, the Dean and Doctors of the Faculty of Sacred Theology of Paris," explaining his reasons for seeking to make public the transcripts, as it were, of his own encounter with the darkness. For those readers prone to skipping such front matter and jumping straight to the body of the text, it will probably come as something of a surprise to learn that Descartes' meditations, which seem like such an earnest attempt to find some solid bedrock upon which to build a life free of falsehoods, are actually a ruse. As Descartes makes clear in his letter to the faculty, he never really had any doubts at all about God or the eternal life of the soul: he's simply trying to put together an argument that will persuade the "unbelievers" (*infidèles*) of what he and his fellow believers "believe by faith" (47). So, the darkness, the radical doubt, the mind floating free of the body are all just props to add to the drama of the fiction he's created — ways of getting those outside the circle of believers to share in his illusion.

That's one way to read Descartes' opening remarks to the Faculty of Sacred Theology. There is, however, yet another possibility. (There always is.) Maybe the letter to the deans and doctors is the sham, just Descartes whispering sweet nothings to those in power in hopes of securing a protected space where he can carry out his scientific research without threat of being harassed. And, given that Descartes is so good at creating the illusion of compliance, what can the illustrious deans and faculty do? He's poured it on so thick — he's just doing what any fellow believer would do, contributing to the cause, etc. — that they just have to get out of the way. If the God that emerges from Descartes' meditations is one more likely to be found residing in the theorems of analytical geometry than in the sanctuaries of the Vatican, what's the harm? That's how advertising works: it's just food for the infidels. It poses no threat to the believers, for what true believer would doubt the existence of God or that the soul separates from the body at death?

There's no resolving the question of whether or not Descartes was being completely sincere when he wrote to the deans and doctors of the Faculty of Sacred Theology in Paris seeking their protection. All we can know is that he had good reason to fear their powers and the institution they represented. For our purposes, what matters most is pausing to take note of the intellectual regime that has risen in the wake of Descartes'

effort to break free of dogmatic belief by locating the self at the nexus of reason and the will. To resolve his crisis in certainty and construct a working space that is not contaminated by the lies of the past, Descartes established an internal hierarchy that gives primacy to the mind and its universal truths — truths that, like the properties of a triangle, are clear, distinct, and without a history. The body and its voyage through time are without interest: nothing is to be gained by exploring what happens to the body as it moves through the social institutions that govern life. These are just accidents of time and place. The mind is where the action is.

Whether Descartes himself learned anything as a result of writing down these meditations isn't clear. We know only that Descartes' meditations were designed to provide their author with a method for protecting himself from being deceived by the world and its denizens. Encased in this regulatory mechanism, Descartes is, I believe, more alone at the end of his meditations than when he started. For now that he has rid himself of his fictions and screwed himself into the real, he has no need to consider these fundamental matters any further: "I will say in addition that these arguments are such that I believe there is no way open to the human mind whereby better ones could ever be found" (48). True to this claim, Descartes spends much of the rest of his life defending the veracity of his proofs and the cogency of his line of reasoning. He wanders off into the dreamy world of argumentation.

JOINING THE LIARS' CLUB: WRITING AND THE GENERATION OF HOPE

I never knew despair could lie.

— MARY KARR, *The Liars' Club*

It's safe to say that the spirit of our time differs markedly from the spirit of Descartes' time. While he wrote to banish the particular and to revel in the universal, now that we inhabit the age of the memoir, we find ourselves surrounded by those who write to distinguish themselves from the crowd by capturing the deep particularity and pathos of their own past experiences. Frank McCourt describes the grueling poverty of the Irish immigrant; former Princeton professor Michael Ryan records having sex with his dog; Kathryn Harrison, sex with her father; David Denby, sex with himself (while reading the Great Books no less); James McBride, what it's like to grow up black while having a white mother; Susanna Kaysen, what it's like to be institutionalized. The list goes on and on, because every shoe salesman and waitress, every schoolteacher and cop, every politician and pundit has a story to tell and wants to share it now via the Internet, on some television talk show, or on the printed page. The chosen media doesn't seem to matter. The stories will out.

While there has been much fretting in the critical community about this "turn to the personal" and all that it may be said to signify, the memoirs just keep coming, flooding over the outstretched arms of all those

who would like to contain the spread of this genre. That the memoirs, in general, return to scenes of violence and violation is worth pondering, for here one finds evidence of one way in which writing continues to matter at the current moment: the memoir allows one to plunge into the darkness of the past; it provides the means both for evoking and for making sense of that past; and it can be made to generate a sense of possibility, a sense that a better, brighter future is out there to be secured. When judged by these criteria, Mary Karr's *The Liars' Club* stands out as one of the most remarkable representatives of the genre.

The Liars' Club opens with fragments of a recovered memory, "a single instant surrounded by dark": Karr, at seven years old, being inspected by her family doctor; the Sheriff and his deputies moving through her house; the backyard on fire; her mother being taken away; the concerted effort to find a place for the children to stay (3). One of the central projects of *The Liars' Club* is to make sense of these fragments, to relocate them in a more coherent, more comprehensive account of Karr's past. What happened that night? Why did no one ever speak of it again? To answer these questions, Karr has to wade through the faulty, inexact evidence that her family—which is its own liars' club—makes available to her and then find a way to tell not only her story, but also the stories of Pete Karr, her father, Charlie Marie Moore Karr, her mother, and Licia, her sister.

By the middle of Karr's memoir, she has succeeded in finding out what led to the appearance of the police and the firemen in her house. She eventually remembers being with her sister, hiding in the dark, their mother in the bedroom doorway holding a knife and then, moments later, her mother in the hallway calling the police, saying, "Get over here. I just killed them both. Both of them. I've stabbed them both to death" (157). But to get to this moment, Karr must first detail: life among the working poor in Leechfield, Texas; the odd union of her father, an oil worker, and her mother, a highly educated woman with artistic aspirations; her parents' spiral into alcoholism, the violent fights, the long separations; the slow, agonizingly painful death of the grandmother; her own rape by a neighborhood boy. She is participating in a form of revelation, a ritual of purging and purification. She is telling the family secrets, pulling the ghosts out of the closets, waking the dead, and she does so with no overt sign of shame.

At one point, in retaliation for a beating she received in a fight with the boys who lived next door, Karr credits herself with going on "a rampage that prefigured what Charles Whitman—the guy who shot and killed thirteen people from the tower at the University of Texas—would do a few years later" (161). She got a BB gun, climbed a tree, and waited for her victims to walk out into a nearby field. And when the enemy clan appeared, Karr opened fire, hitting one of the children in the neck before the family fled out of range. When one of the boys hid behind his father, Karr reports that her response was as follows: "You pussy, I thought, as if Rickey's not wanting to get shot were a defining mark against his manhood" (162). For this activity, Karr received a whipping. She notes, as well,

that her "morning as sniper" won [her] a grudging respect. Kids stopped mouthing off about Mother" (162). Violence silenced her tormenters and it kept the enemies at bay. Within the psychic economy of the world Karr inhabited at the time, this doubtless seemed the only rational response available to her.

Eventually, Karr recovers the psychically charged world surrounding her memory of that dark night. Trapped in a life she never wanted serving as a "hausfrau" to an oilman in a "crackerbox house," surrounded by people she despised, Charlie Marie Karr tried to set her world on fire. She burned down her studio. She made a bonfire of her paintings, the children's toys, their books, their furniture, their clothes, their shoes.

As Mary and her sister mutely look on, they are transformed by the experience: they are ready to be led into the fire themselves. "We are in the grip of some big machine grinding us along. The force of it simplifies everything. A weird calm has settled over me from the inside out. What is about to happen to us has stood in line to happen. All the roads out of that instant have been closed, one by one" (152).

They are doomed.

No neighbor intervenes to stop what is happening. No one calls the police. The children don't run away to save themselves. The father doesn't appear to rescue them. The mother is not restrained by some maternal instinct. On the familial level, this is the apocalypse; this is a time without hope. And yet, for reasons that are never explained and perhaps never can be, Charlie Marie doesn't actually go through with murdering her children. She only thinks she has. The disaster passes. The mother is institutionalized. Mary takes her BB gun into the tree. And eventually Charlie Marie comes back home.

From a certain vantage point, this would appear to be the logical place for Karr to end her meditation. She's cast light into her memory of that dark night in the bedroom and now knows what happened. Why keep *The Liars' Club* going for another two hundred pages? What else is there to know? The story continues, I would argue, for two interrelated reasons. First, Karr only knows the *how* and the *what* regarding that night; she does not know *why* her mother went over the edge. Second, Karr's writing has not yet delivered her from those memories because she knows only the facts, not the truth of what happened. At the age of seven, thinking magically, she understood only that her mother had tried to kill her for failing to clean up her room. By the middle of the book, she recognizes the inadequacy of such an explanation. Without the *why* she has nothing, just information coming in the dead of night.

Pursuing the question of motivation takes Karr into still darker waters. After her mother's psychotic episode, her parents move to Colorado and eventually divorce. Her mother remarries and sinks deeper into a drunken stupor. Karr walks in on her mother having sex with another man; Karr is raped again; Charlie Marie tries to kill her new husband, buys a bar, stays up late reading French philosophy and "talking in a misty-eyed way about suicide" (230). Eventually, Charlie Marie puts the

girls on a plane back to their father, but it's the wrong plane and they end up flying to Mexico. The calamities continue without ever exposing the cause of all this senseless, self-destructive behavior. Why is it that no one seeks help? What is it that fuels Charlie Marie's all-encompassing sense of despair? Why is it that Pete Karr seeks refuge with the other members of "the Liars' Club," a group of men who drink together and tell tall tales that keep their pasts shrouded in darkness?

When Karr finally finds the key that unlocks the mystery of her family's past, it is long after she has grown up and moved away. Her parents have reunited. She has watched her father's steady decline after a stroke, sat by his side during his final days, listened to him ramble on about his life in the war, a time he never before mentioned. She discovers that he was wounded twice, one time stuck with "a bayonet through his forearm, leaving a scar [she'd] seen a thousand times and never once asked about" (307), the other time left for dead under the rubble of a bridge he'd helped to explode. This last news sends Karr up to the family attic in search of military papers that might be used to get her father additional medical assistance. While moving amongst the family's remains, she discovers four jewelry boxes, each containing a wedding ring. She has, quite unexpectedly, found her mother's hidden past and she then finds the strength to use this material evidence to compel her mother to speak. As Karr confronts her ever-reticent mother, she observes: "Few born liars ever intentionally embark in truth's direction, even those who believe that such a journey might axiomatically set them free" (311).

Karr uncovers the systemic violence that defined her mother's past — the sudden, inexplicable disappearance of her first husband and her first two children, the years she spent trying to find her first family, the reunion where she was convinced to leave the children with their father and return to her studio apartment in Texas — and as she does so the fragmented pieces of her own life begin to fall into place. In the end, the mystery is not so mysterious: "Those were my mother's demons, then, two small children, whom she longed for and felt ashamed for having lost." The explanation for Charlie Marie's years of silence about her past is both simple and profound. She tells her daughter that she kept these events a secret because she was afraid that, if Mary knew, she "wouldn't like [her] anymore" (318).

It would be easy to ridicule such an explanation. After all, Charlie Marie has done much in her life that her daughter did know about that would have justified rejection. She neglected her children, placed them in harm's way, tried to kill herself, tried to kill them. Karr herself finds her mother's reasoning to be "pathetic" (318). However one judges Charlie Marie's excuse, though, the fact that she cannot produce a satisfying or reasonable account for her silence is compelling evidence of just how much power stories *can* exercise over the lives of individuals. By clinging to her silence, by keeping her story trapped inside, she invested her untold story with such a monstrous power that she came to believe that speaking it aloud would make her essentially unlikable. Left alone with

this story, Charlie Marie transformed a series of events where she was outmatched, unprepared, and cruelly victimized into irrefutable proof of her own unworthiness as a mother. Without some other connection to the world, without some other voice to counter her interpretations, Charlie Marie was left to suffer her own perpetually punishing judgments. Within this psychic economy, the only possible way for Charlie Marie to remain likable was to keep her story a secret. To remain likable, she had to lie.

The revelation of Charlie Marie's story did not produce the anticipated effect, though.

As Karr puts it: "what Mother told absolved us both, in a way. All the black crimes we believed ourselves guilty of were myths, stories we'd cobbled together out of fear. We expected no good news interspersed with the bad. Only the dark aspect of any story sank in. I never knew despair could lie." As the book ends, Karr escapes the darkness that has defined her past and contemplates "the cool tunnel of white light the spirit might fly into at death." Acknowledging that this description of what it's like to die may simply be an account of "death's neurological fireworks, the brain's last light show," Karr insists that this is a lie she can live with. She is content to at least entertain the possibility of a future communion with her loved ones, a time when "all your beloveds hover before you, their lit arms held out in welcome" (320).

In Karr's hands, the memoir thus becomes a vehicle for arriving at an understanding that produces forgiveness. Writing, as she uses it, is a hermeneutic practice that involves witnessing the mundane horrors of the past in order to make peace with that past. And, as the preceding account makes clear, it also becomes, however briefly, a means for gaining access to the light of the universal. While the other writers and events I've discussed here have turned our attention to death and decay, Karr offers an encounter with the prospect of one's mortality that leads neither to despair nor cynicism nor violence nor suicide nor escape. Even if it's a lie, the lie Karr tells herself at the end of *The Liars' Club* is a lie that keeps her inside the realm of social relations, helping her make what she can of what life has put before her.

AN EXPERIMENT IN INSTITUTIONAL AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It might seem that, by organizing these readings in this way, I've been building up to a spirited defense of the social and therapeutic value of writing one's memoirs. After all, this kind of writing worked for Karr; why shouldn't it work for us all? But the genre of the memoir is no more likely to compel a writer to make peace with the past or to find some sense of connection with others than is poetry, fiction, the meditative essay, the policy statement, the well-honed critique, the bulleted memo, the forced confession, the suicide note. When Martin Amis composed his memoirs, for instance, the genre didn't force him to shift his world view: he ends *Experience* with atrocity, Auschwitz, ruminations on the murder of one of his cousins, and "the usual articles of faith for a man of fifty . . . : that the parents are going, the children are staying, and I am somewhere in

between" (371). When Eric Harris began his diary with the statement, "I hate the fucking world," he wasn't laying the groundwork for a transformative inner voyage; he was girding himself for battle.

If we accept Amis's bleak view of the future of publishing — and I think we should — then the challenge, for all whose lives are inextricably bound to the literate arts, is to make a compelling case for why writing might be said to matter in the twenty-first century. Amis taking the long view, Alex Supertramp running into the wild, Descartes alone with his thoughts: it is clear that these men knew that writing could be used to articulate and extend one's sense of despair and one's sense of superiority. What isn't clear, though, is whether these men knew what Karr knows — namely, how to use writing as a practice for constructing a sense of hope and optimism atop the ruins of previous worlds. Is it possible to produce writing that generates a greater sense of connection to the world and its inhabitants? Of self-understanding? Writing that moves out from the mundane, personal tragedies that mark any individual life into the history, the culture, and the lives of the institutions that surround us all?

In working my way up to this set of questions, I have unexpectedly found myself relying on words and phrases that immediately produce religious connotations: the dark night of the soul,

the generation of hope, the power of forgiveness. While I did not set out to consider religious matters, the language I've fallen into using has inevitably led me to a set of concerns that tends to be avoided by those who share my secular sensibilities. Under normal circumstances, I might find other, less volatile terms. But these aren't normal circumstances. There will never again be a book

**IS IT POSSIBLE TO PRODUCE
WRITING THAT GENERATES A
GREATER SENSE OF CONNECTION TO
THE WORLD AND ITS INHABITANTS?
OF SELF-UNDERSTANDING?**

that can credibly be labeled "great," not because outstanding books are no longer being produced, but because the world is now awash with writing that no one reads, with last year's blockbusters ending up in the dump next to this year's most insightful critiques. If one is in search of fame or truth and one has placed all one's hopes on the activity of writing, this fact can be a devastating blow. But, however painful it may be to admit, it is clear that those of us who remain committed to books are part of a residual culture whose days are numbered. The fetishization of the written word is coming to an end and in its place one finds a fascination with moving what is known from here to there in the shortest amount of time and with the elusive pleasures of religious conviction. One finds as well a haunting sense of disconnection, as one tightly wound individual after another hatches a plot to make others pay for these ambient feelings of placelessness. The world as we have known it is passing away and the world that is emerging is one that appears to be fraught with danger.

What to do? These concerns about the diminishing power of reading and writing serve as the launching point for a sustained investigation into the value of humanistic inquiry at the present moment. In

fashioning the oxymoronic phrase "institutional autobiography" to describe the collection of meditations that follows,⁸ I mean to highlight a brand of intellectual inquiry that is centrally concerned with what might best be termed "the felt experience of the impersonal." The course of any given individual life cuts through or around a set of institutions charged with responsibility for nurturing both a sense of self and a sense of connection between self and society — the family, the school, and, for some, the church or the house of worship. It goes without saying that the relative influence each of these institutions has on any given individual depends on a number of variables, including race, class, and gender. By linking the institutional with the autobiographic, my goal is not to draw attention away from our individual differences, but rather to show that we all internalize institutional influences in ways that are both idiosyncratic and historically situated, open-ended and overdetermined, liberating and confining. We all go to school, bringing both our minds and our embodied histories: what happens there is both utterly predictable and utterly mysterious, the circumscribed movement of a statistical norm and the free flight of aberrant data.

Historically, schooling in the United States has served as the battleground where the nation works out its evolving understanding of social justice — through, for example, busing, affirmative action, the student loan program, the multicultural curriculum. What has changed recently, though, is the power of weaponry that students bring to the schoolyard and the magnitude of the notoriety that accrues to those who show up ready for a fight. The police investigating the actions of Harris and Klebold concluded that the two young men were driven, above all, by a desire for fame: "[A]ll the rest of the justifications are just smoke. They certainly wanted the media to write stories about them every day. And they wanted cult followings. They [were] going to become superstars by getting rid of bad people" (Cullen, "Kill Mankind"). We might say that Harris and Klebold wanted what all writers are said to want, what Richard Tull and Alexander Supertramp dreamed of and what Gwyn Barry, Amis, Krakauer, Descartes, and Karr have all, to varying degrees, achieved. The costs of such fame are quite high and the benefits fleeting at best.

Can secular institutions of higher education be taught to use writing to foster a kind of critical optimism that is able to transform idle feelings of hope into viable plans for sustainable action? Can the first year writing course become a place where we engage productively with the dark realities of our time: violence, suicide, war, and terrorism, as well as fraudulence, complicity, and trauma? Can teachers of first year writing be moved beyond praising students for generating arguments without consequence, thought with no interest in action? If there is to be lasting hope for the future of higher education, that hope can only be generated by confronting our desolate world and its threatening, urgent realities. The only way out is through.

NOTES

¹ The boys' larger plans were laid out in Harris's diary, in which he fantasized about going to an island after the massacre or, "if there isn't such a place," he wrote, "then we will hijack a hell of a lot of bombs and crash a plane into NYC with us inside [f]iring away as we go down." Eric Harris, personal diary. For a discussion of inaccuracies in the initial characterization of the boys' interests and beliefs, see Cullen, "Inside." [All notes are Miller's, unless indicated by Eds.]

² Michael Moore's *Bowling for Columbine* rebuts these familiar explanations for the massacre in Littleton and makes the compelling argument that it is a culture of fear, particularly fear of the racialized other, that is the source of America's violent ways.

³ Harris, personal diary. "V" is short for "Vodka," Harris's code name for Dylan Klebold. For more on the contents of Harris's diary, see Cullen, "Kill Mankind," and Prendergast.

⁴ Harris, who was in the final semester of his senior year, had been rejected from a number of colleges in the weeks prior to carrying out the attack on Columbine. And, just before the attack, he had been rejected by the Marine Corps, apparently because he was taking the antidepressant Luvox. Although both Harris and Klebold were considered by their peers to be "brilliant, particularly in math and computers," it was Klebold who seemed to have had everything going for him: unlike Harris, he had had a date for the senior prom and he had just returned from a trip with his parents to visit the University of Arizona, where he had been admitted for the following fall (Pooley 28). Whatever their shared experiences moving through the school system and the juvenile penal system had been, it was clear to both that their paths would begin to diverge radically after graduation.

⁵ Kate Battan, lead investigator of the Columbine shootings, is quoted as having said, as she completed her report: "Everybody wants a quick answer. They want an easy answer so that they can sleep at night and know this is not going to happen tomorrow at their school. And there is no such thing in this case. There's not an easy answer. I've been working on this nonstop daily [for six months] since April 20th and I can't tell you why it happened" (qtd. in Cullen, "Inside").

⁶ Amis does, in fact, share much in common with his successful character: he thrives on publicity; he made a name for himself early on as a modern Lothario, and his insistence during contract negotiations for *The Information* on receiving the largest advance ever given in Britain for a literary novel earned him the enmity of much of the literary community (Lyll C13).

⁷ Descartes was trained by the Jesuits, the religious order founded by Ignatius Loyola who became a committed Christian after a transformative experience reading *The Life of Christ*. Part of the training Descartes received involved going on a series of retreats where initiates meditated on passages from Scripture in the hope that this practice would help them to achieve a deeper understanding of the text and a more loving response to the world. That Descartes returned to the meditational form later in life is evidence of its lasting pedagogical value.

⁸ Miller refers to the chapters in *Writing at the End of the World* that follow this one, essays of a similar method. These chapters, some of which draw on his own experience, are not included in this selection. [Eds.]

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QUESTIONS FOR A SECOND READING

1. "The Dark Night of the Soul" is the first chapter in Richard Miller's book *Writing at the End of the World*. The chapter, which we are inviting you to read as an essay, is organized by subheadings. You might think of these as a way of *punctuating* the essay, and you might think of this technique as a tool for your own toolkit.

As you reread the essay, pay attention to each unit marked off by a subheading, and pay attention to the progression or arrangement of these units. How might they mark stages or strategies for the writer? for the reader? (Are they big paragraphs, for example, or mini-essays, or stanzas, or something else?) How might you describe the principle of selection and organization? Can you imagine bringing this strategy into your own writing?

2. In the final chapter of *Writing at the End of the World*, Miller says the following about his own writing:

While the assessments, evaluations, proposals, reports, commentaries, and critiques I produce help to keep the bureaucracy of higher education going, there is another kind of writing I turn to in order to sustain the ongoing search for meaning in a world no one controls. This writing asks the reader to make imaginative connections between disparate elements; it tracks one path among many possible ones across the glistening water. (p. 196)

We can assume that this is the kind of writing present in "The Dark Night of the Soul." And he says this about English and the humanities:

The practice of the humanities . . . is not about admiration or greatness or appreciation or depth of knowledge or scholarly achievement; it's about the movement between worlds, arms out, balancing; it's about making the connections that count. (p. 198)

This latter is a pretty bold statement, since English departments have traditionally defined their job as teaching students to read deeply, to conduct scholarly research, and to appreciate great works of literature. What Miller has to offer, rather, is "movement between worlds, arms out, balancing" or "making the connections that count."

As you reread "The Dark Night of the Soul," be prepared to talk about connections—about the connections Miller makes, about the ways he makes them, and about the ways you as a reader are (or are not) invited into this process. Is Miller's description of his project, as represented above, accurate

or sufficient? If what is represented in Miller's writing can suggest a goal for a curriculum or an imperative for English instruction in high schools and in colleges, what changes would need to be made? What would a course look like? What would its students do? Would you want to take such a course?

3. For the sake of argument, let's say that Jon Krakauer and Mary Karr are the key figures in this essay—Krakauer as a reader, Karr as a writer. As you reread, pay particular attention to these two sections. What are the appropriate goals and methods for reading, if Krakauer is to serve as a model? What are the appropriate goals and methods for writing, if Karr is to serve as a model? And do you agree with the initial assumption, that Krakauer and Karr are the key figures in this essay?

For further research: Two chapters in *Writing at the End of the World* are, at least in part, autobiographical. In them Miller writes about his own family, and the story he tells is a difficult one. You could read these chapters to add a third key figure to this mix—Miller himself. Does Miller read Karr as an exemplary figure? With this example in mind, how do you read Miller? How might you place his writing in relation to hers?

4. Miller introduces two phrases in the final paragraphs of "The Dark Night of the Soul": "the felt experience of the impersonal" and "critical optimism." He introduces these to set up key terms a reader can use in reading the chapters that follow in his book. You don't have these chapters to refer to. Still, the chapter that you read should serve as suitable preparation for a reader to make sense of these terms. As you reread "The Dark Night of the Soul," keep these key terms in mind. And be prepared to write one-paragraph definitions of each. What do they mean for Miller? What do they mean in relation to the work he does in "The Dark Night of the Soul"? Each paragraph should include a reference (with a block quotation) to one of Miller's examples.
5. Richard E. Miller has recently turned his attention to multimedia composition, composition in digital environments, both in his own writing and as a necessary next step for the teaching of English. You can access an example of this work at nmc.org: "This Is How We Dream, Parts 1 and 2." Watch this video presentation, and as you reread, take the notes you will need to be prepared to talk about new media in relation to the concerns expressed in "The Dark Night of the Soul."

ASSIGNMENTS FOR WRITING

1. Miller's essay opens with a list of fatal shootings in school—troublingly, an incomplete list. As the essay builds to questions—questions for educators and for students—the specters of violence and alienation remain, changing how we think about the reading and writing school endeavors to teach us. "I have these doubts, you see," Miller writes of academic work, "doubts

silently shared by many who spend their days teaching others the literate arts. Aside from gathering and organizing information, aside from generating critiques and analyses that forever fall on deaf ears, what might the literate arts be said to be good for?" (p. 424).

Write an essay that takes up this question—"what might the literate arts be good for?"—and that takes it up from your range of reference and from your point of view—or, more properly, from the point of view of you and people like you, the group you feel prepared to speak for. As an exercise in understanding, your essay should be modeled on one (or more) of the sections in "The Dark Night of the Soul." You can choose the text—and the text can be anything that might serve as an example of the literate arts, things in print but also including songs, films, and TV shows. But your presentation and discussion of the text should be in conversation with Miller—with his concerns, his key terms, his examples, and his conclusions.

2. In the final chapter of *Writing at the End of the World*, Miller says the following about English and the humanities:

The practice of the humanities . . . is not about admiration or greatness or appreciation or depth of knowledge or scholarly achievement; it's about the movement between worlds, arms out, balancing; it's about making the connections that count. (p. 198)

This latter is a pretty bold statement, since English departments have traditionally defined their job as teaching students to read deeply, to conduct scholarly research, and to appreciate great works of literature. What Miller has to offer, rather, is "movement between worlds, arms out, balancing" or "making the connections that count."

"The Dark Night of the Soul" could be said to be about the teaching of English. Reread it, taking notes and marking sections you might use to think about Miller's concerns and his contributions and about schooling and the teaching of the "literate arts." This is a subject about which you already have some considerable experience. Write an essay in response to "The Dark Night of the Soul," one in which you engage Miller's argument from the point of view of the student. If what is represented in Miller's writing can suggest a goal for a curriculum or an imperative for English instruction in high schools and in colleges, what changes would need to be made? What would a course look like? What would its students do? Would you want to take such a course?

3. In the final chapter of *Writing at the End of the World*, Miller says the following about his own writing:

While the assessments, evaluations, proposals, reports, commentaries, and critiques I produce help to keep the bureaucracy of higher education going, there is another kind of writing I turn to in order to sustain the ongoing search for meaning in a world no one controls. This writing asks the reader to make imaginative connections between disparate elements; it tracks one path among many possible ones across the glistening water. (p. 196)

We can assume that this is the kind of writing present in "The Dark Night of the Soul."

Reread "The Dark Night of the Soul" with particular attention to Miller's method, which is, in simplest terms, putting one thing next to another. Pay attention to the connections Miller makes, to the ways he makes them, and to the ways as a reader you are (or are not) invited into this process. And write a Miller-like essay. To give the project some shape and limit, let's say that it should bring together at least three "disparate elements," three examples you can use to think about whatever it is you want to think about. You don't need to be constrained to Miller's subject—writing, reading, and schooling—although this subject might be exactly the right one for you. Your writing should, however, be like Miller's in its sense of urgency. Write about something that matters to you—in other words, that you care about, that touches you personally and deeply.

4. Consider the following passage from Miller's "The Dark Night of the Soul":

What makes *Into the Wild* remarkable is Krakauer's ability to get some purchase on McCandless's actual reading practice, which, in turn, enables him to get inside McCandless's head and speculate with considerable authority about what ultimately led the young man to abandon the comforts of home and purposefully seek out mortal danger. Krakauer is able to do this, in part, because he has access to the books that McCandless read, with all their underlinings and marginalia, as well as to his journals and the postcards and letters McCandless sent to friends during his journey. Working with these materials and his interviews with McCandless's family and friends, Krakauer develops a sense of McCandless's inner life and eventually comes to some understanding of why the young man was so susceptible to being seduced by the writings of London, Thoreau, Muir, and Tolstoy. Who McCandless is and what becomes of him are, it turns out, intimately connected to the young man's approach to reading—both what he chose to read and how he chose to read it. (p. 429)

When Miller is writing about Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, he seems to suggest that what we read, and how we read, can say something about who we are and about what we might become. This is a very bold claim.

Think of a book that made a difference to you, that captured you, maybe one you have read more than once, maybe one that you've made marks in or that still sits on your bookshelf. Or, if not a book, think of your favorite song or album or movie or TV show, something that engaged you at least potentially as McCandless was engaged by London, Thoreau, Muir, and Tolstoy. What was it that you found there? What kind of reader were you? And what makes this a story in the past tense? How and why did you move on? (Or if it is not a story in the past tense, where are you now, and are you, like McCandless, in any danger?)

MAKING CONNECTIONS

1. After years spent unwilling to admit its attractions, I gestured nostalgically toward the past. I yearned for that time when I had not been so alone. I became impatient with books. I wanted experience more immediate. I feared the library's silence. I silently scorned the gray, timid faces around me. I grew to hate the growing pages of my dissertation on genre and Renaissance literature. (In my mind I heard relatives laughing as they tried to make sense of its title.) I wanted something — I couldn't say exactly what. (p. 531)

— RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

The Achievement of Desire

For some, it will hardly come as a surprise to learn that reading and writing have no magically transformative powers. But for those of us who have been raised into the teaching and publishing professions, it can be quite a shock to confront the possibility that reading and writing and talking exercise almost *none* of the powers we regularly attribute to them in our favorite stories. The dark night of the soul for literacy workers comes with the realization that training students to read, write, and talk in more critical and self-reflective ways cannot protect them from the violent changes our culture is undergoing. (p. 423)

— RICHARD E. MILLER

The Dark Night of the Soul

Both Richard E. Miller and Richard Rodriguez are concerned with the limits (and the failures) of education, with particular attention to the humanities and to the supposed benefits to be found in reading and writing. "I have these doubts, you see," Miller writes of academic work, "doubts silently shared by many who spend their days teaching others the literate arts. Aside from gathering and organizing information, aside from generating critiques and analyses that forever fall on deaf ears, what might the literate arts be said to be good for?" (p. 424).

Write an essay that takes up this question — "what might the literate arts be said to be good for?" — and that takes it up with these two essays, Miller's "The Dark Night of the Soul" and Rodriguez's "The Achievement of Desire" (p. 515), as your initial points of reference. What does each say? How might they be said to speak to each other? And, finally, where are you in this? Where are you, and people like you, the group for whom you feel prepared to speak? You, too, have been and will continue to be expected to take courses in reading and writing, to read, write, and talk in "critical and self-reflective ways." Where are you in this conversation?

2. After years spent unwilling to admit its attractions, I gestured nostalgically toward the past. I yearned for that time when I had not been so alone. I became impatient with books. I wanted experiences more immediate. I feared the library's silence. I silently scorned

the gray, timid faces around me. I grew to hate the growing pages of my dissertation on genre and Renaissance literature. (In my mind I heard relatives laughing as they tried to make sense of its title.) I wanted something — I couldn't say exactly what. (p. 531)

— RICHARD RODRIGUEZ

The Achievement of Desire

I could not, in the end, for some blessed reason, turn away from myself. Not at least in this place. The place of desire. I think now of the small lines etching themselves near the eyes of a woman's face I loved. And how, seeing these lines, I wanted to stroke her face. To lean myself, my body, my skin into her. A part of me unravels as I think of this, and I am taken toward longing, and beyond, into another region, past the walls of this house, or all I can see, stretching farther than the horizon where right now sea and sky blend. It is as if my cells are moving in a larger wave, a wave that takes in every history, every story. (p. 381)

— SUSAN GRIFFIN

Our Secret

We typically think of desire as something that leads us toward something, not as an achievement in and of itself, but as a process. Both Rodriguez and Griffin embody desire in different ways in their essays. If Richard Miller were to read these writers for their desires, what do you think he would notice?

Write an essay in which you think through the relationship between writing and desire. With Miller in mind, consider how Rodriguez's or Griffin's essay enacts a set of desires. What seems to propel their writing? What interests or concerns move them from one subject to another? At the same time, what desires do they come to as the essay unfolds? What do they seem to move closer to, and what do they seem to leave behind? Use this opportunity to reflect on your own writing and the changing desires that propel you or slow you down, the set of desires that may or may not be found in Miller's ideals, Rodriguez's reflections, or Griffin's imaginings.

3. One way to imagine Susan Griffin's project in "Our Secret" (p. 335) is to think of her study of Heinrich Himmler as a journey through texts. She spends a significant amount of time attending to Himmler's journals and writings, looking at the way he stood in photographs, closely reading the words he chose as a child and later as a Nazi soldier. Griffin says that she has been "searching" through these documents. She writes:

Now as I sit here I read once again the fragments from Heinrich's boyhood diary that exist in English. I have begun to think of these words as ciphers. Repeat them to myself, hoping to find a door into the mind of this man, even as his character first forms so that I might learn how it is he becomes himself. (p. 338)

Considering the journals and memoirs he consults, one might think of Richard Miller as having a similar project to Griffin's, one of sifting through texts in order to uncover their relationships to the human beings who read and wrote these texts. Miller writes:

Asking why a Steve Cousins or an Eric Harris or a Dylan Klebold is violent is itself a meaningless act, not because the motivation is too deeply buried or obscurely articulated to ever be known, but because we no longer live in a world where human action can be explained. We have plenty of information; it just doesn't amount to anything. This is the logic of the history of increasing humiliation working itself out over time. (p. 426)

Write an essay in which you discuss Griffin's project of looking at Himmler in relation to Miller's examination of Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold. How do Miller's words above help to illuminate, expand, or complicate Susan Griffin's thoughts in "Our Secret"? What does Griffin mean when she says she thinks of Himmler's words as ciphers? In what ways do Griffin and Miller seem to be engaging in a similar inquiry or investigation? What does each text offer as its theory of writing and reading?

4. In his essay "Our Time" (p. 657) John Edgar Wideman worries over the problems of representation, of telling his brother's story. He speaks directly to the fundamental problem writers face when they try to represent the lives of others: "I'd slip unaware out of his story and into one of my own. I'd be following him, an obedient shadow, then a cloud would blot the sun and I'd be gone, unchained, a dark form still skulking behind him but no longer in tow" (p. 672). Wideman goes on to say:

The hardest habit to break . . . would be listening to myself listen to him. That habit would destroy any chance of seeing my brother on his terms; and seeing him in his terms, learning his terms, seemed the whole point of learning his story. . . . I had to teach myself to listen. Start fresh, clear the pipes, resist too facile an identification, tame the urge to take off with Robby's story and make it my own. (p. 672)

Richard E. Miller, in "The Dark Night of the Soul," is also concerned with the problems of representation. He provides readings of the lives of others—from Eric Harris to Chris McCandless to Martin Amis to René Descartes and Mary Karr—who are also engaged with the problems of representation and understanding. Write an essay about writing and representation, about the real world and the world of texts, with Wideman and Miller as your primary points of reference. How do they understand representation as a problem for writers and readers? How is that understanding represented (or enacted) in their own work? Which might have something to learn from the example of the other?

5. Both Richard Miller, in "The Dark Night of the Soul," and Judith Butler, in "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy" (p. 240), are concerned with the fundamental question of what, in Butler's terms, "makes for a livable world." How would Miller read, appropriate, and understand Butler's essay?

"The Dark Night of the Soul" is divided into sections; most sections consider a particular text: Krakauer's *Into the Wild*, Descartes's *Meditations*, Karr's *The Liars' Club*. Reread Miller in order to get a sense of his argument, style, and method, and then write a section that could be added to "The Dark Night of the Soul" with Butler's "Beside Oneself" as its subject.

ENGAGING WITH STUDENT WRITING

You will find below a couple of responses to Richard Miller written by students using the "Assignments for Writing" in *Ways of Reading*. The essays included here are previously unpublished, but we invite you to read them in much the same way as you would read the other essays collected in this book. They are meant to serve not as models or examples, but as opportunities to work on an essay as a reader and as a writer. Response to question 2 in "Assignments for Writing":

Books Aren't Enough

By Austin Crull

Perched on a shelf above my bed are a few dozen novels with worn covers and faded letters written down their spines. These books fit right in with their surroundings. A messy bed, clothes strewn about the room, and a desk with just about any item you could think of spread randomly across it. Yet there is a distinct difference here. The books are worn, but they stand neatly in line. Their spines are cracked, yet they emanate a feeling of composition rather than chaos. In their pages are stories about wizards, elves, and tons of other imaginative creatures that can only be found on the pages of fantasy novels. What can a book say about a person? And how can we discover this answer if that which we are searching for is about ourselves? It seems that self-analysis is the only means of reaching these answers. In a way, we must step outside ourselves in order to truly find what makes us who we are. In this instance, books are the evidence collected for self-inspection, and just as Jon Krakauer studied Chris McCandless in his book *Into the Wild*, we too can gain a wealth of knowledge about ourselves through the books we read.

Stepping over and around the mess on the floor, I step directly in front of the bookshelf of a nineteen-year-old college student. One book stands out from the rest. It is larger than the rest, but that's not what makes it so apparent to me. While the entire collection looks well used, this book in particular looks as though it has been picked up far more than the rest. *The Lord of the Rings* by J. R. R. Tolkien is inscribed down the side in faded golden letters. The story is

well known—one of unlikely friendships, good versus evil, and overcoming seemingly insurmountable obstacles. So what does this tell us? That this person has friends? That this person hates evil and maybe has overcome a few obstacles in his life? Were this the case, then it seems we've discovered the identity of just about every kid in the world. It is not these truths that we are searching for. They speak neither to the complexities of a person nor to the depths of human emotion. What about this one book tells something that nothing else in the room could possibly reveal? The fact that it has been read numerous times says something in and of itself. This book is important. Something is locked within the text of these pages that enthralls the reader so much that he comes back and reads it time and time again.

One of these components is the sheer depth of this novel. Its author, Tolkien, spent a lifetime writing the pages of this book, leaving no question unanswered and no detail overlooked. Perhaps this says something about its reader. A book like this may reveal the curiosity of our subject. He is someone who searches for every answer and needs to know every detail. Another component may be the magnitude of the story. In the book the fate of the world rests on the shoulders of some of the smallest and seemingly most insignificant characters. To an outsider this can suggest the insecurities of the reader. Perhaps the reader connects with the insignificance of the characters. There is hope in the story and reassurance that no one is truly insignificant. Our reader no doubt finds comfort in these ideas. In addition to these ideas, one notion is quite evident that our reader may identify with. Adventure. Looking around this room, you can see textbooks everywhere. It is a college kid's dorm after all. This book no doubt offers an escape from the exams, a relief from the readings about molecules and economics. This book provides excitement, and it disconnects readers from mediocre reality.

So what does this all really say about our subject? He has insecurities. Sometimes he wishes to break free from the bonds of reality. These conclusions seem to be similar to the few that were drawn earlier. They are shared by nearly everyone. These conclusions don't seem to create an identity as much as they create the picture of humanity. It is at this point where I notice the problem with our question. There is no sense of individuality when we look upon the books in this room. Thousands of people have read all these books. They provide a blank page when we try to interpret a person through them. It is the mind we are trying to unlock which creates the interpretation for us. Without seeing how someone reacts to the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*, we have no chance of discovering who they are. Our thoughts and actions are what reveal our identities—not those of an author. It is at these moments, when we think we understand someone, that we fall short.

In Richard Miller's *Writing at the End of the World*, he mentions that the author of *Into the Wild*, Jon Krakauer, researches who his subject (Chris McCandless) is through his readings. No doubt this is true; however, Krakauer also researches McCandless through interviews with family and friends, his writings, and his actions. That is how Krakauer develops an identity for his subject. The human mind is so complex that it takes more than one medium for us to develop an identity for another person. And even with all the resources at Krakauer's fingertips, who's to say that his suggestions are accurate? It seems an insurmountable challenge to create an identity for someone else no matter what the resources at your disposal.

Austin Crull's essay, "Books Aren't Enough," seems to both enact *and* challenge Miller's arguments about how reading might shape a human mind. Crull speculates about himself through the books he finds in his room, but he also reflects on the room itself and on the condition of the books he finds there. It seems he wants us to consider not only the books but also the context in which they are found. Ultimately, he tells us: "Without seeing how someone reacts to the pages of *The Lord of the Rings*, we have no chance of discovering who they are. Our thoughts and actions are what reveal our identities—not those of an author." What does Crull seem to be arguing in this statement? How does he want to intervene in Miller's questions about literacy and the way reading might reflect one's "inner life"? Why do you suppose Crull wants to focus on "how someone reacts"? Is this issue of reaction one Miller misses or neglects? How might you position Crull and Miller as contributing to the same conversation? How do they converge, collaborate, or challenge each other?

Response to question 2 in "Assignments for Writing":

Dreams: The Core of One's Identity?

By Brady Bartlett

Sigmund Freud believed that dreams are the symbolic language of the subconscious mind. So what does that tell us? Are dreams impulses or desires that are too harmful or disturbing to our conscious mind? Are they suppressed feelings that we have shoved deep inside of ourselves? A person's superego keeps the subconscious mind from acting out—one's superego is shut off during the dream state—so are dreams the profound hidden passions that drive and influence somebody?

My roommate keeps a journal of the dreams he has. He wakes up in the morning and writes them down to make sure he doesn't miss any details. What would somebody be able to learn about Obi if they stumbled on his journal of dreams? Is it fair to make assumptions about Obi's motives or thoughts based on complex symbolic dreams? His dreams could be nothing but exaggerations of thoughts and interactions that occurred throughout the day. Is it fair for me to make these assumptions about Obi based on his subconscious mind?

I am on a bridge. It is a brown bridge, and I am running. The city is behind me. Some force starts to push me. I start to fall off the bridge to the left. I am falling in air. Right before I hit the ground, I wake up.

Does Obi live in the city? Maybe he is afraid of the city and does not want to be stuck there his whole life. He feels threatened about his surroundings—he no longer wants to be there—he runs. Obi is on the bridge, on his way out of the city, and then he falls off of the bridge. Obi does not believe in himself. Instead of seeing himself get out of the city, he falls off before he gets away from the danger. He thinks that he will not be able to make it away from the city. He worries that he does not have what it takes to get out.

I'm in the woods with my older brother. We are climbing this big rock in the woods. All of a sudden a few giant robot monkeys start coming toward my brother and me. They have guns! My brother tells me to hide. He starts shooting them, but is shot in the leg. I run up next to him. I grab the gun and start shooting. They are getting closer. I wake up.

Obi's brother takes the normal older brother role in life. His older brother protects him even if it is a life-and-death situation. There is definite trust that his older brother will watch out for him, even against giant robot monkeys. The point right after his older brother gets shot in the leg and Obi runs to his aid shows that the trust and love are mutual. His brother is willing to risk his life to save him, and Obi has his brother's back also. The fact that he grabbed the gun and started shooting back probably means he is pretty brave or at least in the face of danger he stands up. He is not a coward. He is a person who cares greatly about his family.

I'm on a trip to California. I am going to see the Dodgers vs. Indians baseball game. At the game I get the urge to play floor hockey. Next thing I know I am playing floor hockey at USC. While playing, I look up and see my buddy from home (who goes there), and after I finish the game, I go give him a hug. I wake up.

This friend of his is probably pretty close to him. Maybe they have talked about visiting each other, and that is what brought this dream about. He misses his friend and wants to see him. Seeing him reminds him of home, which he also misses, but not enough to go home. He is happy being independent but still wanted to get that sense of home. He is also probably someone who likes sports, seeing as in his dream he both watched one and played one.

I am older; in my thirties if I had to guess. I am dressed in a suit, and my date is wearing a gorgeous blue dress. We are at a fancy restaurant. Suddenly we're in a hot tub at a mansion. Nobody is around but us. It is quiet. The sun

is setting, and the view out to the ocean is breathtaking. As I lean in for a kiss, the alarm goes off . . . of course.

From this I get that Obi is ambitious. I think that a normal life is not in his plans for the future. He has bigger plans. This may not be his ideal dream house or girl, but he is hoping that he lives nicely when he is older. He could be high maintenance and used to this type of living, or he does not live like this and aspires to be successful. If he aspires to be like this, his standards are high. Instead of being content with a nice family in the countryside, he goes for the gold. Fancy suit, beautiful girl, expensive restaurant, mansion, ocean view. He thinks this is what will make him happy in life.

Certainly one cannot figure out a great deal about people through their dreams. Think of a dream that you have had more than once. One that sticks with you. What does it say about you? Why do you think you had it? The problem with dreams is that they are not fully understood. Even I cannot tell you what my dreams mean. My guess would be a more educated guess because I know more about myself, but a guess nonetheless. This extends beyond dreams. You cannot judge someone or try to figure them out through dreams, their writing, what they read, or what music they listen to. To understand somebody, you have to communicate with them and try to get to know them.

When you read someone's things to try to get a sense of who they are, too much is left for assumption and interpretation. Too many factors are not taken into consideration by the reader, like their mood. If I write something while I am in an angry mood, what is said will come off a lot differently than if I were in a very happy state of mind. Reading someone else's dreams is very appealing because it is always interesting to see what goes on in somebody's mind when they no longer have control. During dreams your morals are put to the side, and that barrier is no longer there. Your mind is free to do what it likes. Feelings that are so deep that you do not even acknowledge their existence may arise during dreams. The dream could be a fantasy that is not possible to achieve in real life.

Do dreams really mean anything to someone? Perhaps they are just some connections to something still on the conscious mind. Maybe somebody just told Obi a story or he watched a movie, and in his dream state it was taken to a completely different level. In the dream state there are no boundaries. You can fly, be invisible, never die, be wealthy, or even not look the same. You are at the mercy of your subconscious mind. If someone tries to interpret these images made from your subconscious mind, it is simply unfair. You are not even sure what these symbolic messages mean, so how would somebody else know? Next time you have a dream, write it down and think of what might be said about you if a total stranger tried to interpret it.