



Top Stories



Brownback to drop out of Presidential race on Friday, says AP

Satirist Stephen Colbert runs for U.S. President

Popular American satirist Stephen Colbert has announced that he will run for the Presidency of the United States. So far, he has only said he will run in the state of South Carolina.



Wikipedia Current Events

The BBC announces 1,800 job cuts as part of restructuring to fill a £2 billion (US\$4 bn) shortfall caused by lower than expected funding by the British government.

- At least four people are killed in three days of tribal warfare near the Grasberg mine in the Papua province of Indonesia.
- French commuters face chaos after a public transport strike over proposed changes to public transport pensions continue.
- Former Prime Minister of Pakistan Benazir Bhutto returns to Pakistan after eight years of self-exile, with a crowd of a million expected in Karachi to welcome her back.
- 2007 Karachi bombings: At least 100 people are killed and 150 injured as two bombs explode near a truck carrying Benazir Bhutto.

troops. Security was tight, after a warning that militants could attempt to assassinate the former leader.

Bhutto is disliked by many traditionalist Pakistanis who consider her rule to have brought the country too close to the United States. Bhutto had told reporters she was "not scared" and was concentrating on her mission, only hours before the attack.

Bhutto, who was traveling from the airport to a rally atop an armoured truck, was unharmed and taken back to her ancestral home of Bilawal House by police and security forces. At least 20 police were killed in the bombing.

Sources indicate there may have been multiple explosions, with a smaller blast preceding the main one, in what CNN's Dan Rivers described as a "large-scale attack". Pakistani Minister of Information Tariq Azim Khan has stated that the attack, which injured another 150 people, was believed to be a suicide bombing.

Bhutto was in the country, having been waived of any corruption charges by President Pervez Musharraf last week, to discuss the possibility of a joint government dedicated to fighting extremism in the volatile country. Bhutto had told reporters that she did not want the country associated with the training of terrorists.

Featured story

John Reed on Orwell, God, self-destruction and the future of writing

Christopher Hitchens called him a "Bin Ladenist" and Cathy Young said he blames the victims of 9/11's terrorism, but author John Reed's quest for spirituality and sense in modern America keeps moving forward. A Wikinews interview with the controversial novelist.



'Large-scale attack' against ex-Prime Minister Bhutto leaves more than 100 dead in Pakistan

Former Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto was the target of a bombing which killed at least a hundred people Thursday night, hours after landing at Karachi Airport.

Bhutto's arrival in the country with more than 100 supporters, breaking eight years of self-imposed exile, was met by more than 20,000 police and military

Avro Vulcan returns to the air after restoration

For the first time in 14 years, an Avro Vulcan heavy bomber has taken to the skies over England. The newly-restored aircraft took off from Bruntingthorpe Aerodrome, Leicestershire.

The craft flew for about 25 minutes in the first of three planned test flights from Bruntingthorpe Aerodrome, meant to prove that the craft is officially "airworthy", the only Vulcan to hold such a distinction. It has taken £6 million to return the aircraft to service.

The aircraft, XH558, bombed the Argentinian-held Port Stanley in the Falkand Islands during the 1982 conflict.

Brownback to drop out of Presidential race on Friday, says AP

The Associated Press is reporting that Kansas Senator Sam Brownback is expected to drop out of the Presidential race on Friday in a speech scheduled in Topeka, Kansas. "I know Senator Brownback enjoyed campaigning and meeting new people in talking about ideas for the future of America, but I think it came down to money," an anonymous source told AP. "It's just time," said a source to Reuters. "He is not going to endorse anyone else right away."

In an interview with Wikinews, Brownback confirmed money was an issue. He reported raising only \$800,000 in the third quarter of this year, his lowest since entering the race. Brownback said he was baffled by how poorly candidates appealing to the Christian right were doing in the Republican party primaries. "Why we haven't gotten more traction," Brownback said, "I

don't know." Originally Brownback said that he would pull out if he did not finish better than fourth in the Iowa caucus; AP's report anticipates a sooner-than-expected announcement.

"That a guy can grow up on a farm in Eastern Kansas and run for President of the United States," Brownback reflected, "I love a country like that."

Turkish Parliament approves military action in Iraq

On Wednesday, Turkey's Grand National Assembly voted 507-19 to authorize sending troops into northern Iraq to pursue Kurdish rebels. Although the authorization is valid for one year, Turkish officials made clear that it would not necessarily result in military action. Both the United States and Iraq have recently warned Turkey against such an incursion.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that although the motion does not indicate that a military operation is imminent, it is necessary for Turkey to be able to respond to bomb attacks which have been blamed on Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) rebels in Iraq. Turkey has been asking for help in dealing with the PKK for months, and the Turkish public has grown frustrated with America's perceived lack of action on the issue.

Both the United States and Iraq have recently warned Turkey against an incursion into Iraq. "The Iraqi government calls on the Turkish government to pursue a diplomatic solution and not a military solution to solve the [problem] of terrorist attacks which our dear neighbor Turkey has witnessed from the PKK," Iraq government spokesperson Ali al-Dabbagh said earlier this week.

White House National Security Council spokesman Gordon Johndroe called on Turkey "to continue their discussions with us and the Iraqis and to show restraint from any potentially destabilizing actions."

Responding to the motion, U.S. President George W. Bush urged Turkey not to carry out an attack, saying "[we are] making it clear to Turkey it is not in their interest to send more troops in... there is a better way to deal with the issue."

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad defended Turkey's decision and criticized the U.S. position, saying "It is important to note that the powers that have invaded Iraq are those primarily responsible for the terror activities and attacks because they control the country." "We certainly support and back the decisions by the Turkish government in combat against terror and terror activities," he said.

Murat Karayilan, the leader of the armed wing of the PKK, warned Turkey of the consequences of an attack in an interview with The Times. "If the Turkish Army attacks Iraqi Kurdistan we will struggle and resist against this until the end," he said. Karayilan nevertheless said he hoped that the crisis could be resolved peacefully.

U.S.-Turkish relations have been strained recently after a U.S. House of Representatives resolution passed committee, labeling the World War I era killings of up to 1.5 million Armenians by the Ottoman Empire as "genocide". Turkey strongly disputes these claims. Majority Leader Nancy Pelosi says the US House of Representatives will vote on the resolution "soon."

President Bush criticized the resolution at a press conference on Wednesday, saying "One thing Congress should not be doing is sorting out the historical record of the Ottoman Empire."

John Reed on Orwell, God, self-destruction and the future of writing

It can be difficult to be John Reed.

Christopher Hitchens called him a "Bin Ladenist" and Cathy Young editorialized in *The Boston Globe* that he "blames the victims of terrorism" when he puts out a novel like *Snowball's Chance*, a biting send-up of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* he was inspired to write after the terrorist attacks on September 11. "The clear references to 9/11 in the apocalyptic ending can only bring Orwell's name into disrepute in the U.S.," wrote William Hamilton, the British literary executor of the Orwell estate. That process had already begun: it was revealed Orwell gave the British Foreign Office a list of people he suspected of being "crypto-Communists and fellow travelers," labeling some of them as Jews and homosexuals. "I really wanted to explode that book," Reed told *The New York Times*. "I wanted to completely undermine it."

Is this man who wants to blow up the classic literary canon taught to children in schools a menace, or a messiah? David Shankbone went to interview him for Wikinews and found that, as often is the case, the answer lies somewhere in the middle.

Reed is electrified by the changes that surround him that channel through a lens of inspiration wrought by his children. "The kids have made me a better writer," Reed said. In his new untitled

novel, which he calls a "new play by William Shakespeare," he takes lines from *The Bard's* classics to form an original work. He began it in 2003, but only with the birth of his children could he finish it. "I didn't understand the characters who had children. I didn't really understand them. And once I had had kids, I could approach them differently."

Taking the old to make it new is a theme in his work and in his world view. Reed foresees new narrative forms being born, Biblical epics that will be played out across print and electronic mediums. He is pulled forward by revolutions of the past, a search for a spiritual sensibility, and a desire to locate himself in the process.

Below is David Shankbone's conversation with novelist John Reed.

On the alternative media and independent publishing

[Conversation in progress...]
John Reed: Yeah, exactly. Well, working with the Brooklyn Rail is my community service.

David Shankbone: How is that?

JR: It's turned into a much bigger piece of community service than I thought it would be. It started without major expectations; at that time I had been drafted into it. There were still places to get literary books covered, it felt like. There was a VLS; there was a New York Press. VLS doesn't exist anymore . . . it's a big deal.

DS: All the alternative media is either becoming a conglomerate, like the *Village Voice*, or it's dying, like the *New York Press*.

JR: The *Village Voice* may be dying, too. It's been bought and resold so many times, I don't really understand what it is

anymore.

DS: I interviewed Michael Musto, and that was one area that I wanted to touch on, but we got involved in so many other things. I don't even know how much I could really get out of somebody who's working there, but--

JR: I would love to know what he thinks about it. But the Rail is doing well--I like covering all those books.

DS: How does the Rail make its money in order to operate?

JR: Well, the Rail is really doing well. They are getting grants and I'm a little bit astonished at how well they do, pulling that in. I think the Rail is in a good position to pull it together and bring itself to the next level. I'm not over there at the office every day, but that's my impression of it.

DS: What about this theory that the drop in advertising for the print media, even though it's going to go through a period of growing pains, in the end might actually be better for the literary press like the Brooklyn Rail, because people who have keys to funding will see more of a need to do grants, which will allow them to be more experimental as opposed to worrying about, "Are we going to offend our advertisers?"

JR: It may work that way. There is a gigantic fragmenting because, because the new venues for literary books are not just in print media. They're on the Internet; there are millions of these micropresses now. So many I can't keep track of them. And a lot of them are publishing really good books. Many are not concerned with getting reviews. They just don't care. They're willing to do a very small print run to facilitate their sales through networking sites, and a few literary blogs or

literary sites, and there are a lot of them now. And of course, as these things condense from one thing to the next and grow into larger organisms, there's going to be a fair share of power there filtered down to the small presses.

DS: I interviewed a musician named John Vanderslice, and off-the-record he talked about how the mainstream music press has almost lost all influence--Spin, Rolling Stone; those kinds of magazines. He said that whenever he did some small blog interview his web site jumped up in hits. But when he got a favorable review in Rolling Stone he said, "I barely heard a word about it."

JR: I think it's exactly comparable. The whole music industry has shifted over into networking sites, the Internet, and it's just extremely comparable. The way that it's functioned--and now half of the music industry is made up of this kind of independent record label. And that's what's happening with books. You don't have mid level artists recording at Sony, and you don't have many mid-list authors at the large houses. The little presses are snapping them up. Of course, the large houses are aware of this, in the same way that the large record labels are aware of it, and I think that they're gearing themselves to either take them over or have imprints that address it. Like, [MTD] Books now has [Bice] books. They do like cool, beautiful books, and they've given [Bice] a real [purview] to do what they want.

DS: Do you think it's becoming like the pharmaceutical industry? There the really big drug companies don't have a lot of drugs in the pipeline, but there are all these like little drug companies that are existing for one-or-two-

drug clinical trials, and the big drug companies are watching them. Once they have a seller, big pharma goes in and snaps up the little companies.

JR: Yeah, exactly. That's exactly what it is. I don't know if it's all bad, though. When a big press buys a small press, the small press sort of loses its identity. But it doesn't happen right away. Right now, the distribution of the small presses is so piss poor for the most part, that it's just very hard for them to move units. It's a real challenge. Most of them don't care that much; they want to have one or two books that are hits, but to sell big numbers of books, distribution is a real problem.

DS: How does the business model for small presses make up for a lack of blockbuster books?

JR: They need one or two, but most small presses that don't care.

DS: It's more of an idealistic enterprise, then?

JR: Yeah, if it's a non-profit, or they do like a--they get some grants. But for the functional small presses--let's say Akashic Books, or Archipelago Books, which are very small who I believe run at a profit. That's my impression. Soft Skull is another one. I love MacAdam Cage; I don't know how they're making any money, but they do wonderful books. I think their business model is that they're going to put all these books out there, and if one or two of them hits every couple of years, then they're fine. But they've got to have books that sell a lot of copies. Not many of them; one press who used to have that theory of publishing is Saint Martin's Press, this sort of "Throw shit at the wall and see what sticks" phenomenon. Then when one book starts going, they put everything behind it--

DS: But they're not like that anymore, are they?

JR: I don't know. I mean, now it seems like a lot of places have taken on that model. You have all this stuff out there, something hits, and then everything goes behind that. The small presses that are trying to make money, I think that that's their model.

On Christopher Hitchens, Orwell and 9/11 as inspiration

DS: Why did you decide to take on Orwell?

JR: I went to school at P.S. 41. I read Orwell over and over again and of course as a kid, I liked it. But I didn't really understand what about it that also depressed me. It's kind of a bludgeon for revolutionary thinking. On a number of levels, Orwell encourages you to think that you're not as smart as the pigs--that revolution is doomed to failure. I don't know if that's exactly what Orwell meant, but that's certainly how it's framed in school.

DS: How it reads in general?

JR: Really how it's used. It's the paradigm of the Cold War and it was used to promote the Cold War. In fact, the phrase "Cold War" is Orwell's term. He was very aware of what was happening with this. I don't know if he would have liked that it ended up being a real tool for the CIA to push the Cold War agenda--I don't think he would have liked it. But that's what happened, and at the end of his life he was involved with some pretty conservative people. Whether or not it was entirely his own doing or he was a weak, lovelorn old man is another question. I think probably some of both.

DS: Christopher Hitchens called you an "Osama bin Ladenist." How

do you react to that label?

JR: Honestly, I didn't really expect it to be so thrilling to me, but I loved it.

DS: I photographed many of the New York academics who are featured in the David Horowitz book, *The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America*, and every single one of them held it up as this badge of honor. They all received emails like, "How did you get in there?" It gave them stature that they may not have had before. Is it the same?

JR: Yeah, I mean it's just also completely so absurd. We got all this press for *Snowball's Chance*, and of course it was all based on whether people were conservative or progressive. They either liked me based on their politics or didn't like me based on their politics. Hitchens didn't read the book. In fact, that's the only thing that makes me a little bit bitter, is that he called me a "bin Ladenist" without having read the book. But yeah, I don't mind. It's just so completely absurd.

DS: He coined a philosophy for a terrorist. Like 'Trotskyite'--there never really existed this phrase "Osama bin Ladenist." Do you think it elevated bin Laden?

JR: Yeah, it was so bizarre. He was selling *Why Orwell Matters* at the time. With that book they were trying to reorient Orwell away from this Cold War model. I don't know if they can do it, really. They've done so much damage to his canon. I don't know if they can shift it out of a sort of Cold War emphasis. Maybe they can. The idea that *Snowball* brings capitalism to the farm--we see the pitfalls there--it's anathema to a sort of CIA model of the Cold War. But they've got to change it, because the Cold War is over.

DS: But the thinking is there. Right after the Soviet Union ended--you could sense it, you could feel it in the air--this "Who do we set our sights on?" I think that all of us felt that way to a degree, if not just because we were socialized to think that way.

JR: Yeah. Yeah. I think that's exactly what they were trying to do, to by--

DS: Denouncing 'Islamofascism'...

JR: Yeah. I think that there's a little bit of that. I don't know if it's quite as transparent as it was with the Cold War, the Dark Empire model, but it's still there; I think it's still there.

DS: Do you think it's a little bit trying to fit a square peg through a round hole, like the old paradigm of the Soviet Union as the evil empire, and now the evil empire is this very disparate range of peoples from Indonesia to Iran and trying to make them into a 'Soviet Union?'

JR: Yeah, it's a tough sell. But they're doing it, they're all over it over there.

DS: It's worked. It's sold.

JR: Yeah, they're doing it. I can't even believe how much money they've spent over there.

DS: They are going to be spending a lot more; it'll be a trillion dollar war.

JR: Yeah, and that's the other thing: this whole idea that we're in this capitalist country. We're not really in a capitalist country; we're in something else. Because if it were pure capitalism, then these decisions would be terrible decisions. That's why Ron Paul is so interesting. Because he's up there just with steam coming out of his ears, saying, "We're spending too much money! This is crazy!" And it is. It's not fiscally

responsible. We're bolstering these oil companies, who are really a vestigial energy source when we have all kinds of other options. We know it's not where we should be. But we're doing it because that's where the economy is. That's what these large corporations are. But that's not capitalism. That's some kind of weird version of corporate socialism--our whole government is now buoying antiquated technologies.

DS: Was there a moment where your switch was flicked, where you were like, "I've had enough." Was there a breaking point?

JR: For me it was 9/11. You had these armies of people covered in chalk walking past our apartment. I had had the idea for the book--I had a title in my head, *Snowball's Chance*, walking along Lafayette Street on September 10th. I mentioned it to my wife; she said, "Uh, I don't know, it doesn't sound too great."

DS: [chuckles]

JR: But I was sure that there was something good about it. And then 9/11 happened. I sat there watching TV for three days, like everyone else, riding my bike with a gas mask on and getting cartridges for my wife and brother.

DS: Did you really?

JR: Yeah, you know, I have a lot of really strong memories from that period. The one that is with me right now is there was a policeman...we were downtown, so we had to go past this checkpoint. I was wearing a gas mask from minute one, because I just could feel that this was not good, the stuff that was in the air. He looked at me; you know, most of the cops would just make fun of us for wearing gas masks, because they heard that it was safe. This one cop was standing there, looked

and us and said, "Do you know something that I don't know?" And of course, we did know something, which is that the city officials were lying to us. I always think back on that guy, and I wonder--

DS: Is he dead?

JR: Yeah. Who knows? But anyway--

DS: Or suffering--

JR: Two or three days after 9/11, I realized Snowball's Chance meant that Snowball came back to the farm. I had pretty much the whole book in my head at that moment. I wrote it over the course of about two weeks, just sitting there writing nonstop, really writing what I already knew was there-- catching it on paper. Was my rage directed then at Orwell? More it was like my creative energy was just into this thing. In retrospect, I realized what it was: a lot of the the book mocks Orwell and ups his very dry delivery; all of that stuff is creative impetus.

DS: Orwell forms such a fundamental basis for so much neoconservative thinking, almost as an ideological text. Like *The Outsiders* forms our sense of what a rebel is to a degree, and Orwell gives us a worldview of--

JR: Yeah, I think that's it exactly. Right when 9/11 happened, that period was over. *Animal Farm* was looking forward into a fifty-year period, and suddenly that period was over. That paradigm was over at that moment. That's when it seemed like open game to me. I was actually pretty pissed at Orwell right after that, because that whole Cold War model had largely gotten us into that mess.

DS: What about 1984?

JR: Yeah, there are people really pissed about 1984. I've gotten a few emails from people saying that

they want to go after 1984, suggesting that I should, but I don't know, I just didn't--

DS: All of a sudden you'll be in an Orwell genre: Orwell criticism--

JR: For some reason, I don't mind that one as much. There are also so many dystopic . . .

DS: 1984 is used by both liberals and conservatives to attack each-- each in different ways--

JR: Yeah, 1984, as far as I know, doesn't have that history of being backed by the CIA.

On the future of the narrative

DS: As a writer there's always a desire to be innovative and original, but you can't be original anymore in writing. It's very difficult. Almost everything has been done. I think that I read somewhere that the only genre of art that hasn't fully been mined is maybe poetry.

JR: Yeah, could be. Well--

DS: How do you handle the challenge with wanting to be--

JR: Well, there are new art forms that are forming. The Internet is going to have much larger--

DS: What are they?

JR: Well, interestingly, the narrative forms. Americans are extremely sophisticated in terms of narrative forms. We see it in commercials, we see it on TV, we see it in movies. But the narrative forms we're talking about are three acts, five acts, depending on how you want to look at it. They're all based on a Christian model of sin, suffering, redemption; which is not a large model. We've actually got a sophisticated view of a relatively narrow sort of idea of what narrative is. But as the Internet enables larger shows--as TV, magazines and the Internet join, you're going to have much

larger narrative structures. Sort of like a soap opera, if you could imagine a soap opera that was on the Internet, where you would have a cross-section of narratives and could go in any direction at once. The producers could get behind any narrative at once. Essentially, then, what you've got is large epic structures, or Biblical structures, or mythological structures, where you have strains that interconnect, different storylines that interconnect and are often discrete that make up a whole. But the whole thing isn't three acts. The whole thing isn't five acts. It's an infinitude of three acts or five acts; it can be as big as you want.

DS: Can you conceptualize that to an example?

JR: Well, the best example I could give would be the Bible, or Greek mythology.

DS: On an Internet forum.

JR: I don't think that the technology is quite there yet. I think it's close.

DS: Once you can envision it, the technology will follow, though. Once you can start seeing it.

JR: Yeah, there are sites that are sort of attempting it, and if you look right now, there are all these new multiplatform shows, and that are beginning to do it. And there won't be networking capabilities in these shows; they'll be much different than the shows that we see on that one level. But on another level, they'll still be narrative shows.

DS: A very common thing for a writer is to be riddled with self-doubt, and that can often ruin a lot of inspiration and creativity and make you lose your way in what you're doing. How do you handle a challenge like that?

JR: Unfortunately, I can't stop myself, whether I'm having self-doubt or not. This new project of mine is a new play by [[w:William Shakespeare|William Shakespeare]; I've taken lines from all the plays and put them together into a new play, essentially. I liked the idea; I thought it was a cool concept. But I didn't know if it was a publishable idea. I didn't want to waste my time doing a non-publishable thing, but then I ended up doing it anyway. And of course, when I saw it, it was a complete surprise. It's going to come out, so we'll see what happens.

On changing the literary canon

DS: Do you have a memory that has stuck with you that--where you continually turn back to it to learn new lessons?

JR: I feel like I have a lot of memories that I turn back to all the time.

DS: Is there one that stands out?

JR: Right now, there's not. Although there is a dream I had that's been sticking with me. Memories that I'm inundated with right now have to do with my childhood, and remembering--actually, I have a picture of me standing on the West Side Highway when I was a little kid. I was just a street urchin, and now my daughter smells like that. So I'm inundated by these things.

DS: She smells like a street urchin?

JR: She smells like a little kid who runs around in the park, you know? Is a dream too off-base?

DS: And that brings back a lot--the olfactory memories?

JR: Yeah, yeah. Is a dream too off-base?

DS: No, I'd love to hear your dream.

JR: So, I was standing in this field--I think it was a polo ground kind of thing. And there were a lot of sort of petite bourgeoisie/intellectuals/professor s--these sorts of people. It was late afternoon after some kind of sporting event; I think it was polo. I don't really know. And everyone's standing around; it's the first cooling off of a hot day. It didn't really have a time period. Sort of recent distant past.

DS: Sure.

JR: And someone came screaming out: they'd had an audience with the Queen. They were shouting that they had just met the Queen and that the Queen had given--him a poop. One of her poops. And he comes running out and is saying this, and everyone is mocking him. He's taking it good-naturedly, as he should. He's standing there, and the crowd kind of quiets down, and he's holding this small plastic tub--which incidentally is the one that we put the lizard in when we were cleaning the cage--he's holding this small plastic tub that has two dry, narrow poops in it, one sort of tipped on the other. There's a silence overwhelming the crowd. Then he pops the lid, and he lifts it to his nose to sniff it. And he sniffs it, and he really takes it in, and he's thinking about this smell and committing it to memory. Then in utter silence, he just passes it to the person next to him, and that person takes the poop up to their nose and sniffs it, and then it passes through the whole crowd.

[both chuckle]

JR: So that dream I keep thinking about.

DS: Do you do dream analysis?

JR: I think that dream has to do with the way things become big in culture. I have all kinds of

complaints about the literary canon. For example, there are a lot of books that are widely remembered that I think could be forgotten, and I think that they're out there--

DS: Like Animal Farm?

JR: I think that they're out there--well, Animal Farm, I don't know if I would forget it, but I might forget other lesser-known books by--let's pick a Trollope book and get rid of it, because that book is at the expense of a contemporary author. I don't really see the genres as competing against literary authors; I see the backlist as competing against literary authors.

DS: What's a book that every kid in high school reads that you think should be removed?

JR: Well, I read Typhoon by Joseph Conrad, and that could definitely go. I was not a big fan of those James Fenimore Cooper books, which I had to read. I thought they were just preposterous. They could go. There are a bunch of Trollope books that could go. I know there are some people who love Balzac, but frankly, a lot of those bore me to death, too. I would have kids reading contemporary books. A kid who reads a book and says, "This isn't for me. It doesn't have anything to do with my time period; I don't know why I'm reading it.

Literature is completely removed from my experience." They're right! There's no reason to have that kid reading books that are removed from their experience.

DS: Clearly a lot can be gained from literature, and as you've have shown talking about Shakespeare here. But you think there might be a problem with building a new generation of readers, in that we train people to read things that they can't relate to? It would be

like raising kids to watch Bette Davis movies, and then you get to watch the Harry Potter film.

JR: Exactly. I think that is exactly the problem. It is exactly the problem, and I can't iterate strongly enough that I feel like people should be reading contemporary books, that we should melt down the canon to some degree and have people reading contemporary authors. There are amazing contemporary authors, and if you were to walk around the basement of the Strand for a day and look at all the review books down there, and tell me that there aren't amazing contemporary authors, I'll cede the point. But I know. I know you won't come out of that basement and tell me that. There are just so many amazing contemporary authors, people who are writing extremely well right now.

DS: Is there at all a movement for that?

JR: I don't know but I actually think that it's going to happen, partly because of the public domain, the downloadable Internet.

DS: But can't you see such a reaction against that change?

JR: Yeah, I can. No, I can already hear someone harping "Faulkner lost to Toni Morrison?!?"

DS: [laughs]

JR: Well, first of all, Faulkner isn't going to be lost, right? And second of all, the Toni Morrison books you're talking about are twenty-five years old.

DS: There's a magical thing that happens when people feel they discover things that went to the wayside--think about bell bottoms! I remember in the early 90s, the idea of bell bottoms, or even just large pants at the bottom, was

just anathema.

JR: Yeah. Yeah.

DS: And then all of a sudden it's like people get bored with the same thing, and boom! Bell bottoms are back.

JR: Yeah. It doesn't seem so foreign now.

DS: People who are raised watching "Die Hard" and Schwarzenegger, all of a sudden they discover old Joan Crawford films.

JR: Yeah, the literary canon is not going to disappear. Having people read contemporary authors is just going to build a readership of contemporary readers. I don't know why we're having kids read books that bore them. There're just so many good books out there.

[edit]

On belief in a higher power

DS: Do you believe in a higher power?

JR: I think that my feeling about the higher power is in keeping with most of America, in a lot of ways--we think of ourselves as a Christian nation, but in fact, we also think we can pick and choose what we want about religion. Most people, if you press them, their concept of God is something like a divine spark within them or something that we all share. Which is very in keeping with the Gnostic principle--we call it Gnosticism now--but a Gnostic principle of Christianity. And I would put myself somewhere in there.

DS: How do you raise your children?

JR: I tortured myself about this before I had kids, and now that I have them, there're a couple of things that make it very difficult

for me to choose any one particular religion. I can't forgive Catholicism for the kind of pederasty that it allowed. It's hard for me--Jewish--I can't--I don't even know, I'm afraid to publish that, but--I can't, you know, abide a religion that would distinguish a child from its parents, to say this child isn't part of this religion because its mother isn't. To me, that's exactly the kind of distinction that makes religion sinister and destructive.

DS: How do you circumvent that in the rearing of children, then?

JR: I'm thinking of something like a Unitarian. I would do a Gnostic church if they really existed. And I know they sort of exist, but they seem a little small. I think Unitarian is probably as close as I'm going to come.

DS: Why would you be afraid to have it published that you're part Jewish?

JR: First of all, I'm tired of being Jewish. I'm tired of the fact that I'm counted among Jewish people; when I'm at a funeral, and there have been a lot of funerals on that side of the family, they're perfectly happy to have me carry a casket. But you know, I'm not part of the Promised Land, and I'm tired of the selective use of me. Also, people say that Judaism is a philosophy, and then it comes up: "Are your kids Jewish? Is their mother Jewish?" I say, "No"; to me, that makes it a religion, you know? I'm getting baptized in the next few months, because I just really think that the Gnostic principle--

DS: [chuckles] As a big "Fuck you" to Judaism, or--?

JR: Partly, but I appreciate the Gnostic principle; the Gospel of Thomas is meaningful to me. I like it.

DS: So you're going to be baptized into the Gnostic church?

JR: Well, this is the other thing. I've got to decide exactly how to do it. Baptism is looked at in different ways contingent on what Christian group we're talking about. Some think it's okay to baptize children. Others think it's part of a later conversion in life. For me, the ones that think it's okay to baptize children, that's exactly what I don't want, because the idea that a child wouldn't be accepted, blessed by God regardless? Whether or not they've been baptized, to say that God would have anything against any child is just disgusting to me. I can't forgive it.

DS: It's an odd concept.

JR: I don't really think of myself as a born-again, and they of course insist on later baptism. I don't know exactly. I'm sort of currently leaning towards the Baptist church.

DS: Southern Baptist?

JR: Maybe. I have a lot of Southern--

DS: They're one of the least intolerant.

JR: Well, that's interesting. I don't know; I haven't decided--

DS: I went through a Southern Baptist phase when I lived in Georgia.

JR: Oh, did you?

DS: Yeah, yeah. The Southern Baptist convention is probably the most conservative out there.

On politics

DS: If you were forced to choose, which war would you prefer to fight in, Iraq or Afghanistan?

JR: Which one would I rather fight in? Well, for whom?

DS: On the side of the United States.

JR: Iraq or Afghanistan...God, that's tough man. I think Afghanistan.

DS: Afghanistan?

JR: Well, at least we had an endgame.

DS: Hillary or Barack?

JR: I think Hillary. My reasoning is completely ridiculous: I distrust men who are that skinny. You and I are both lean, but if I told you, you've got to go take this stump out to the back yard and gave you an axe, I'd be pretty confident you could do it. Obama doesn't look like he could do it to me. [both laugh] There's something about that I mistrust.

DS: If you remain that lean on the campaign trail, when they're having all those--

JR: There's something about it I distrust, a guy who can't lift a hammer.

DS: [laughs]

On self-destruction and survival

DS: How would you choose to die?

JR: How would I choose to die? I don't know. Most men stop being afraid of dying. Then, when they have kids, suddenly they're afraid of it again. But not for themselves, for their kids. So I don't really care, just as long as my kids are provided for.

DS: You think that most men, pre-parenthood, lose their sense of mortality and their fear of it?

JR: I think you just get tired of being afraid of it.

DS: Were you ever afraid of it?

JR: Yeah, I was afraid of it in my early twenties, and as a kid; I just remember being really, really

afraid of dying, and it being incomprehensible and depressing.

DS: Did that affect your behavior?

JR: Well, my daughter, too. We had a lizard die, and that was a big deal. She was asking these questions, "Is it gonna be another lizard?" You know, she has all of these--

DS: "Where does it go?"

JR: Yeah, she has a lot of really valid questions. I don't know; I also don't feel that we understand everything. For all the people who praise Shakespeare, Shakespeare is still really quite extraordinary. The sense that I have of Shakespeare is he does understand that on some level, we as human beings, our bodies, are like the top of an iceberg that you can see. Then there's all this other stuff under the water that you can't see. That's my feeling about it. I'm not that afraid of it anymore because I feel like there's all this other stuff under the water. But it does worry me--

DS: An afterlife?

JR: I don't know if it's in those terms, exactly, but there are a lot of things we don't understand. We're all part of the same thing. For various Gnostic reasons, saying that there's this thing that existed before all of us, that we're all part of it, and that each of us is made up of a piece of this thing-- it's appealing to me.

DS: What's a trait you deplore in yourself?

JR: The traits I hate most in myself is probably one of my best traits --

DS: Isn't that always the case?

JR: Yeah, probably. Probably. I've always been loyal to people, and I think it's one of my worst and best traits.

DS: How is it your best trait?

JR: I stand behind people who are really quite troubled and messed up. [laughs nervously]

DS: Is that also how it's one of your worst, then?

JR: Yeah, yeah.

DS: What's a time that this trait screwed you over.

JR: As a young writer, of course, I knew a lot of extremely talented, amazing people who were hell-bent on self-destruction, as are a lot of people at that age who are creative people, and yet I still believed in them.

DS: How so? Typical drug, alcohol problems, or--

JR: Yeah, or just really self-sabotaging. A novelist, let's say, who refused to finish the novel and kept rewriting until it was ruined. Or an artist who--

DS: Like Joseph Grand in The Plague where he was rewriting the same sentence over and over?

JR: Yeah, yeah, or just doing a gigantic revision when it was really finished, or an artist who was doing quite well and then started dating their art dealer and cheated on them. People have all kinds of ways of destroying themselves.

DS: What do you think it is that drives many artists feel to sink their own ships?

JR: Well, because partially, I think the inclination to be a creative person is to blow things up, right? And of course the nearest thing around you is yourself.

DS: Do you think that Norman Rockwell had that inclination?

JR: I don't know his history that well. Did he?

DS: I don't know, either. No by his popular image.

JR: There's also a lot of bullshit in our culture, that people push the idea that to be a successful artist you have to be utterly self-destructive.

DS: What's your most treasured possession? You can't include kids, because they're not really possessions.

JR: My most treasured possession? Well--I like this painting right here.

DS: Is it your most treasured?

JR: I don't know if I have a most treasured, but I have a most precious possession. Shall I go get it?

DS: Yeah, definitely.

JR: This is a scraper. A red chert scraper that I found walking along in the desert in New Mexico, about a year and a half ago. Christmas, two years ago. With two kids I work really hard--pretty much constantly. But the thing about this is it has such an amazing energy, to hold it.

DS: Mmm. I feel that, yeah.

JR: And the other: it may be prehistoric; it may be several thousand years old.

DS: What makes it a scraper?

JR: This is what's interesting. To me, after you killed the meat, this is what you would use to scrape the inside of the flesh off of the fur, or anything like that. Scraping the fat or the gristle off the top of the meat. And it's a reminder how much harder things were, you know? Any time I'm feeling down on myself--

DS: You could be scraping meat off bones.

JR: I could be scraping--and it was really like that, you know? So--there's that.

DS: I have treasured possessions,

but I also have treasured memories. I found a suicide in the woods when I was thirteen; s a kid my age, who was probably fourteen. It's a treasured memory in some ways, one that's lasted my whole life, and it's come back in a lot of ways. On my MySpace profile, I make an allusion to that in my narrative. I don't think people actually read that. I think that people look at pictures, and then they move on. But that's not really true. I have been contacted by both that individual's younger sister, who was eight when he killed himself, and the girlfriend he killed himself over. Separately. JR: Yeah, people do read the stuff on there. People do.

On raising children

JR: The kids have made me a better writer.

DS: Really?

JR: Yeah, on the Shakespeare thing, I think part of what was holding me back from finishing it was--because I had written the first half in 2003--is that I hadn't had kids. I didn't understand the characters who had children. I didn't really understand them. And once I had had kids, I could approach them differently. And its great when kids appear in your work.

DS: Gives it depth and also maybe opens you up to a new audience.

JR: Yeah, I can't believe I didn't have any kids in my books. I did have kids in my first novel, but not having kids or parents in your work is so weird. It's just such a weird lack. You often see literary books that don't have them.

DS: Especially based in New York.

JR: Especially based in New York, yeah.

DS: Do you find that when you

have friends outside the city, and they know you're raising kids here, they bate their breath? So many people still have this vision of New York from like "The Warriors,"; from the Abe Beame days of New York.

JR: That's true, it's true. The funny thing is we were just in San Diego and my daughter, who's three, would just lie on the floor moaning in boredom, because it's so boring there. We were in a couple of houses, one of which had a pool. She was fine when there was a pool. But the driving--she just hated it! You have to drive to go anywhere, and we couldn't find our health-food-store food...and we're driving around for forty minutes, and she just would sit in the back saying, "I don't want to live in the suburbs," you know.

DS: So many parents think that--my sister would be one--the preference of that controlled atmosphere is better for the kids. They don't realize what they lose not living in an urban center.
JR: Yeah.

DS: People creating this thriving environment where we can influence each other, and kids --
JR: --They love it--

DS: --have more stimulus. When you see news reports that on the discovery of an Earthlike planet does that affect your perspective or does it go unnoticed?

JR: I don't know; there's so much out there that we don't understand that it's hard for me to imagine there isn't some larger relationships, somehow. Let me see if I can phrase it better: there's a lot out there we don't understand.

DS: If you had to choose, and you had to choose or both would be devastated and destroyed, which

continent would you have blown up, Asia or Africa?

JR: Asia or Africa! I don't know, I have to blow up one of them??

DS: Or they both go.

JR: I would just do it based on population, I guess. I don't know their population figures, but I think that there are more people in Asia, so I think I'd blow up Africa.

DS: So it would be a sum total of human life, as opposed to your judgment of cultural significance, or--?

JR: I'm not sure. The land mass thing might figure in, but mainly yeah, just the populations.

On pedophilia and the death penalty

DS: What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?

JR: Before I was a parent, I was sort of wishy-washy on the death penalty; but being a parent makes you conservative about some things. My wife is very progressive. But then when we talk about a pedophile priest or something, and someone suggests that they be executed, she doesn't say anything. I don't think it's just because there's a sense of vengeance. I think it's because that would be the most miserable you could possibly be, that I can imagine. To a person with such a damaged soul that you would harm a child--I can't imagine anything worse.

DS: Augusten Burroughs made the exact same point; the death penalty came up when we were talking, too.

JR: Is that right?

DS: He's a very dynamic person to talk to. He was like, 'I'm not one of those people who cares about the whole taking another life. I feel like when you damage a child,

you've damaged them. You've given up your right to be here amongst us.'

JR: Nobody's doing you a favor, either, by keeping you around.

DS: I'm pretty ambivalent on the death penalty. It doesn't bother me on some philosophical level, like the death, you know? But I think that the argument that makes me ambivalent as opposed to pro- what worries me is the idea that there's innocent people being put to death.

JR: Yeah, well, I have an easy solution for that: you don't execute someone who's been convicted once, but when they are convicted twice. The thing is, we're not executing pedophiles. That's not what we're doing with them.

DS: They're still out there. Just recently, there was some fifteen-year-old girl who was--
JR: I was just watching something last night, about a pederast in Idaho, who was fine because the statute of limitations is up. In Idaho they've recently changed it. So, as a twenty-three-year-old, if you hadn't done anything by the time you were twenty-four, you couldn't do anything, ever.

On personal relationships

DS: What do you value most in your friends?

JR: It's funny, because I was just saying this is my biggest flaw --

DS: Loyalty?

JR: --probably it would be loyalty, yeah.

DS: Before you got married, what would have been a bigger turnoff for you with your wife, her speaking in a baby voice, or her being overly flatulent?

JR: I don't think I would have minded a baby voice; it would have depended what she was

saying, of course.

DS: Say, both scenarios in bed.

JR: I think flatulence would have been a bigger bummer.

DS: Than a baby voice.

JR: Well, if she's saying smart things in a baby voice, I wouldn't mind it.

DS: Like what?

JR: If she was just as brainy as she is and she had a baby voice, I would have been fine.

DS: Is there a lot of brainy pillow talk in your household?

JR: Not with two kids around!

Today in History

202 BC – Proconsul Scipio Africanus of the Roman Republic defeated Hannibal and the Carthaginians in the Battle of Zama, concluding the Second Punic War.

1469 – Ferdinand II of Aragon wedded Isabella of Castile, a marriage that paved the way to the unification of Aragon and Castile into a single country, Spain.

1781 – American Revolutionary War: British forces led by Lord Cornwallis officially surrendered to Franco-American forces under George Washington, ending the Siege of Yorktown.

1943 – Streptomycin, the first antibiotic remedy for tuberculosis, was first isolated by researchers at Rutgers University.

1987 – The Dow Jones Industrial Average fell by 22.6% on Black Monday, the largest one-day percentage decline in stock market history.

October 19 is Double Ninth Festival in the Chinese calendar (2007); Constitution Day in Niue; Mother Teresa Day in Albania.

Quote of the Day

There are two things to aim at in life: first, to get what you want; and, after that, to enjoy it. Only the wisest of mankind achieve the second. ~ Logan Pearsall Smith

Word of the Day

churlish; adj

1. Of or pertaining to a serf, peasant, or rustic.
2. Rude, surly, ungracious.
3. Stingy or grudging.

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