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# Remembering Who We Were:

Boston Books, 1986

Shaun O'Connell

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Among the works discussed in this essay:

*The Handmaid's Tale*, by Margaret Atwood. 311 pages. Houghton Mifflin Company. \$16.95.

*Supply of Heroes*, by James Carroll. 403 pages. E. P. Dutton. \$17.95.

*The Parish and the Hill*, by Mary Curran. 264 pages.

Feminist Press at the City University of New York. \$8.95.

*Ivory Bright*, by Elaine Ford. 230 pages. Viking. \$15.95.

*Impostors*, by George V. Higgins. 262 pages. Henry Holt and Company. \$16.95.

*Southie Won't Go: A Teacher's Diary of the Desegregation of South Boston High School*,  
by Ione Malloy. 286 pages. University of Illinois Press. \$24.95.

*The Brass Bed*, by Alexandra Marshall. 275 pages. Doubleday & Company. \$16.95.

*The Good Mother*, by Sue Miller. 310 pages. Harper & Row. \$17.95.

*Monkeys*, by Susan Minot. 159 pages. E. P. Dutton/Seymour Lawrence. \$15.95.

*Taming a Sea-Horse*, by Robert B. Parker. 250 pages.

Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence. \$15.95.

*Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, by Robert D. Richardson, Jr. 453 pages.  
University of California Press. \$25.00.

*Roger's Version*, by John Updike. 329 pages. Alfred A. Knopf. \$17.95.

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On September 3, 1985, a decade after the period of turmoil that surrounded implementation of a federal order to integrate Boston's public schools, Judge W. Arthur Garrity returned the control of these schools to the Boston School Committee and to Laval Wilson, who took office that day as Boston's new superintendent of schools. Boston's mayor, Raymond Flynn—who, a decade before, had opposed what was commonly known as forced busing in Boston's affected Irish-American communities of South Boston and Charlestown—was pleased. "The judge's withdrawal will symbolize an end to a period of time that everybody wants to put behind," he said, "and will close a chapter on a time that Bostonians want to forget. Everybody wants to open a new chapter of good will for the city."<sup>1</sup>

For many who were, so to speak, making book on Boston in the mid-1980s, the city seemed a good bet. Emblematically, its professional sports teams performed with amazing success in 1986: the New England Patriots appeared in the NFL Super Bowl

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in January; the Boston Celtics won the NBA Championship in June; and the Boston Red Sox appeared in the World Series in October. The economy of Greater Boston was booming: though housing prices were soaring, the unemployment rate was low and the consumer purchase rate was high. New high-rises in downtown Boston cast shadows on old landmarks like the graceful Custom House, long Boston's tallest building, which was for sale. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts presented a sumptuous, self-congratulatory exhibition called *The Bostonians: Painters of an Elegant Age, 1870–1980*. Harvard celebrated its 350th anniversary with glitz and circumstance: fireworks over the Charles River and symposia in the Yard. Prince Charles extended his congratulations in an address. The Democratic Party celebrated its own: retiring House of Representatives Speaker Tip O'Neill, who also spoke to the Harvard 350th, recalling his boyhood job of raking leaves in the Yard; Joseph Kennedy, O'Neill's replacement in the Eighth Congressional District; Governor Michael Dukakis, who was elected for a third term by a landslide, then became a presidential candidate, largely on the basis of what many were calling Massachusetts's economic "miracle." Happy days were here again. Skies above Boston Harbor were clear again.

In his annual reflections on the World Series for the *New Yorker*, Roger Angell, who had long called himself a Red Sox fan, tried to dismiss "the old miasmal Boston baseball doubt and despair" that has hung over Boston since Babe Ruth was traded in 1920.

One begins to see at last that the true function of the Red Sox may be not to win but to provide New England authors with a theme, now that guilt and whaling have gone out of style. I would put forward a different theory about this year's loss and how it may be taken by the fans.<sup>2</sup>

Though the Boston Red Sox lost the World Series to the New York Mets—despite their 5–3 lead with two out in the tenth inning of game six; after losing that game, they led 3–0 in game seven, only to lose that one too and the Series as well—Angell argues that they became a different team, one that even Bostonians will love.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps so. So should the new, buoyant Boston respond. Still, it seems odd to be told by a *New Yorker* that we must look on the bright side—especially by a previous Sox fan who suddenly declares himself a *Mets* fan!

Whaling was certainly gone, but it was not clear that guilt, along with other self-destructive tendencies, had so blithely disappeared from the airs over the still-polluted Boston Harbor. Certainly William A. Henry III, former reporter and critic for the *Boston Globe*, now an associate editor for *Time* magazine, thought not. After reading *Deadly Force*, by Lawrence O'Donnell, Jr.—a work that reveals police incompetence and duplicity in a murder case—and J. Anthony Lukas's *Uncommon Ground*—a book that documents the impact of school desegregation upon three Boston families—Henry saw a portrayal of "a bitter, angry, combative, and revengeful Boston, a mean and sometimes scary place to live."<sup>4</sup> (*Deadly Force* was presented as a network television drama in 1986, and *Uncommon Ground* was in production for another network television drama. The sitcoms "Cheers" and "The Cavanaughs," the medical drama "St. Elsewhere," and the crime drama "Spenser: For Hire" were bringing Boston great media attention, but the image was decidedly mixed.) Henry catalogues and illustrates a number of adverse charges: "Boston is a city where lessons are taught. Lessons about turf, about money, about power and retribution and manhood."<sup>5</sup> In short, he accuses the Boston power elite, particularly its Irish-American political leadership, with provincialism, abuse of power, racism, and sexual anxiety. Boston, for Henry, has

become a nice place to visit; however, like Angell, he will take Manhattan as a place to live.

Literate Bostonians did not need Roger Angell and William A. Henry III to tell them that these were *not* the best of times. Plant closings, layoffs, and the persisting problem of the homeless reminded us that there was another, less glossy Massachusetts. Racism persisted; even the Red Sox were not free from its taint, as their out-of-court settlement against a black former coach and player, who had charged racial discrimination, indicated. The Boston public schools lost ground in their struggle to maintain order, standards, and racial balance; the former white majority had slipped to a distinct (roughly 25 percent) minority. One-party dominance of Massachusetts politics led to insularity and arrogance. Readers who turned from newspapers and magazines to books for their information on the state of Boston's society and culture found further cause for anxiety.

In any case, Henry's charges are not new. A decade ago, in *The Problem of Boston*, Martin Green mourned the passing of a golden age of civility and culture. In Green's reading, Boston, in the second half of the nineteenth century, "became progressively more malformed and dysfunctional, a caricature of the earlier ideal." By 1900, Boston was "ordinary."<sup>6</sup> In Green's argumentative construct, Boston had once been a unified, coherent society—held together by a faith in perfectability—which produced a great culture, evidenced by its literature. In 1828, Bronson Alcott had echoed Winthrop's vision of a city upon a hill: Boston, he said, was "a city that is set on high. It cannot be hid. It is Boston. The morality of Boston is more pure than that of any other city in America."<sup>7</sup>

Industrialization and immigration divided this community, says Green. After 1845—that is, after the beginning of Ireland's potato famine, which resulted in massive emigration to Boston—it sunk, like Atlantis.

The city set on high was spoiled, and yet the citizens were individually profiting by its spoilation. They were individually richer. But their wealth came from the impoverishment, debasement, brutalization, of their fellow-citizens. Moreover, the Irish refused to become fellow-citizens, culturally. They formed a society within a society. They were opposed to Bostonian enthusiasms—for reason, for education, for reform. . . . They hated even English literature, seemingly the most unsectarian of Boston's enthusiasms.<sup>8</sup>

Though this suggests a balanced indictment against the new industrialists and their employees, the Yankee and the Celt, Green soon makes it clear that his principal blame is reserved for the victims of industrial practices, the new Irish-Americans. By the Gilded Age, Green argues, immigrants—mainly the Irish and their political machine—had destroyed the idea of community in Boston. "But there is no point in using the term 'Boston' to include all the communities that then lived in the city; from our point of view, they never made one community, because they never made one culture."<sup>9</sup>

It should come as no surprise that the Irish settlers saw Boston culture as an instrument of Yankee authority, just as they had viewed British culture in Ireland as an arm of the Ascendancy. Yet Green has a point about the muffling of Boston culture in the latter half of the nineteenth century. This was clear from a viewing of the 1986 Museum of Fine Arts (MFA) exhibition of Bostonian painters from 1870 to 1930, a show that celebrated the achievement of this period with elegant portraits by Edmund C. Tarbell,

Frank Benson, Philip Hale, William Paxton, and other members of the “Boston school” of painting. *The Boston Painters 1900–1930*, written by R. H. Ives Gammell and published in 1986, is a stirring defense of these cultivated antimodernists, whose paintings showed a reverence for the leisure class from which they emerged. Yet Gammell’s rationalization suggests the provincial and aesthetic limits of this school:

The Boston Painters of the first generation reached middle age before the Great War darkened their distant horizons and so the horror of that conflict did not touch them directly, whereas the fallacious prosperity of the postwar era reinforced their deliberately maintained complacency. These artists seriously believed the tragic or sordid aspects of human affairs to be as misplaced in the fine arts as they would be in well-bred dinner table conversation and they sharply derided any implication to the contrary.<sup>10</sup>

While the Boston painters worked in the tradition of Velázquez, Vermeer, Hals, and Chardin, the 1913 New York Armory Show painters “represented, first and last, a repudiation of visual observation.”<sup>11</sup> Boston painting, for Gammell, should be a well-bred visual feast. All else is ill-bred.

John Singer Sargent set the tone and style for this era of Boston painters. The first room of the MFA show was dominated by him, particularly by his *Daughters of Edward D. Boit* (1882), which was posted by the same blue underglazed, porcelain-decorated large vases that Sargent included in the painting. The viewer, looking at the artfully yet casually arranged Boit daughters—one daughter is lounging against a vase—senses he is entering a special and rarified world, where the rich are indeed different.

In Stanley Olson’s lucid biography of Sargent, *John Singer Sargent: His Portrait*, we learn more about Edward Darley Boit (1840–1915).

Boit was an ideal patron, a man quivering on the outskirts of art who encouraged John by the sheer force of his admiration. He was, down to his toes, a Bostonian—Boston Latin School, Harvard, Secretary of Hasty Pudding, Freshman crew, tall, poetic, athletic, confident, and rich (richer still for having married a Cushing—Charlotte Louisa, known as “Iza”—the only daughter of a vastly wealthy merchant whose estate “Belmont” gave the town its name)—with a very curious difference. In 1868 he saw the work of Corot, and at that instant discovered painting in a blinding flash and spent the rest of his life in service to that revelation.<sup>12</sup>

The MFA show included *Winter, Commonwealth Avenue* (1909), a charming watercolor by Boit which delicately displays the open grace of that thoroughfare, modeled after French boulevards. Of course, art, for Boit, meant Paris. Sargent was attractive to him, as well as to other wealthy Bostonians, in large part because he was an American who had been celebrated in Paris, even causing a scandal there with his *Madame X* (1884). It was Sargent’s continental command that validated him to the provincial, newly rich Bostonians. He was, according to Trevor J. Fairbrother, “a gentleman and as modern as Boston desired—in short, a modern old master.”<sup>13</sup> In turn, Sargent—who “belonged nowhere,” writes Olson—loved Boston.<sup>14</sup> “All of his murals,” suggests Fairbrother, “were done for Boston, an indication of his commitment to the city and the city’s belief that he was the greatest artist of his day.”<sup>15</sup>

Of course, these murals are now viewed by many as Sargent’s least impressive achievement. Olson, for example, has qualified praise for Sargent’s Boston Public Library

murals, called *The History of Religion*; on the other hand, he refers to his murals in the Museum of Fine Arts as

public art for public art's sake, an exercise in civic virtue with nothing much to offer the ordinary citizen, save the assurance that academic archetypes are somehow good for him. Perhaps the grand archetype guiding all of Sargent's mural projects was the image of America, an abstract emblem of home.<sup>16</sup>

Sargent's Widener Library murals are dismissed by another critic as "wartime propaganda, . . . overwrought . . . bathos."<sup>17</sup> Boston brought out the best and the worst in John Singer Sargent, affirmations and idealizations.

The MFA show, displaying the new Boston's ecumenical, celebratory spirit, included many painters whose identification with Boston was marginal, brief, or painful. Winslow Homer, for example, did not live in Boston after he was twenty-three (1858), but Fairbrother insists that Homer was "in tune with Boston," that "his temperament was New England in character, and his social outlook was that of a New England gentleman."<sup>18</sup> Childe Hassam, whose *Boston Common at Twilight* (1885–1886) evokes a shimmering, placid, idealized Boston, relocated to New York in 1889; later he contributed to the Armory show that Gammell would mock. Maurice Prendergast—an Irish-American who was born in St. John's, Newfoundland, and who worked in Boston selling fabrics in a dry-goods store—may have been, as Fairbrother says, "the only Boston artist of his generation to take a truly important place in the new art of the twentieth century," but his works were not exhibited at the MFA in his lifetime!<sup>19</sup> Boston's rigid class and aesthetic standards made its art world a tight little island before the turn of the century.

The last painting in the MFA show, John Whorf's *North End Boston* (1936), jars through contrast. An impressionistic version of an Edward Hopper scene, it shows a parked car and a jumble of fire escapes, building fronts, and signs: "Hotel," "Louis Levy." That is, it includes a realistic, exterior Boston of poverty and ethnic identity, characteristics that Gammell and the original "Boston Painters" wished to exclude from their gentlemanly art.

Expressionism in Boston: 1945–1985, an exhibition presented by the DeCordova Museum during the summer of 1986, showed more of another Boston, in works that were inspired by European rather than Boston models, works that were typically created by Jewish Americans, most notably Hyman Bloom, Jack Levine, and David Aronson. Where the Boston painters idealized their elegantly contrived figures and landscapes, the Boston expressionists shocked with horrific, jarringly shaped and colored political revelations. "Justice is more important than good looks," said Jack Levine.<sup>20</sup> Yet Levine was linked, however much in tangent or counterpoint, with the Boston tradition, says Pamela Edwards Allara: "If proof were needed of a Boston sensibility, it is personified by Levine, the Jewish 'boy from Boston' who spent his adult life in characteristic exile from a homeland which had so little interest in reclaiming him."<sup>21</sup> The Boston expressionists smuggled modernism into Boston.

The exhibitions of paintings at the Museum of Fine Arts and the DeCordova Museum in 1986 illustrated a sense of satisfaction that Bostonians were feeling about their cultural achievements. By celebrating works produced by different castes and classes, in widely different modes and styles, Boston enlarged its sense of itself, though these exhibitions showed a history of deep division: two Bostons. In 1904, William Howe Downes defined a narrow idea of the Boston character in an *Atlantic*

essay. "Inherent in Boston's support of her artists, from Allston to Paxton, is the Emersonian belief . . . that here is 'an inextricable relation . . . between ethics and aesthetics' because 'the only durable kind of beauty is spiritual or moral beauty.'" <sup>22</sup> These major art shows offered works, from Sargent to Paxton, derived from that set of assumptions, but they offered even more a sense of ourselves in a wider, less beautiful, more various world, a world that began to take shape when poor European immigrants—the Irish, Jews, and Italians, each of whom laid claim, in succession, to Boston's North End—began to arrive in great numbers in the latter half of the nineteenth century. As a result, the Boston ascendancy became more protective and stylized in its cultural expression. "You can't get a picture into the Boston Museum except you [*sic*] antecedents date back to the Mayflower," said Maurice Prendergast. <sup>23</sup> The popularity of these shows suggests that Bostonians now take great pleasure in witnessing the luxurious paintings flattering to Brahmins alongside Prendergast's *South Boston Pier* (1896), which shows less fancy Bostonians on joyous holiday.

Martin Green's curious indictment holds the Irish immigrants, in the main, responsible not only for shattering the dream of the city upon a hill, but also for making its arts tepid and circumspect. We should wonder at the value and vitality of a society that could be so easily compromised by the presence of newcomers who were imported to be its laborers and servants, but there is no doubt that Green identifies a region of achievement for which literary Bostonians of any cultural background might be proud and nostalgic. Green offers his own search for an alternative to Boston's ethnic variety and commercial intensities: "Concord was Concord in reaction against, and in relation to, Boston. They were two sides in the debate over the good life, which taken as a whole offered a considerable variety of vigorous alternative ideas." <sup>24</sup>

One of the best books of 1986 picks up this theme. In *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind*, Robert D. Richardson notes—as did Henry Adams in his *Education*—that eighteenth-century Boston ended in the 1840s, when the Boston and Albany Railroad opened, the Cunard steamers came to Boston, and telegraphic messages carried the news from Baltimore to Washington that Clay and Polk had been nominated for the presidency. <sup>25</sup> The Irish and their appalling ways arrived in Concord to lay rail for the Fitchburg line. Richardson, however, unlike Green, does not come before us to bemoan our loss of cultural certitude or blame the newcomers; rather, he celebrates the perfected expression of cultural cohesions at its late moment of final articulation. "Concord in the 1830s and 1840s—Emerson's Concord—was to America what Goethe's Weimar had been to Germany." <sup>26</sup> However, more important, Richardson celebrates the life of a mind: not cityscapes and landscapes, which can be walked and bought, but an interior world of imagination. "The landscape lies fair within," wrote Thoreau. <sup>27</sup>

Richardson tracks Thoreau—"I have travelled a good deal in Concord" <sup>28</sup>—on his various travels, real and imagined, provincial and universal, earthly and supernatural, in this fine "intellectual biography of Henry Thoreau from 1837, when he was twenty and finishing college, to his death in 1862." <sup>29</sup> Though an intellectual biography, Richardson's work stays close to the actual grounds of Thoreau's life. The state of Thoreau's body, as well as his mind, and the relations between the two are beautifully articulated. For example, we learn that in 1851, when he was thirty-four, Thoreau had all of his teeth extracted. He took little note of the event in his journal, except for his response to ether—then in use in Boston for only five years—which he found gave him "a sense of expansion into 'a greater space than you ever travelled'; but on second

thought, he concluded that no one needed to take ether who was capable of being transported by a thought.”<sup>30</sup>

From the time in 1837 when he took Emerson’s *Nature* out of Harvard’s library, to the end of his life, when he was collecting specimens for Louis Agassiz and coming to terms with Darwin’s developmental theory, Thoreau was transported by others’ thoughts—he read and walked with the same resolution—and fused those thoughts with his experiences into an original vision. He studied, for example, Longfellow’s *Outre-Mer: A Pilgrimage Beyond the Sea* and Margaret Fuller’s *Summer on the Lakes* as models for *Walden*, but he also went to the woods to confront life on his own terms. Though Richardson traces the traveler and the reader, above all, his Thoreau was a writer. “Nothing goes by luck in composition,” Thoreau wrote, “it allows no trick. The best you can write will be the best you are.”<sup>31</sup> Thoreau literally *composed* his life.

After reading Richardson’s book, we might think Thoreau the best any of us might become. He made the most of his defiantly limited experiences, seeing a universe of implications in Concord. He faced the worst nature could offer—“naked Nature, —inhumanly sincere, wasting no thought on man”<sup>32</sup>—yet made the best of it by building an alternative world of words. In 1850, after Margaret Fuller and her daughter drowned and he went to Fire Island to look for their bodies, Thoreau wrote, “Our thoughts are the epochs in our lives: all else is but a journal of the winds that blew while we were here.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet, to dismiss all that lies outside the mind as “a journal of the winds” is to dismiss the world in which most of us live. That is, for all of Thoreau’s glory, there is a chilly quality of isolation about him. Rather than join the Brook Farm commune, Thoreau went to Walden, where he built his hut on Emerson’s land. He reduced himself, says Richardson, “to the simplest possible constituent unit, the self.”<sup>34</sup> He turned away from the wider worlds represented by Boston and Concord—seeking his own synthesis of their argument over the good life—yet he did not confront the wilderness, as did Parkman, or face true savagery, as did Melville, authors whom he admired. “Thoreau was well aware that what he was doing was not braving wilderness, but simulating its conditions in a sort of symbolic or laboratory experiment.”<sup>35</sup> That experimental quality is what makes Thoreau so valuable to us—as a self-created version of Tocqueville’s new American—and so limited as a model: a celibate, autonomous original. Richardson convinces us that we shall not look again upon the likes of Henry David Thoreau, who, when asked on his deathbed how he saw the next world, replied, “One world at a time.”<sup>36</sup>

There was little place in Thoreau’s world, anytime, for the Irish immigrants who were transforming Boston and even arriving in Concord in his day. More accurately, the *place* Thoreau assigned the representative Irishman, John Field, in *Walden*, was to serve as a pathetic example of those who mis-lived their lives. “The culture of an Irishman is an enterprise to be undertaken with a sort of moral bog hoe,” Thoreau concluded, giving up on Field, “an honest, hard-working but shiftless man” who foolishly worked for a living (“boggling” for farmers: turning and manuring their lands) to support his family.<sup>37</sup> Thoreau might have agreed with Martin Green that the “problem of Boston” could be traced, in part, to the presence of the Irish.

Three works written by Bostonians and published in 1986 took up the long-standing, unsettled question of the relation of Irish-Americans to their larger communities and to an idea of culture, in Boston and elsewhere. Mary Curran’s novel, *The Parish and the Hill* (first published in 1948, reissued in 1986), though set in a fictional version of

Holyoke, Massachusetts, tells us much about the traditional pattern of conflict between the Yankee and the Celt but even more about the internal tensions in the Irish community between “shanty” and “lace-curtain” Irish.<sup>38</sup> Ione Malloy’s edited diary, *Southie Won’t Go: A Teacher’s Diary of the Desegregation of South Boston High School*, recalls that crisis as though it occurred yesterday. It also carries us back into the world of the most important local book of 1985, Anthony Lukas’s *Common Ground*; however, where Lukas had a detached sympathy for all groups caught up in Boston’s desegregation crisis and described Judge W. Arthur Garrity’s decisions as heroic, Malloy saw the crisis from the inside, as it happened in South Boston High, where she taught; she identified most with the Irish-American community, her own, and she had little use for Judge Garrity or his decisions. The third work, James Carroll’s novel *Supply of Heroes*—set in Ireland, England, and France during the period of the Great War and the Irish Rising of 1916—may appear to have little to do with Boston but, indirectly, has much to say about who we are and the way we live now.

Before she died in 1981, Mary Curran had been living in South Boston; across a section of Boston Harbor stood the Kennedy Library and the University of Massachusetts, where she had been a professor of English and director of the Irish Studies Program. She had come a long way from Holyoke, where she was born in 1917 and came of age. A graduate of Massachusetts State College in Amherst (now the University of Massachusetts), she went on to earn her M.A. and Ph.D. at the State University of Iowa, then taught at Wellesley College and Queens College before returning to the University of Massachusetts. She had traveled a rare route of cultural ascent, particularly for an Irish-American woman of her generation, yet she had never wholly assented to the proprieties of her rank and station. That is, there was always something proudly *shanty* about Mary Curran, for she loathed lace-curtain pretention. Yet in the 1970s she moved to Beacon Hill, on Pinckney Street across from Louisburg Square, and she listed herself in the phone directory as Dr. Mary Curran. She embodied the cultural contradictions of the third-generation Irish-Americans, those who are fully able to pursue the promise of American life yet fear the sacrifice of their cultural heritage.

“*The Parish and the Hill* views Americanization—or assimilation or acculturation—mournfully: as a process in which identity may be lost, is certainly called into question,” writes Anne Halley.<sup>39</sup> The novel chronicles three generations of O’Sullivans and O’Connors as they leave County Kerry and settle into and then leave the Irish Parish. The story is narrated by Mary Curran’s fictionalized version of her younger self, Mary O’Connor. “I was born in Irish Parish, but was lifted out of it, and with my family was one of the group to move to Money Hole Hill.”<sup>40</sup> It is a novel of lost innocence and lost community among the Irish immigrants, who are corrupted by their own lace-curtain pride and their desperate desire to emulate the Yankee establishment as a means of acquiring money. Only Mary’s mother seems immune from the disease of invidious distinctions.

There’s enough bitterness between the Hill and the Parish as it is, with the Yankees looking down on the lace-curtains and the lace-curtains looking down on the shanties, and here now we have the shanties thinking themselves better than someone else [the Polish immigrants who were arriving in the Parish] so that they can have someone to look down on. It’s a disease, I tell you, and if you catch it you’re done for, that I know, for I see it on the Hill.<sup>41</sup>

Once upon a time, or so memory hazes history into idyll, when Mary's grandfather, John O'Sullivan, arrived from Ireland, all was well in the happy valley of an Irish commune. For him,

There was no dissension then. We were all the same, and if a woman made a cup of tea there would always be a friend by to drink. No one ever had to shake a tea-kettle in an Irishman's house. There was always plenty. You will never see those days again, for they are gone, all of them, and it's the Hill did it, the Hill with its pot of gold and Irishman fighting Irishman to get at it. Irish Parish was full of peace till the time came when the serpent got into the garden and none content after—all of them making the gold rush to the Hill and trying to outdo the Yankees at their own game.<sup>42</sup>

However, there is no help for it. The O'Connors move to Money Hole Hill. The worst of the brothers, Tabby, in pursuit of money and status, even moves to Boston, as far east of the Eden of Irish Parish as one could go in Massachusetts. He joins the K of C, dines at the Parker House, even lives on Pinckney Street! Mary's mother again has the definitive opinion.

To her a Boston Irishman was as low as an Orangeman. She hated the Boston Irish because they represented the stronghold of the lace-curtain Irish; the whole of Boston was for her an even stronger Money Hole Hill. It was to Boston that the lace-curtain Irish on Money Hole Hill moved when they rose in the hierarchy; that is, when they acquired more money and more intolerance.<sup>43</sup>

Three of Mary's brothers decline into alcoholism, brutality, bigotry, or money lust; her ambitious sisters marry Protestants, but suffer for it. Hannah O'Connor, for example, meets a particularly gothic fate, a plot twist out of a Bronte novel: the most beautiful girl in Irish Parish, she marries a Dickinson, whose family members are Money Hole aristocrats who reject her; she discovers that the Dickinsons have locked away a mad member of their own family, lest public awareness of his presence cause shame. Hannah, however, has her revenge by outliving all the Dickinsons and inheriting their grand house, but ends her days a mad crone, living in a chicken coop with dogs! Here the Irish inherit the earth and do in the Ascendancy but find the game not worth the candle.

Only Mary O'Connors's memory of her family, a moveable feast, endures. Mary Curran's memoir-like novel is flawed by an unsteadiness of tone and occasional improbabilities (as in the Hannah parable), but it stirs sympathy and understanding for the underclass—Irish-Americans in general and Irish-American women in particular—from which its author rose. It is a novel that helps us confront our collective history. On this point, a passage from an essay entitled "On Keeping a Notebook," by Joan Didion, serves as a useful illustration:

I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends. We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and the betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were.<sup>44</sup>

Mary Curran's novel, indeed each of the texts here considered, retrieves our hidden history.

In Ione Malloy's *Southie Won't Go*, that history is a nightmare of racial conflict from which Boston is trying to awake. As an English teacher at South Boston High during the academic years 1974–1975 and 1975–1976, Malloy was in a position to see the worst. She was well aware of her unique perspective on this telling moment in Boston history. One day during the fall of 1975, she even tried to persuade her students that “this is the most interesting place in Boston right now.”<sup>45</sup> It was precisely this self-consciousness that motivated her to keep her diary in the first place, when she realized that her school “was gradually becoming the focal point of resistance to court-ordered busing.”<sup>46</sup> However, *Southie Won't Go* is much more than an eyewitness account of a Boston battleground, though it certainly is that. Malloy *shaped* her manuscript by cutting its original length in half; by inserting student composition; by adding glosses and notes on other events in the city—in the fall of 1975, for example, the Red Sox were involved in a heated pennant drive<sup>47</sup>—and by adding selected transcript from the federal court hearing that Judge Garrity held before he placed South Boston High in receivership, in December 1975. Malloy shaped her own vision, a cautionary tale, of this traumatic story.

She begins her diary on October 7, 1974, with a report of a raid carried out on South Boston's Rabbit Inn by the TPF—Boston's Tactical Police Force—which was accused of violence by the inn's patrons. The incident served Malloy as an emblem of the antagonism felt between the citizens of Southie—“We just want to be left alone” was their motto—and the Boston political, religious, and media establishment.<sup>48</sup> In a cliché which is at once melodramatic and accurate, Malloy summed up the social situation: “The very fabric of the city was being torn apart.”<sup>49</sup> She saw beatings, a stabbing in the school corridor, bomb threats, name-callings, and an expense of spirit. In her entry for November 20, 1974, she wrote, “As I walked around the school, and felt the mood of the school, I thought, ‘This school is DEATH. The mood of the school is black.’”<sup>50</sup> Perhaps Malloy was unaware of the irony in her use of the word *black* because her greatest sensitivity was directed toward the impact all the turmoil was having upon her white students, particularly her Irish-American students. She talked to them with candor and courage. For example, on February 26, 1975, after the black students had left her homeroom, she told her remaining white students, “Don't say ‘nigger.’ Don't even think it.”<sup>51</sup> However, her mood grew increasingly hopeless as she saw her former students drop out, turn angry and racist. She was not encouraged when in the fall of 1974 she was told she had received a federal grant of \$4,000 for a proposal on Irish literature which she had submitted long before the integration order transformed South Boston High.

My hope had been to change the self-image of the South Boston youth by giving him a sense of his cultural roots so he could stand strong; I had hoped over the years, perhaps, to create a mini-Irish cultural renaissance in Boston.<sup>52</sup>

Now she felt that the grant had “no meaning.” With court control, media attention, TPF, and students in crisis, there was little hope for a cultural renaissance in Boston, however mini, particularly for the Irish. “There could be no Irish cultural renaissance if the students abandoned the school.”<sup>53</sup> Even though Malloy eventually accepts the grant and develops the curriculum guide, her bleak judgment is a cloud that never lifts in this book.

Finally, Ione Malloy left South Boston High to earn her doctorate, then resumed her

teaching at Boston Latin School, “a citywide magnet school remote from the turmoil of the city, where the ‘carrot’ at the end of the ‘stick’—the bus ride—is a 350-year-old tradition of academic learning.”<sup>54</sup> She had grown up in Boston’s Back Bay, the daughter of a private schoolmaster, in the midst of Boston’s rich cultural resources. In her teaching career she was drawn to Southie’s sense of community.

“Southie” meant strong community pride, a fierce loyalty to one another, a distrust of any change, and—among some—a suspicion of those who might be different. This togetherness is both South Boston’s greatest strength and greatest weakness.<sup>55</sup>

Though she sustains much of the balance suggested in this statement, it is clear that her greatest sympathies lie with Southie residents, the Irish-American community from which she came. She reserves particular anger for Robert A. Dentler and Marvin B. Scott, authors of *Schools on Trial: An Inside Account of the Boston Desegregation Case*, for what the *New York Times* called their “sneering sarcasm” toward the Irish Catholics of Boston.<sup>56</sup>

*Southie Won’t Go*, like *The Parish and the Hill*, is a verbal act of provincial cultural self-defense against real and imagined assaults upon community integrity by the demands of the wider world and its cultural values. Malloy’s Southie is another version of Curran’s Parish, a vision of the ideal community shattered by the challenges and temptations of cultural diversity. For Curran, the destructive element was Yankee money and Irish lace-curtain pretensions; for Malloy, it was an idea of equity harshly imposed by Boston haves upon Boston have-nots, those who despair or turn violent. Malloy has little patience with the argument forwarded by Dentler and Scott that the desegregation program which removed schools from local community control introduced Southie’s citizens to a wider world. Dentler and Scott:

The programs teach that there is life beyond the enclave of one’s heritage. It teaches that respect is due all humans and cannot be parcelled out according to ethnicity, class, or residence.<sup>57</sup>

For Ione Malloy, the Garrity desegregation program insulted a community and destroyed the Boston schools. She concluded her diary in the spring of 1977, and in the decade since—a period of bomb threat, school evacuation, and Boston motorcycle police guarding the graduation ceremonies of Southie High—nothing that has happened has changed her mind.<sup>58</sup>

Novelist James Carroll, like Ione Malloy and Mary Curran—all three outsiders, seeking Irish-American roots—lived in Southie during the period of Boston’s racial strife. He became a volunteer bus monitor on a bus that moved black children from Roxbury to South Boston High. While Ione Malloy was inside the school, watching the buses arrive, anxious over the disruption of Boston Irish community coherence, Carroll was *on* one of the buses, shocked when he saw white people mimicking gorillas, gesturing obscenely, yelling threats at the terrified black schoolchildren aboard the bus: “It was one of those experiences I will never, ever come back from, because they were my people, these were my people outside, and I was shaken with the rage of it.”<sup>59</sup>

Unlike Malloy, Carroll praised Judge Garrity’s efforts. “Like many Boston Irish, I am proud that Garrity is one of us,” he said.<sup>60</sup> However, living across the street from “a paramilitary anti-busing organization,” isolated from his neighbors, unable to invite his Puerto Rican sister-in-law to visit, Carroll gave up on Southie, moved to Nahant, “which was once the summer enclave of the Yankees,” and wrote *Mortal Friends*, a

novel that describes Boston's Yankee-Celt conflicts as an extension of the Catholic Irish-Protestant Ascendancy conflicts in Ireland.<sup>61</sup>

Now James Carroll lives on Beacon Hill, amid its cultural resonances, somewhere between the houses once inhabited by Mary Curran, on the one hand, and Robert Lowell, on the other. Like Mary Curran and Ione Malloy, Carroll is divided between his attraction to an Irish-American cultural enclave and his counter-attraction to the symbolic sites of Yankee achievement.

I'm aware of the historical meaning of Beacon Hill, how the Irish people have been on the Hill a long time, but it's only in the last few generations they've been living downstairs. They used to live in the attics of these buildings. I understand the irony, but I have a feeling that the Irish—not just the Irish but “the people”—have claimed this neighborhood.<sup>62</sup>

The son of an air force officer, Carroll grew up in Washington, D.C., but never developed a sense of *place* there. “No one is *from* Washington.”<sup>63</sup> Boston gave him that, a symbolic site for his family, a landscape of fact and imagination which provided a setting for some of his fiction.

Though *Supply of Heroes* is not set in Boston, Boston's concerns are deeply set in it. Carroll extends his inquiry, begun in *Mortal Friends*, into the connections between conflicts in Ireland and Boston, finding points of origin in the foolish blood sacrifices of the Great War of 1914–1918, in which fifty thousand Irishmen died, fighting *for* England, and “the dumb show of clowns,” the Irish rebels who fought and died in the Irish Rising of 1916.<sup>64</sup> Carroll's title is taken from a statement by Sir Edward Carson, spokesman for Ulster Protestants, who opposed Home Rule and who was happy to see Irishmen die for England: “The necessary supply of heroes must be maintained.”<sup>65</sup> The title is ironic, for Carroll sees little achievement in either armed struggle. (He was a Catholic Paulist priest before leaving the priesthood and becoming a novelist, and was an antiwar activist during the Vietnam War years, when he was a chaplain at Boston University. His anger over the waste of this war shaped his vision in *Prince of Peace*, a novel inspired by the career of Daniel Berrigan, and in *Supply of Heroes*.)

*Supply of Heroes* is a historical romance: remote events occupy the background while family and love relations occupy the foreground; the two threads of thematic concern and plot are deftly interwoven. Jane Tyrell is a young Anglo-Irish woman whose Ascendancy brother, Douglas, fights for the British in France and whose Catholic lover, Dan Curry, takes part in the Rising. Though Carroll allows Douglas and Dan to have their say, his greatest sympathies lie with Jane, his thematic spokesperson, particularly when she confronts the republican militancy of her lover.

What's the point of hating England so? It's all mixed in together, as it should be. I'm Irish, yes. And I'm English. So are you. Listen to the words that we're using. We're speaking English, Dan, because that's who we are too!<sup>66</sup>

Language, for Carroll, is a means of release from chauvinistic close-mindedness, from the dumb show of those who would use obscene gestures to communicate with schoolchildren, those who would rather fight than talk. Elsewhere Carroll has written against “the green fog” of Irish-Americans. “The green fog of sentiment, of nostalgia, of nursed wounds, of noble violence, of old enmities, of unquestioned truths—this green fog is poison.”<sup>67</sup> This green fog of provincialism—the insularity of Curran's Irish Parish or Malloy's Southie—results in gratuitous blood sacrifice and destructive anger against others outside the community. Carroll learned lessons of ethnic provin-

cialism and transcendence on the streets of Boston, mean streets and cobblestone streets. The city helped inspire his fictional parables.

When I looked around for the first large subject for a serious novel, *Mortal Friends*, it was obvious to me that what I felt most passionate about and cared most about was Boston. When I was here as a priest, I had a day off a week and on those days for three or four years I walked all over the city, walked everywhere, and I loved it. I lived in Back Bay and Roxbury and Jamaica Plain during my time as a priest and I loved the city. It affected me profoundly.<sup>68</sup>

Boston profoundly affected the lives and art of Mary Curran, Ione Malloy, and James Carroll, Irish-American writers who evoke their community and dramatize its internal and external cultural struggles.

Other characters in Boston fiction *lost* their lives. Boston shows its true grit in the latest crime entertainments of George V. Higgins and Robert B. Parker. These muck-raking novelists reveal a manipulative and brutal world behind Boston's traditional red-brick exterior and beneath its fresh glitz. "What kind of a world is it when whoring is the best choice open to you?" asks Parker's hero, Spenser, who is searching for a missing teenage prostitute in *Taming a Sea-Horse*. "Since when do you and I talk about the world?" replies Susan Silverman, Spenser's friend and lover. "The world is what it is."<sup>69</sup> In fact, Spenser had described his view of the world nearly 100 pages earlier, while he and Susan were enjoying a picnic and a canoe ride on the Concord River. "A lovely world with danger just beneath."<sup>70</sup> Higgins would agree. In *Impostors*, his heroine, Connie Gates, a "writer for hire" investigating old crimes and cover-ups, comes to similar philosophical conclusions.<sup>71</sup> In both novels, life is presented as a series of deals, trade-offs, compromises, in which everyone tries to get his money's worth, a version of Hemingway's "good value."<sup>72</sup> Whoring, murder, and deception are the ways of the world their heroes cannot change, though they can rescue innocents from its worst destructions and find a haven for themselves in improvised family relationships. These novels show us the sordid underside of Boston life, the fallen world as it is, according to Higgins and Parker.

Even the weather is red in tooth and claw. "It was full summer in Boston," Spenser reflects in one of Parker's terse and infrequent weather reports, "and the heat sat on the city like a possessive parent."<sup>73</sup> Bostonians, rebellious children, sweat. "On the morning of the second Wednesday in July," reflects the more loquacious narrator of *Impostors*, "the sun came up flat and hot and early over Boston Harbor, baking the still air and liberating all the smells of iridescent oils that lay upon the water."<sup>74</sup> Suddenly, their Boston becomes as exotic and dangerous as Bangkok. Higgins and Parker escort us safely through boundaries into atmospheric realms, less accessible regions of the city and remote castes of its citizenry we would rather not meet outside the pages of fiction. Their Boston is "a savage place," as Parker titled one of his novels.

Yet Higgins and Parker do not confine their fictional landscapes to the limits of Boston's Combat Zone, that narrow territory of sleaze currently being squeezed out by Chinatown, the Tufts Medical Center, and commercial development.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, their vision of corruption is less limited than Boston's summer heat and odorous, troubled waters. Spenser's quest carries him to Maine, Salem, and St. Thomas before he tracks down his man in Boston. Connie Gates's search also carries her out of Boston, to the fictional South Shore town of Waterford, to New Bedford, to Mattapoisett and Catau-

met. Crime, it seems, knows no bounds. Higgins and Parker are successful craftsmen who began their business in one of the basement rooms of what Henry James called “the house of fiction,” but now have constructed their own expensive dwellings upon the fictional landscape; the criminal network they portray ranges from bars and strip joints to some of the better restaurants in Boston and splendid vacation spots.<sup>76</sup>

However, distinctions should not be blurred. Higgins and Parker may work the same side of Boston’s dark streets, but their methods of operation are different. Higgins’s novel is dense, rich, various in its representations of offbeat characters and resonant places. It is talky, brooding, retrospective. Parker’s novel is thinner but better designed. His characters have sketchy pasts, his places impinge little upon our consciousness, but *Taming a Sea-Horse* melts and moves on his expert plotting and his street-smart yet allusively literary wit, which lifts Spenser above the lubricious company he keeps.

*Impostors* presents a world of interlocking relationships. Mark Baldwin, “virtuoso manipulator of people and circumstances,”<sup>77</sup> CEO of North American Group, which owns various media outlets, and Bill Taves, Bristol County D.A., both worry when Joe Logan, popular television anchorman, guns down the man who was given a minimal prison sentence after being convicted of drunken driving in the deaths of Logan’s wife and son. They worry because Logan wants to testify against “the system” of legally sanctioned injustices, perhaps even reveal the statutory rape charge against Baldwin which Taves helped squelch. Baldwin hires Connie Gates to find out what Logan knows and is likely to reveal. Connie is a Wheaton College B.A., now thirty-five, divorced, mother of two children (who live with their father), and a former reporter—a woman who is trying to make it on her own without being unmade by a grasping world. She becomes an unwitting impostor in the Logan case, an unaware participant in a cover-up. Eventually, she discovers that Baldwin bought off his victim’s family and intimidated them into dropping their charges, but she also finds out that even more has been covered up in Waterford: illegal collusion on land deals has made certain people rich; another unsolved murder turns out to have been the result of a homosexual lovers’ spat between a prominent newspaperman and a drifter. Yet when Connie Gates gets to the bottom of things—through tireless investigation and selective sexual encounters with men from whom she wants information—she decides to do nothing about it.

“My motto is if at first you don’t succeed, the hell with it.”<sup>78</sup> These words could have been spoken by Connie Gates but in fact are said by Spenser when he cannot find the missing prostitutes he is hunting in New York. Spenser returns to Boston, not, as his jape implies, to give up the hunt, but rather to redouble his quest to rescue a maiden, of sorts, in distress. He backtracks the life of Ginger, a murdered prostitute, hoping to find April Kyle, the same young hooker he had previously rescued in *Ceremony*, hoping that Ginger’s story will somehow connect with April’s disappearance so he can again perform a rescue. Since the mystery genre is a closed system of referents—what goes up comes down, what is lost is found—Ginger’s story eventually crosses with April’s story and Spenser discovers that Warren Whitfield, president of DePaul Federal Bank—eighteenth largest in the nation, offices on the forty-fifth story of the DePaul Building, facing Franklin Street and Post Office Square in Boston’s financial district—launders money for the mob and, in return, is supplied with prostitutes for his kinky pleasures. (The crime entertainments of Higgins and Parker create the illusion of plausible place and circumstances—identifiable sites serve as background for implausible adventure. Here Parker draws upon the recent Bank of Boston scandal surrounding large unreported cash deposits by mobsters.) Though Whitfield is indirectly responsible

for Ginger's death, Spenser does little more than terrify the banker. Indeed, he cuts a deal: if April is returned, he will not blow the whistle on the Whitfield/mob money-laundering-and-prostitution ring. That is, Spenser is no social reformer; he is a narrow constructionist of rescue missions. When April is safe in his protective arms, he lets Boston's larger corruptions stand. Where, in fact, would Spenser, or the readers of this genre, be without them?

Higgins's heroine, Connie Gates, is on no rescue mission. In *Impostors*, Higgins drops the knight errant figure: lawyer Jerry Kennedy, who takes care of his own in several other novels; or Pete Riordan, federal agent, who, in *The Patriot Game* (1982), tracks down IRA gunrunners. Connie shares the boldness of Kennedy and Riordan, but not their moral outrage. She is set up by Baldwin to do his investigating, but she uses others, by sleeping around, to get information. In a world of deals, she gives herself a good hand. Finally, she too tracks down her man and persuades Joe Logan to tell all. By then, she knows the pattern of interlocking crimes and cover-ups that support the system, but she does not care. Connie gets Joe to admit that he would not kill the freed drunken driver if he had it to do over again, gets him to accept a deal from D.A. Taves—a temporary insanity plea, which everyone knows is a useful fiction—and, finally, gets him in bed with her. She says, "You may look at me and think: 'A one-night stand.' But I have got to tell you, Joe, I've got more than that in mind."<sup>79</sup> In other words, she has rescued herself from a corrupt world by finding her own true love—Joe Logan, an admitted murderer who will now accept the same kind of legal deal that emblemizes the corrupt system he had originally wanted to expose! Connie discovers a world of impostors and decides to play her part in it. The system, such as it is, stands.

Higgins's heroine and Parker's hero stand apart, making their separate peace with Boston's savage place. Connie, enriched by Baldwin's payment of \$20,000 for work they both decide need not be written up, will presumably live happily ever after on Cape Cod with a confessed murderer, who will be judged temporarily insane by the courts. Spenser draws a young prostitute back into his ad hoc family circle, which includes his lover, Susan Silverman, who is a psychological counselor, and Hawk, a black alter ego who is even less reluctant than the sometimes bloodthirsty Spenser to commit crimes. (In *A Catskill Eagle* [1985], Spenser and Hawk kill and maim in four states to rescue Susan and avenge various wrongs.) If readers who took these crime entertainments seriously were not disturbed by the presentation of Boston as a center of sleaze and hypocrisy, they might well be worried about the heroes and heroines who sally forth to face such corruptions. Higgins's Connie and Parker's Spenser accept the fallen world of Boston as it is. They resemble Hemingway's Jake Barnes, who held, "I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about."<sup>80</sup>

The readers of novels by Parker and Higgins know what their worlds of complex crimes and simple moral contrasts are all about from previous fictional forays into Boston's actual and metaphoric combat zones. Presumably they wish to see this vision reconfirmed, but, even more, they find satisfaction in watching the novelists' compromised heroes and heroines learn how to live in such a world by cutting their own deals and cutting themselves off from Boston's evil.

During 1986, several women wrote distinguished novels, set in or near Boston, that confronted inner and outer evils of greater subtlety and magnitude. These works

demonstrate, at once, the persistent vitality of the fictional form—its marvelous adaptability to differing styles, voices, states of consciousness, and political intents—and the richness of the regional culture from which these works emerge.

Susan Minot's *Monkeys* is a brief, elegantly turned, and moving novel about a boisterous family of seven children who manage to stay together despite the sudden death of their mother and the alcoholic detachment of their father.<sup>81</sup> The novel is set mainly in rich-man's land, north of Boston—Marshport, Massachusetts, and Eden, Maine—where the Vincents come of age. Minot, who also grew up in this world, evokes a felicitous setting in a time of family tensions, the late 1960s and the 1970s, and treats issues we have already seen in Mary Curran's novel of poor family life in the 1930s: the lace-curtain Irish/Yankee attraction and tension. Rose Marie O'Dare, who is from Boston, marries Augustus Paine (Gus) Vincent, descendant of Brahmins. This "mixed marriage," as A. R. Gurney, Jr., called it in his approving *New York Times* review, results in seven wonderful children yet fails because the culture gap between the parents is so vast.<sup>82</sup> Rose Marie has married upward to attain cultural polish; Gus has married downward to attain vitality; but these elements combine only in their children. In Minot's crisp prose, Sophie, the second child and the narrator, observes these irreconcilable differences in her parents.

Mum's real name was Rose Marie—it was Irish—but she'd changed it, thanks to Dad. He called her Rosie after the schoolteacher in *The African Queen* who dumps out all of Humphrey Bogart's gin in order to get them down river. Mum never drank at all.<sup>83</sup>

In her novel of scrambled relations, *Ivory Bright*, Elaine Ford lays claims to the dowdy, downscale territory of Somerville.<sup>84</sup> At the beginning of the novel, Ivory Bright, an odd, withdrawn woman in her early thirties, lives on the well-named Granite Avenue, in a poorly rehabilitated porch that overlooks a vandalized park and a vacant lot. The porch is in an apartment rented by her brother, his wife, and their children. Ivory's role is to serve others, but she tries for a life of her own by opening a ratty toy shop and seeking love. By the end of the novel, having married a bank loan officer, she lives in a large house on the slightly more upscale Westwood Road, but her role is similar, for her husband has had a stroke and needs her constant attendance. A customer in a breakfast and doughnut shop sums up the vision of life's limits embodied in Ford's novel:

"I'll tell you what life is," Lightning Bolt says, shaking a catsup bottle over his home fries. "Life is Union Square in the middle of rush hour."<sup>85</sup>

Life in Sue Miller's *The Good Mother*, set largely in North Cambridge, only blocks away from Ford's tatty Somerville, is less rigid, more various and dangerous.<sup>86</sup> This novel, which focuses upon a divorced woman who tries to be a good mother at the same time that she seeks a professional and love life, touched a nerve in Boston. Widely read and highly praised, it stirred debate over choices made by its heroine, Anna Dunlap, who gets involved in a custody fight to keep her four-year-old daughter, Molly, after Anna's lover, Leo, is accused of child molestation by Molly's father, Anna's former husband.

Sue Miller evokes a sense of place, principally Cambridge and Boston, which, like its heroine, is capable of sudden transformations and looming threats.

When I drove back over the B.U. bridge to Cambridge, the sun was setting over the river in garish hues that would have put Maxfield Parish to shame. A lone power boat made its way up the river, its wake cutting the glassy pink into a furious roil that stretched into even ripples wide behind it. I descended into the shadowy residential streets below Central Square.<sup>87</sup>

Miller's heroine descends to a furious roil of loss and despair before she rises to purpose. At the end of the novel, Anna, having lost custody of Molly, chooses to reject personal development in favor of proximity and limited access to her daughter. It is a novel that, finally, celebrates maternal love above all else, a parable of consciousness-raising for a heroine who accepts limits.

The heroine of Alexandra Marshall's *The Brass Bed*, Nina, another single parent with a daughter, also has a sensitive feminist consciousness—the novel's climax occurs at a nuclear freeze rally on Boston Common, where the most persuasive speakers are women—but has not discovered that she need accept limits.<sup>88</sup> At the conclusion of this professionally polished novel, which illustrates a detailed knowledge of the Greater Boston region, its citizens, and institutions, Nina has managed to find a decent man, Duncan, a reporter for the *Boston Globe*, and make a *place* for herself in Boston. When a picture of Nina and her baby at the antinuke rally appears in the *Globe*, Nina is happy.

Already, short though it was, she had a history here in Boston. It was fixed in print — no matter that the ink came off on her hands — that though she and Duncan had the disadvantage of a late start they had the advantage also of a late start. And in this picture the only politicians shaking hands above her head were other women, holding hands.<sup>89</sup>

Holding hands for women is, like so much more, strictly forbidden in Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, a nightmarish but beautifully wrought novel of the future set in a transformed Cambridge.<sup>90</sup> Margaret Atwood and John Updike have written, in my judgment, the two most inventive, most revealing works of fiction in 1986, both set near at hand for Greater Bostonians. Both *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Roger's Version* evoke a vivid sense of local *place*, yet each sees, as did William Blake, a world of implication in a grain of sand. Boston and Cambridge are summoned into prose with the exactitude of magic realism in both works: by Atwood to contextualize a political vision, by Updike to embed a religious vision.

*The Handmaid's Tale* describes a dystopia, in the manner of 1984, which articulates the frightening possibilities Atwood contemplates in contemporary America. If, after several disasters—pollution from nuclear fallout, the president assassinated and the Congress eliminated, a mutant strain of syphilis—the Moral Majority, religious fundamentalists in league with political reactionaries, took power, this might be the way the world would look. The U.S.A. has become Gilead, a monotheocracy. Fertility has declined, so the state has forced certain young women to become Handmaids, child-bearers. (Other women are Wives, who use the Handmaids as surrogate mothers; Aunts, who train the Handmaids; Marthas, servants; Econowives; and Unwomen, who are sent to the Colonies to clear up nuclear waste until they die.)

The Handmaids are dressed in red robes, their faces surrounded by white wings; they are trained to walk with grace and silence, and they are described with Atwood's characteristic delicacy of observation and dramatic intensity.

We must look good from a distance: picturesque, like Dutch milkmaids on a wall-

paper frieze, like a shelf full of period-costume ceramic salt and pepper shakers, like a flotilla of swans or anything that repeats itself with at least minimum grace and without variation. Soothing to the eye, the eyes, the Eyes, for that's who this show is for. We're off to the Prayvaganza to demonstrate how obedient and pious we are.<sup>91</sup>

The novel is narrated by a Handmaid whose assigned name is Offred ("My name is Offred now, and here is where I live").<sup>92</sup> She reminds us of Anne Frank and Orwell's Winston Smith, others who kept eloquent journals of their imprisonment and their hopes for escape while living under dictatorships.

Offred lives in Gilead, whose center appears to be in what had been Cambridge, Massachusetts. As she does her errands, she recalls the Bogart film festival in a theater (the Brattle), the boathouses along the river (the Charles); she walks past the ancient burial grounds in the center of town and the college yard (Harvard Yard), which is now the domain of the ruling Eyes. Inside the Yard, Salvaging ceremonies take place before the library (Widener): a woman is publicly executed by hanging for a crime (Gender Treachery), and a man, accused of rape, is dismembered by women. The Yard is surrounded by a Wall, which is where the bodies of political criminals are hung after they have been murdered. The library is "like a temple" on whose entry walls are preserved the murals (by Sargent) of men at war, with women portrayed as Death or Victory. "They won't have destroyed that," says the justifiably bitter Offred.<sup>93</sup> Offred views this art, which was subsidized by Boston's Brahmin culture, as a weapon against the oppressed: once it was the immigrants who were supposed to be intimidated by such expressions; now it is women.

However, *The Handmaid's Tale* is more than feminist propaganda; it is a study of oppression in the regional tradition. The novel is dedicated to Mary Webster—an ancestor of Atwood who was accused of being a witch and who was hanged, but lived—and Perry Miller, Harvard's great Puritan scholar. Atwood sees as oppressive what Miller called "the New England Mind."<sup>94</sup> The Puritan settlers, among whom were her ancestors, "came to establish their own regime, where they could persecute people to their heart's content just the way they themselves had been persecuted."<sup>95</sup> The novel, then, is "a study of power, and how it operates and how it deforms or shapes the people who are living within that kind of regime."<sup>96</sup>

The novel also becomes something of a wry social comedy when Offred discovers that the more things change the more they stay the same. The Commander, who ritually tries to impregnate Offred in demeaning ceremonies during which she is held by Serena, his Wife, instigates a secret liaison with Offred. Late at night he has her sneak to his study to play Scrabble. Serena did not understand him! "That's what I was there for, then. The same old thing. It was too banal to be true."<sup>97</sup> However, the plot turns even more toward a dangerous farce when Serena forms a counter-conspiracy with Offred to have her impregnated by a servant, lest the Commander's seed not take hold in Offred's womb. Gilead, despite its oppressive regime, generates its own anti-theatrical subversion, as did Massachusetts's original Puritan theocracy.

In the end, Atwood's novel holds out hope, for Offred's journal, like those of Anne Frank and Winston Smith, does survive. There is even a hint that she has managed an escape to Canada—Atwood offers her own homeland as a sanctuary for the oppressed women of Gilead, just as it was for the young men who refused to fight during the Vietnam War.

*The Handmaid's Tale* is a marvel of invention, Atwood's "modest proposal," which

reminds us to be attentive to those who would take back the individual freedoms that women have won in the past generation. It reminds us of the human will to survive oppression, to seek release and sanctuary through language. Though she has slim hope that her words will ever be read, Offred, who has escaped and is in hiding when we last hear from her, writes the text of what we read to an audience she believes is *there*. “Because I’m telling you this story I will your existence. I tell, therefore you are.”<sup>98</sup>

The hero of John Updike’s *Roger’s Version*—Roger Lambert, a fifty-two-year-old professor at what appears to be the Harvard Divinity School—needs more than liberty and listeners to confirm his existence.<sup>99</sup> He requires confirmation of God’s power and presence, though he wants that confirmation, paradoxically, to be registered through His silence. At the center of the novel’s dramatic action, Roger risks his public reputation by lying to hospital officials to protect his young niece, Verna Ekēlof, who has beaten her own daughter. Then Roger commits infidelity with Verna: “they were partners in incest, adultery, and child abuse.”<sup>100</sup> Curiously, it is at this moment that Roger feels his faith in God is renewed.

I saw how much majesty resides in our continuing to love and honor God even as  
He inflicts blows upon us—as much as resides in the silence He maintains so that  
we may enjoy and explore our human freedom.<sup>101</sup>

Roger, sedentary and smug, is shaken out of his complacency by a series of challenges, drawn into risky involvements with others, whose grasp he finally exceeds; then transcends this world. Roger Lambert has two literary models that foreshadow his renunciation. Roger Chillingworth, the crabbed cuckold of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, enjoys brooding upon the betrayal by his wife, Hester; Roger Lambert thinks his young wife, Esther, is having sex with Dale Kohler, a computer programmer. Lambert Strether, the contemplative hero of *The Ambassadors*, by Henry James, repudiates any earthly gain or human entanglement, as does Roger Lambert.

*Roger’s Version* is a novel of crossings: from point to point in the Boston-Cambridge landscape, from one world to the next. Roger traverses a symbolic landscape on a reluctant and tentative quest.

Our city, it should be explained, is two cities, or more—an urban mass or congeries divided by the river whose dirty waters disembody into the harbor that gave the colonial settlement its *raison d’être*.<sup>102</sup>

At the novel’s opening, Roger has lost interest in his city’s *raison d’être* and much else. He lives in apparent complacency and actual quiet desperation with Esther and their son, attends to his classes, smokes his pipe and reads Karl Barth, until his life is disrupted by Dale Kohler, who, before he attempts his alleged seduction of Esther, seeks Roger’s help in finding evidence of God’s existence through computer research. Dale argues for a subjective world of thought whose source is God; Roger defends his faith in the world’s indifference and God’s elusiveness.

Roger grows less detached when Verna also thrusts herself into his life. As she tempts him out of his self-protective shell, Roger imagines, on little evidence, that Dale and Esther have become lovers—whether out of a fanciful need for compensation or from an insight, Updike never makes clear. He tortures/titillates himself with scenes of their sexual encounters, which are described with a stylistic elan Updike reserves for such occasions. Suddenly Roger’s world is alive with divine and malign possibilities.

Roger leaves his haven, his fine home near the Divinity School, and crosses with

elan into dangerous sections of the city. "Poverty and flash jostled along the avenue, and I was tempted to sing, heading out of my accustomed neighborhood into one where possibilities were in squalor reborn."<sup>103</sup> Dale and Verna draw Roger into new territories of real and imagined prospects. They draw Roger out of himself, toward some elusive revelation, perhaps even a glimpse of God's face, heavenly and hellish possibilities. "Not either/or but both/and lies at the heart of the cosmos," thinks Roger, while Verna performs fellatio upon him.<sup>104</sup>

Yet Roger Lambert's flirtations with passion are brief and poignant, as were Roger Chillingworth's and Lambert Strether's before him. Ultimately, Updike's hero decides that this world is too much with him. This becomes clear in the novel's final pages, when Roger takes Verna to a Boston restaurant at the top of a hotel.<sup>105</sup> As the restaurant revolves 360 degrees each hour, Roger tells Verna that their affair is over and renounces, like Christ being tempted by Satan, all that world beyond and below him. Contemplation and conversation alternate. "Our old city from above is predominately red, and the view is shocking, a vast surgery or flaying."<sup>106</sup> Boston here is an allegorical plane on which its citizens are tested. Verna tells Roger that she suspects that Esther is having an affair. Roger turns away.

The view, westward, showed how the city had expanded, early in the century, when land was cheap. It had acquired its civic establishments: the public library and the fine-arts museum, both Italianate, courtyarded, and red-tile-roofed; the irregular deep-lipped green bowl that contained our major league ballpark, rimmed with seats that came in two flavors, cherry and blueberry; the long reflecting pool and marzipan dome of the Christian Science cathedral (Christian Science! as if there could be such a thing!). Many of the older mansions in their iron-fenced grounds had fallen lately to new construction—parking garages whose roofs bore playful patterns of arrows, and a combination hotel and vertical shopping mall whose irregular geometrical forms, seen from above, suggested Lego.<sup>107</sup>

Boston, that wondrous toy. But not a place made for Roger. By the time he bids Verna goodbye and the view shifts to the north, toward the Divinity School, lost in the haze, Roger is ready for renunciation.

This city spread so wide and multiform around and beneath us: it was more than the mind could encompass, it overbrimmed the eye; but was it all? Was it enough? It did not appear to be.<sup>108</sup>

Verna will return to Cleveland and Roger will recede into his former contemplative life.

For Updike, it seems, indeed for all of those reflective authors here discussed, Boston remains a vibrant state of mind, an occasion for sustained verbal reflection, a site of personal and cultural conflict, a city still in the making. Beneath its high-tech prosperity, its high-style glitz and its political clout, lie anxieties, articulated by these writers, over the separations between the people we once were and those we have become or those we *might* become.

We live in an age of diminishing regional identity. Joshua Meyrowitz, in *No Sense of Place*, his study of the impact of television upon American culture, has argued that "many Americans may no longer seem to 'know their place' because the traditionally interlocking components of 'place' have been split apart by electronic media."<sup>109</sup> Bostonians, too, experience this sense of dislocation, but their writers help reassure them about *who* they are, *where* they have been, and *what* they might become.

In 1986, Jane Holtz Kay, who had previously written *Lost Boston*, published the

revealingly titled *Preserving New England*, a plea, through pictures and texts, that our architectural heritage not be lost. In their own ways, so too have these writers on and about Boston portrayed our troubled but irreplaceable heritage.<sup>110</sup> 🐼

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## Notes

1. Mayor Raymond L. Flynn, cited in Ione Malloy, *Southie Won't Go: A Teacher's Diary of the Desegregation of South Boston High School* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 282.
2. Roger Angell, "The Sporting Scene: Not So, Boston," *New Yorker* (8 December 1986): 78, 87.
3. John Powers, "It Was in the Stars: The Year That Was in Sports," *Boston Globe Magazine*, 28 December 1986: 12–19.
4. William A. Henry III, "Un-Common Ground," *Boston* 78 (10 October 1986): 159.
5. *Ibid.*, 203.
6. Martin Green, *The Problem of Boston: Some Readings in Cultural History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1966), 24.
7. *Ibid.*, 43.
8. *Ibid.*, 45–46.
9. *Ibid.*, 103.
10. R. H. Ives Gammell, *The Boston Painters 1900–1930*, ed. Elizabeth Ives Hunter (Orleans, Mass.: Parnassus Imprints, 1986), 178.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Stanley Olson, *John Singer Sargent: His Portrait* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1986), 97.
13. Trevor J. Fairbrother, "Painting in Boston, 1870–1930," in *The Bostonians: Painters of an Elegant Age, 1870–1930*, ed. Trevor J. Fairbrother (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1986), 45.
14. Olson, 84.
15. Fairbrother, 46.
16. Olson, 154.
17. Carter Ratcliff, *John Singer Sargent* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1982), 209.
18. Fairbrother, 38.
19. *Ibid.*, 59.
20. Cited in Pamela Edwards Allara, "The Humanist Vision: Expressionist Art in Boston, 1945–1985," in *Expressionism in Boston: 1945–1985* (Lincoln, Mass.: DeCordova Museum, 1986), 25.
21. Allara, 25.
22. Cited in Allara, 12–13.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Green, 206–7.
25. Robert D. Richardson, Jr., *Henry Thoreau: A Life of the Mind* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986), 137.
26. *Ibid.*, 54.

27. Cited in Richardson, 78.
28. Ibid., 242.
29. Richardson, ix.
30. Cited in Richardson, 237.
31. Ibid., 96.
32. Ibid., 202.
33. Ibid., 213.
34. Richardson, 150.
35. Ibid., 153.
36. Cited in Richardson, 389.
37. Cited and discussed in Shaun O'Connell, "Boggy Ways: Notes on Irish-American Culture," *Massachusetts Review* 26, nos. 2 & 3 (Summer–Autumn 1985), 382–83.
38. See the enlightening discussion of these terms in Anne Halley's Afterward in *The Parish and the Hill*. It reads in part: "While shanty is ramshackle, open, a mixed variety of living beings in forced intimacy, inhabiting a space intended to serve minimal practical functions, lace-curtain is structured and confined. The curtain emphasizes boundaries, separations, small units set off from each other in a larger conformity. The only important boundaries for the shanties, even after they have been transformed into red brick tenements in Irish Parish, remains the line that separates them from the Yankee world beyond, and from other ethnic communities. The lace-curtains, on the other hand, define and refine boundaries between separate persons, separate families. They begin to divide the 'haves' from the 'have nots,' the respectable from the disreputable, the good housekeepers from the bad. They establish categories that can be relevant and have application in the world outside the Parish."
39. Halley, 226.
40. Mary Curran, *The Parish and the Hill* (New York: Feminist Press at the City University of New York, 1986), 18.
41. Curran, 27.
42. Ibid., 49.
43. Ibid., 76–77.
44. Joan Didion, "On Keeping a Notebook," in *Slouching Toward Bethlehem* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968), 139.
45. Malloy, 129.
46. Ibid., Preface.
47. See Peter Gammons, *Beyond the Sixth Game* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1985).
48. Malloy, 4.
49. Ibid., 16.
50. Ibid., 37.
51. Ibid., 82.
52. Ibid., 27.
53. Ibid., 28.
54. Ibid., 278.
55. Ibid., 4.

56. Cited in Malloy, 278.
57. Ibid., 278–79.
58. Malloy, 272.
59. Dan Wakefield, "The Passions of James Carroll," *Boston Business* (Winter 1986): 67.
60. James Carroll, review of *Common Ground*, *Boston Globe* (Books), 8 September 1985, B16.
61. Wakefield, 67.
62. Ibid., 100.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 64.
65. James Carroll, *Supply of Heroes* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1986), 223.
66. Ibid., 201.
67. James Carroll, "Beyond the Dream," *Boston Globe Magazine*, 17 March 1985, 44.
68. Wakefield, 100.
69. Robert B. Parker, *Taming a Sea-Horse* (New York: Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence, 1986), 220.
70. Ibid., 126.
71. George V. Higgins, *Impostors* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1986), 40.
72. Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954), 31.
73. Parker, 186.
74. Higgins, 149.
75. John King, "Combat Zone at the Crossroads," *Boston Globe*, 25 January 1987, A33.
76. Henry James, "Preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*," in *The Future of the Novel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), 50.
77. Higgins, dust-jacket copy.
78. Parker, 70.
79. Higgins, 345.
80. Hemingway, 148.
81. Susan Minot, *Monkeys* (New York: E. P. Dutton/Seymour Lawrence, 1986).
82. A. R. Gurney, Jr., "Men, Women and Children First," *New York Times Book Review*, 27 April 1986, 27.
83. Minot, 98.
84. Elaine Ford, *Ivory Bright* (New York: Viking, 1986).
85. Ford, 212.
86. Sue Miller, *The Good Mother* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
87. Ibid., 160.
88. Alexandra Marshall, *The Brass Bed* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1986).
89. Ibid., 274–75.
90. Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1986).
91. Ibid., 222.

92. Ibid., 143.
  93. Ibid., 166.
  94. Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1953).
  95. Margaret Atwood in an interview with Mervyn Rothstein, "No Balm in Gilead for Margaret Atwood," *New York Times*, 17 February 1986, C11.
  96. Ibid.
  97. Atwood, 158.
  98. Ibid., 268.
  99. John Updike, *Roger's Version* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1986).
  100. Ibid., 280.
  101. Ibid., 281.
  102. Ibid., 50–51.
  103. Ibid., 130.
  104. Ibid., 279.
  105. Updike describes a hotel and restaurant based upon the Hyatt Regency, in Cambridge; he moves this, intact, to downtown Boston.
  106. Updike, 313.
  107. Ibid., 319–20.
  108. Ibid., 323.
  109. Joshua Meyrowitz, *No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 308.
  110. Jane Holtz Kay, with Pauline Chase-Harrell, *Preserving New England: Connecticut, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Vermont, New Hampshire, Maine* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1986).
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