

# Fall Books



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target ratios, manpower density, lethality mechanisms, etc. and whatever the specific technology at hand, he seldom fails to remind that it wreaks its particular havoc—like all DE weapons—at the speed of light.

Beason's inadvertent hilarity is a welcome tonic given the genuinely spooky subject matter. Airborne lasers are on the verge of changing missile warfare; active denial systems (another HPM technology) generate a "nonlethal but human-repelling force field" that seems tailor-made for eliminating pesky crowd control problems, from demonstrations to outright riots. But scariest is the sea change in the balance of power some DE weapons could effect. As the most technologically sophisticated country on the planet—both in terms of military defenses and domestic infrastructure—we're the most susceptible to a DE attack that would leave everything on the grid paralyzed. Given our current geopolitical popularity, it's hard not to feel a bit like a sitting duck. | **Brian Nemtusak**



## FAITH FOR BEGINNERS | Aaron

**Hamburger** | Random House | Aaron Hamburger's *Faith for Beginners*, about a Jewish family from suburban Detroit searching for their roots in Israel, grew on me like a polyp. It begins as a paint-by-numbers soul-searcher: here's the middle-aged, middle-class mother unhappy in her marriage to a terminally ill hermit; there's the spoiled, substance-abusing gay son, Jeremy, whom she's dragged to the holy land to help him "find himself." As a kid Jeremy had wanted to be a Jewish prophet, but as a young adult he's more into lefty politics. Disgusted by the racism and self-obsession of his fellow middle-class tourists, he hastily acquires a Palestinian lover and parades him around, hoping in particular to shock his mother. As she's not the bigot her son assumes she is—and is having a vacation fling with a rabbi—she couldn't care less; in fact she nearly gets killed trying to have a nice lunch with the boy who might one day be her son's husband. Then, just before Jeremy realizes he genuinely loves his pet cause, he manages to ruin the kid's life. Hamburger is a great crafter of character but isn't much of a language addict—in the early going redundancies such as "antique Roman coin" hurt my ears. But soon the words serve the plot just fine, as his depiction of Jeremy develops into a beautifully ironic portrait of a fundamentalist preaching against fundamentalism. | **Ann Sterzinger**



**FLEDGLING** | Octavia E. Butler | Seven Stories Press | Octavia Butler's first novel in six years hangs on a risky fictional conceit: a first-person narrator with amnesia.

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workshops. (*Kriti* is Sanskrit for "creation.") "Since there were so few South Asian writers in Chicago, we knew that we'd need to bring writers in from out of town," Mohanraj says. "And it's often easier to persuade writers to come if they'll have a chance to spend time with other writers."

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, author of *Arranged Marriage*, *The Mistress of Spices*, and *Queen of Dreams*, will discuss the state of literature from the South Asian diaspora on Saturday as part of the Chicago Humanities Festival; her speech doubles as *Kriti*'s keynote address. (*Kriti*'s three-day pass includes admission to the speech; the Saturday single-day pass does not.) DesiLit is hosting a dinner with Divakaruni and is a cosponsor of Salman Rushdie's and Vikram Seth's appearances at the Chicago Humanities Festival on Sunday. "If past CHF events are any indication, the audience tends to be almost entirely white," Mohanraj told fellow DesiLit members at a recent organizational meeting. "So we're hoping for some cross-pollination, to entice people to come over to us."

One of the main goals of *Kriti* is to attract beginning writers, as well as those who don't identify as writers at all, which is why the festival is holding writing workshops and how-to panels on fiction and nonfiction

## Kriti

**WHEN** Fri 11/11-Sun 11/13

**WHERE** Northwestern University School of Law, 357 E. Chicago

**PRICE** \$35 for a three-day pass; day passes are \$15 (Friday and Sunday) and \$25 (Saturday)

**INFO** 312-399-2896 or [desilit.org](http://desilit.org)

**MORE** See Chicago Humanities Festival schedule in Section 2 for info on appearances by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Salman Rushdie, and Vikram Seth

novel set in his native Ohio, that he calls an "Indo-American coming-of-age story in the 80s." He'll appear at a number of *Kriti* panels and read a nonfiction humor piece about an Indian woman cabdriver in Manhattan.

Mohanraj hopes DesiLit will eventually launch a small press dedicated to publishing personal essays. "Culturally speaking, there are all these people like my father, an immigrant who's a doctor who has great stories and would like to tell them," she says. "And I would like to hear them. It would be really valuable to the younger generation to have these people writing these memoirs, and having them accessible for us to read." **B**

## On the Records

Two rock writers wade neck-deep into a favorite album.

By Bob Mehr

“Every critic thinks about writing about their favorite album,” says J. Niimi. “And when I heard that someone was actually putting out a series of books like that, a lightbulb went off over my head.”

“Absolutely,” adds Franklin Bruno, a fellow first-time author. “It’d always been a bee in my bonnet to pitch something like that.”

Bruno and Niimi both have entries in Continuum Books’ 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  series, each volume of which is devoted to a short but obsessive treatment of a

### Franklin Bruno, J. Niimi

**WHEN** Sat 11/19, 7 PM

**WHERE** Quimby’s, 1854 W. North

**PRICE** Free

**INFO** 773-342-0910

much-loved album, from James Brown’s *Live at the Apollo* to Neutral Milk Hotel’s *In the Aeroplane Over the Sea*. They’ll appear together next Saturday at Quimby’s, where Bruno will read from his book on Elvis Costello’s *Armed Forces* and Niimi will read from his on R.E.M.’s *Murmur*. The two have known each other since 1994, when one of Niimi’s bands toured through Pomona and played with Bruno’s group Nothing Painted Blue.

Niimi, who started freelancing as a music writer around the same time he entered the master’s program in liberal arts at the University of Chicago in 2002, is a former recording engineer who played drums and guitar in Aden, Holiday, the John Huss Moderate Combo, and Ashtray Boy, a group fronted by Randall Lee of the Cannanes. He now writes for the *Reader* and *Spin*, among other outlets, and cohosts a weekly rock show on WHPK called *Radio Zero*. Bruno began writing professionally not long after starting the PhD program in philosophy at UCLA in 1994, and these days his work appears in places like the *Village Voice* and *Salon*. He got his doctorate in 2003 and this fall accepted a yearlong position as a visiting assistant professor at Northwestern. *Taste the Flavor*, likely the final album from Nothing Painted Blue, comes out later this month on Shrimper.

Both men landed book deals with Continuum in early 2004 by pitching the New York-based editor of the 33 $\frac{1}{3}$  series, David Barker, and almost immediately both realized how difficult it’d be to write about the subjects they’d chosen. “There were like 25 books written about R.E.M., including another book exclusively about *Murmur*,” says Niimi. “So I went and bought all the books and read them, and that gave me an idea of what not to do.”

Bruno likewise didn’t want his project to take the course that most of the dozen or so books about Costello already have, devolving into a tawdry soap opera about the singer’s personal life. “That wasn’t really the point for me,” says Bruno. “I’d had a—I won’t say love-hate relationship—but I’d

had a long-standing relationship with his music. And so I wanted to approach it from that perspective.

“Immediately the first thing that several people said to me was, ‘Well, *Armed Forces* is not his best record,’” Bruno continues. “But it is a record that sort of explains a lot—it’s rich in a certain way because of a lot of stuff that happened around the same time.”

One thing that happened was the now infamous hotel-bar incident in Columbus, Ohio. On tour behind the album in 1979, a drunken Costello traded insults with singer Bonnie Bramlett and members of Stephen Stills’s road crew and tried to provoke them by calling Ray Charles a “blind ignorant nigger.” The resulting furor nearly aborted his career. “I think there are some themes about power and politics that are in the record, and a certain way of approaching them by being blatant or offensive, or using ‘charged language’ as Costello puts it,” says Bruno. “That stuff jumped off of the record and into real life.”

Bruno’s book is organized into alphabetized encyclopedia-style entries (“Nick Lowe,” “fascism,” “Accidents Will Happen”), and his work benefits from a distanced, analytical style. He draws on the complete transcript of Greil Marcus’s landmark 1982 *Rolling Stone* interview with Costello—not just the parts that were printed—and dissects Costello’s own liner notes to the various reissues of *Armed Forces*. He also turns an almost microscopic eye on the nuts and bolts of the album’s music and lyrics: he describes the tune “Busy Bodies,” for instance, by noting that “the arpeggiated guitar/bass riff is derived from ‘Oh, Pretty Woman,’ altered but recognizable; the word choice recalls ‘Nowhere Man,’ though the vocal arrangement is closer to, say, ‘Paperback Writer.’”

Niimi’s book is far more introspective, focusing on his own evolving

relationship with R.E.M.’s 1983 debut album. “I don’t think there was a way I could’ve written the book without kinda writing myself into it,” says Niimi. “As my approach got more theoretical and abstract, it also got more personal.” He absorbed some of his earliest ideas about the nature of art and language while struggling to make sense of *Murmur* in his teens, he says, but didn’t realize it until he returned to the record with an academically trained mind.

While Bruno’s prose is as sharply detailed as Costello’s songs, Niimi’s style similarly evokes the notoriously cryptic and poetic lyrics Michael Stipe wrote for *Murmur*. “I deliberately didn’t want to dismantle the record or take too clinical an approach,” says Niimi. “Ultimately, it’s a record about mystery, and I



**Armed Forces**  
Franklin Bruno  
Continuum

**Murmur**  
J. Niimi  
Continuum



Franklin Bruno, J. Niimi

wanted to preserve some of that in the way I wrote." He makes a case for *Murmur* as a dissident artifact of southern Gothic culture, located in the "dark chasm . . . between nature and reason," and invokes Walker Percy's essay "Metaphor as Mistake," which Stipe once suggested was the key to understanding his lyrics—many of which were collaged together arbitrarily from fragments or made up on the spot. Niimi also gets as close as anyone ever has to nailing down just what Stipe is singing on the record, referring to live and early demo performances and to handwritten lyric sheets Stipe left behind in the studio—but he stops short of proposing a definitive meaning for lines

like "Keep me out of country in the word / Disappointers into us absurd."

Niimi interviewed Mitch Easter and Don Dixon, who produced the record, and they add an evocative layer of detail to his discussion. The sharp percussive sounds on "Moral Kiosk," for example, were made by slapping together two pieces of oak flooring left over from the construction of the studio; what sounds like a thunderous explosion on "We Walk" is a slowed-down, reverbed recording of band members playing pool, picked up during overdubs by an errant microphone in the next room. "Since I worked as a studio engineer for a long time, I brought that to bear," Niimi says. "Because on one

level that's how I listen to all music."

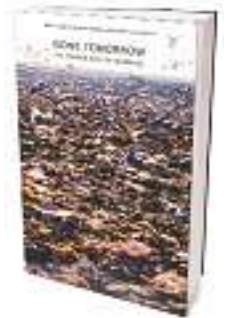
Though reviews for both books have been largely positive, both Niimi and Bruno are still hoping to hear directly from their subjects. "It's weird to have written about a band that's as tied into rock critics and criticism as R.E.M.," says Niimi. "Particularly Peter Buck—who, if he weren't playing music, I think would be a music critic himself, and a good one."

"We chose really tough guys to write about—they're very much critically oriented rock stars," says Bruno, laughing. "Funny that a couple of musicians-slash-rock critics like us would be interested in those kinds of guys, huh?"

Shori awakens at the start of the book in a cave in the woods, naked and badly beaten; she appears to be about ten years old. Then, in the first three chapters, we're asked to accept cannibalism, extrasensory powers, and her initiation of a sexual relationship with an adult; the critical disclosure that she is a vampire is the least of the hurdles Butler throws in our path.

The device of amnesia, however, allows the whole novel to be one graceful, gradually unfurling examination of a vampire society, its family structure, life cycles, scientific experiments, and internal politics. Butler, whose last novel, *Parable of the Talents*, won a Nebula Award in 1999, has a knack for suspense and psychological realism, and as she draws the reader into Shori's attempts to find out who attacked her and killed her family, she fosters a real emotional investment in her story.

Ultimately the key to the mystery turns out to be melanin. Unlike most other vampires, Shori is black; she also has a bit of human DNA, and both real-world racism and some vampires' contempt for humans come into play in the prejudice against her. The plot is so tautly wound and full of revelations and reversals before the novel's conclusion—which seems almost too neat for what has come before. | **Monica Kendrick**



**GONE TOMORROW: THE HIDDEN LIFE OF GARBAGE** | Heather Rogers |

New Press | Heather Rogers's analysis of the intricacies of garbage management, which takes off from her 2002 documentary of the same name, offers a pungent reminder that in a consumer society no hands are ever clean. We may deposit our daily newspaper in the blue box, but what of the 300 million computers junked since

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