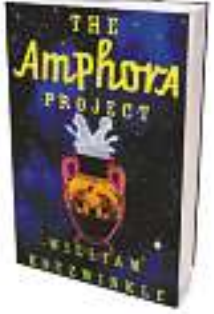


Fall Books



Brief Reviews



THE AMPHORA PROJECT | William Kotzwinkle | Grove Press | In a 1988 essay literary agent Russell Galen had some advice for writers gunning for the big time: "Don't worry about 'breaking out of genre.'" Just "make it big, big, very big." Maybe someone should send a copy to William Kotzwinkle: the man knows how to write, but he's remained a subcult fixture since *Doctor Rat* and *Fata Morgana* were published in the 70s.

His newest tale, *The Amphora Project*, is not big, but it should be. A consortium of the 12 most powerful people on Planet Immortal is bent on cracking a puzzle left by the long-departed Ancient Aliens, one they believe will lead to immortality. Well, it doesn't. Soon it turns out that the puzzle is a trap set by some extradimensional predators, who've now oozed into this universe to eat our life force. Or something like that. It's a pretty massive germ of an idea, but Kotzwinkle lets it play out on the cramped stage of space opera through an assortment of stock characters like Upquark the robot and "space pirate" Jockey Oldcastle, out to save the world or make a buck trying.

There's nothing wrong with this enjoyable *Star Wars* lite. Kotzwinkle has a way with cranky aliens, neurotic cyborgs, and insecure power mongers. But how is it that navigator Lizardo (from the planet Serpentina, of course) has an Uncle Ophidian who shows up in the final chapters to save the day? What's his story? Ah, if only the book were big, big, really big. | **Patrick Daily**



BLUEBIRDS USED TO CROON IN THE CHOIR

THE CHOIR | Joe Meno | TriQuarterly | I count at least seven children (or pairs thereof) who've lost a parent to suicide, disease, accident, or simple abandonment in Joe Meno's new collection of 17 wacky yet tragic ministories. Most of these cartoonish Tiny Tims bear up cheerfully, managing to either have epiphanies or inspire them before Meno hustles his next victims onstage. In addition to the kids there's a colon cancer patient who mysteriously starts floating, a refugee worker whose magical singing drives a coworker to try to start a strike, and another guy with a butt problem who has, surprise, an epiphany while watching porn between trips to the loo.

Meno's prose is entertaining and occasionally pretty ("the lips, the soft petals of

A Heartwarming Work of Staggering Generosity

Chicagoans open a chapter of the free writing and tutoring program founded by Dave Eggers.

By Martha Bayne



Clockwise from top left: Volunteer tutor and student, Mara Fuller O'Brien, the Milwaukee Avenue storefront, Leah Guenther with a student

Last year, when she was in second grade, Kristie De Luna couldn't wait to do her homework. It was assigned for the whole week each Monday, and she'd come home and want to tear through it all. "I'd get tired," says her father, Gonzalo, "and have to persuade her to save some for later."

In third grade something changed. "It was boring" is all Kristie will say. Gonzalo and his wife, Janet, talked about getting their daughter a tutor, but most of the ones they found were too expensive, as much as \$400 a month. Then a month ago a copy of *Chicago Journal* appeared on the family's front steps, and on the cover was a story about something called 826CHI. Gonzalo says he got pulled into reading it because it mentioned a store that sold "secret-agent supplies." The next paragraph mentioned free tutoring.

"I heard him gasp," says Kristie, who'd handed him the paper.

826CHI is one of the newest outposts in a growing network of non-profit writing centers started in San Francisco by *McSweeney's* editor Dave Eggers and a bunch of like-minded peers. The first, 826 Valencia, named for its address, opened in 2002 in a Mission District space it shared with the *McSweeney's* office and a store that sold pirate supplies—eye patches, peg legs, lard. The center, which offers free after-school tutoring and

a slew of innovative programs for both kids and adults, now serves 15,000 students, has more than 900 volunteers, and has spawned sister centers in Los Angeles, Brooklyn, Seattle, and Ann Arbor.

Chicago's center, open to kids 6 to 18, has been in the works since 2003, when executive director Leah Guenther, then a grad student in English lit at Northwestern, and a handful of other writers, teachers, and students met at one of Eggers's appearances. They put together an advisory board of local big shots—including Roger Ebert, Aleksandar Hemon, and Audrey Niffenegger—and started looking for money.

Guenther and Mara Fuller O'Brien, a former Chicago Public Schools teacher who became the education director in May, spent the past few months on what Guenther calls a "horrid real estate odyssey," prowling the city for the right space. They finally found it a couple months ago on a stubbornly ungentrified stretch of Milwaukee between Paulina and Wood.

At an open house last month several prospective volunteers wondered aloud why they'd set up shop in Wicker Park and not Pilsen, Uptown, or Logan Square, where the kids might be more in need of help. "We looked in Pilsen, and Logan Square, and Humboldt Park," says Guenther, "but the other sites, they've found

that what works best is a place that has a mix of foot traffic, tutors living in the area, and schools in the area. Plus it needs to be close to public transportation. There were a lot of options that would have worked well,

Noisy Outlaws: A Lemony Snicket Event
WHEN Sat 11/12, 2 PM
WHERE 826CHI, 1331 N. Milwaukee
PRICE Free
INFO 773-772-8108 or 826chi.org

As Smart as They Are: The Author Project
WHEN Sat 11/19, 7:30 PM
WHERE Thorne Auditorium, Arthur Rubloff Building, 750 N. Lake Shore Dr.
PRICE \$9

but we thought this was the one that would work the best." O'Brien adds that within a mile and a half there are 15,000 students—3,300 at Clemente and Wells high schools alone—and over 85 percent of them have been classified by the CPS as coming from low-income families. O'Brien has spent much of the fall visiting the neighborhood schools, talking to teachers, and passing out information. She and Guenther also did the bulk of the rehab. In a few months the front room will house a spy-supply emporium called the Boring Store—selling disguises, eavesdropping devices, and, in Guenther's words, "things for your carrier pigeon." When the center opened its

doors on October 24 the heat still wasn't turned on, but the back room was full of bright Ikea chairs and tables and new iMacs. A big projection screen/dry-erase board hung on one lime green wall.

In the past two months 826CHI has received more than 200 volunteer applications—many from people in the neighborhood—and amassed a mailing list three times as large. “It’s just been overwhelming in the best possible way,” says Guenther. “The people we have are so diverse age-wise and skill-wise that it’s just really going to be a huge advantage for the students.” She’s quick to add that they’re looking for more help, especially if you speak Spanish, are available during the daytime, or are willing to help with less immediately gratifying tasks such as fund-raising.

Guenther says they plan to offer not just drop-in tutoring but workshops on everything from SAT preparation to zine making to “writing for your pet.” They’ll also bring classes from local schools to the center, where the kids can write a story with a cliff-hanger ending as a group, then finish it on their own and take it home bound into a little book. “In talking to parents, I’ve been trying to emphasize that what we’re offering is tutoring, but it’s not all meant to be remedial,” says O’Brien. “We’re also just looking for kids who want an outlet for their creativity—to write a story or write a book, to do something beyond what they’ve got the time and attention to do in a school.”

Eventually Guenther and O’Brien hope to publish an anthology of student writing, something the more established 826s have been doing for a while. In the meantime they’ll be part of a simultaneous event: this Saturday all six writing centers will celebrate the release of an anthology of young adult fiction, *Noisy Outlaws, Unfriendly Blobs, and Some Other Things...*, published by McSweeney’s Books. The Chicago event, hosted by board members Joe Meno and Anne Elizabeth Moore, will feature a magician and a contest to see who can write the best Lemony Snicket story:

Snicket author Daniel Handler will make an appearance via satellite.

On November 3 Kristie De Luna—who hadn’t missed a day at the center since it opened—vied with seventh-grader Lucas Gilbert for the attention of tutor James Flynn. A writer and filmmaker who last year graduated from college, then moved to Chicago, Flynn had read about 826 Valencia in *Best American Nonrequired Reading*, a series of anthologies edited by Eggers with help from 826 Valencia students.

On one side of the table Gilbert and Flynn, his water bottle emblazoned with Rat Patrol and Bike Winter stickers, huddled over Gilbert’s math homework. Across the table De Luna worried over a short story she was writing about her two shih tzus and their puppies. The heat was finally on, and around the room seven more kids and at least as many adults bent their heads together, reading Spanish, untangling geometry problems, and learning about vowels. In a corner a volunteer took a screwdriver to a troublesome iMac.

Guenther says her biggest worry now is money. She and O’Brien, the only people drawing a salary, have gotten several grants and donations—including a mysterious contribution of \$1,027 from the Web site Television Without Pity, which held an online auction where the center was named the beneficiary by an anonymous fan—but they still don’t have as much as they’d hoped. Next Saturday they’re hosting a fund-raising screening of the film *As Smart as They Are*, a documentary about a collaboration between *McSweeney’s* Brooklyn and the band One Ring Zero, whose 2004 album (also titled *As Smart as They Are*) featured lyrics by such New York writers as Jonathan Ames and Rick Moody.

“There’s only so much fund-raising you can do without anything to show people,” Guenther says. “We just kind of had to take a leap of faith. I don’t think it was completely comfortable for any of us, but I think it’ll be better in the long run, because there’s no more imagining what the program can be. We can show people what it is.” ■

Your Band Could Be Their Life

Brian Costello’s first novel is about what happens after that fateful show.

By Jessica Hopper

When discussing the publication of his debut novel, *The Enchanters vs. Sprawlburg Springs*, Brian Costello sounds relieved: “After ten years I’m just excited to have it out of my head and in the world.” The major cause of the decadelong delay? “I had to learn how to write,” he says with a laugh.

Costello, who grew up in Florida and moved to Chicago in 1997, says early drafts of *The Enchanters* were little more than “rants about Orlando.” The decade of revisions turned the material from typical fanzine fodder into a charged satire of the two milieus that shaped him—the punk scene and the culturally bereft exurbs of central Florida. While the story will ring familiar to anyone whose raison d’être has ever been a seven-inch collection, its real theme is inspiration and evolution: how we become who we are, and the terrible hairstyles we sport along the way. “It’s about the idea that through inspiration we can transform and invent new selves,” explains Costello. “In the Sex Pistols documentary *The Filth and the Fury* they talk about how at early shows they would be playing to these kids with long 70s hair. And then the next time they came through the same kids would be there, but they had short spiky hair and were punks. I

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The Enchanters vs. Sprawlburg Springs
Brian Costello
Featherproof

flesh that were mine”), but it’s often as inaccurate as it is distractingly precocious, as when, in a piece set at a Greek-myth-themed summer camp, he insists on referring to the Eleusinian mysteries as the “Elysian Mysteries” to no apparent satirical end. I soon quit giving a hoot about his parade of miseries, and I’m pretty sure that wasn’t his plan. If these stories succeeded in being spooky or deeply funny you could compare ‘em to Edward Gorey, but as it is the collection is a box of pain bonbons: fun, but so sugarc coated you feel like smirking death when they’re gone. | **Ann Sterzinger**



THE BRIEF AND FRIGHTENING REIGN OF PHIL | George Saunders | Riverhead | George Saunders may be the most overrated writer working today.

Though he’s been frequently fingered as heir to Kurt Vonnegut, Nathanael West, and Thomas Pynchon—and even blurbed by the last, among other luminaries—only the Vonnegut comparison holds water. His blandly refined fiction-workshop voice is like a dried-out Donald Barthelme, that complacent time waster; its ponderous absurdity suggests a pretentious Dr. Seuss.

Saunders’s new novella, *The Brief and Frightening Reign of Phil*, which sprang from a suggestion that he write a story whose characters were all abstract shapes, is about as compelling as it sounds. Its tale of a psychotic dictator’s rise to power and persecution of a minority certainly functions as an allegory for the depersonalization of conflict, the corruption of power, oppression and enslavement, etc. But beyond the obvious—these things are bad!—it’s got nothing to say and no relevance to any specific real-world scenario. And cutesy details about Phil’s inner life, plus a saccharine, slapped-on ex-machina ending, destroy any claim Saunders might’ve had to structural purity.

In the end, though, it’s Saunders’s cloying style that’s most dispiriting. His measured self-satisfaction wafts from every element, from his precious faux-representational descriptions of his impossible creatures and transparent world—the region of Far East Distant Outer Horner, for example, is “a lush verdant zone where cows’ heads grew out of the earth shouting sarcastic things at anyone who passed”—to his equally precious, faux-imaginative asides. | **Brian Nemtusak**



CITIZEN: JANE ADDAMS AND THE STRUGGLE FOR DEMOCRACY

| Louise W. Knight | University of Chicago Press | When Jane Addams founded Hull House in 1889, she aimed only to fortify her neighbors’ spirits, not to combat poverty. But she soon learned that her

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Brian Costello