

Against the Grain

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Booklover – Black and White

Donna Jacobs

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of Rome's decline. Not only did the conflicts themselves sap the strength of Rome, fear of usurpation led the later emperors to make the army and bureaucracy less effective in their efforts to forestall successful revolts. He notes that scholars who favor a story of transformation over decline tend to focus on cultural, social, and religious themes. **Goldsworthy**, like **Heather** before him, suggests that neglect of both narrative and military history has biased these arguments.

Kyle Harper has taken a very different approach to explaining the fall of the empire in his 2017 work *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*.¹⁴ He interweaves Rome's historical narrative from the Antonines to **Justinian** with another of climate change, natural disaster, and disease. A favorable climate fostered Rome's growth and prosperity, but a transitional period of climate instability (ca. 150-450) followed by a little ice age contributed to its decline, as did multiple outbreaks of infectious disease. It is a fascinating and frightening story, one that reflects the concerns and fears of the early twenty-first century as we face the prospect of cataclysmic climate change.

Every age, every historian, has their own version of the fate of Rome. **Gibbon** reflects the concerns of the Enlightenment. The apostles of transformation and accommodation reflect an age of multiculturalism, in which western civilization has been dethroned to become one culture among many and empire is out of fashion altogether. As one reviewer of **Ward-Perkins** and **Heather** aptly observed, their works reflect the outlook of a post-9/11 world. **Harper** addresses the fall of Rome through the lens of climate change, perhaps the preeminent threat of our time. In *La chute de l'Empire romain: une histoire sans fin*, **Bertrand Lançon** approaches the various interpretations and explanations of the decline and fall of Rome as a series of mirrors which reflect the ideologies and predispositions that each historian brings. And in closing, we may observe with him "à chacun, sa 'chute'."¹⁵ 🌿

Endnotes

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6. **Brown, Peter.** *The World of Late Antiquity*, 7.
7. **Goffart, Walter.** *Barbarians and Romans, A.D. 418-584: The Techniques of Accommodation*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980.*
8. **Goffart, Walter.** *Barbarians and Romans*, 35.
9. **Goffart, Walter.** *Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006.
10. **Ward-Perkins, Bryan.** *The Fall of Rome: And the End of Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.*
11. **Ward-Perkins, Bryan.** *The Fall of Rome*, 82.
12. **Heather, Peter.** *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.*
13. **Goldsworthy, Adrian.** *How Rome Fell: Death of a Superpower*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.*
14. **Harper, Kyle.** *The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, and the End of an Empire*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017.*
15. **Lançon, Bertrand.** *La chute de l'Empire romain*, 299. Translated: "to each his 'fall.'"

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.

Booklover — Black and White

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Have you ever witnessed a conversation where the participants are a family, a bunch of close long-term friends, a squad, a couple or confidants? There is usually a code spoken when referring to specifics in the conversation or aside references to situations or circumstances known only to the "group" or surface explanations where the "group" always understands the deeper realities. The back-story of the varying codes can be learned — if offered, but sometimes gets lost in translation. *A Sport of Nature* by **Nadine Gordimer** reads like such a conversation. "He was waiting to see if there was any need to explain what could not be said, whether the experience of this white girl with whom nothing had needed an explanation, so far, went so far as to 'follow him' as she would put it."

Gordimer begins the novel by offering the reader the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition for "*Lusus naturae* — Sport of nature: A plant, animal, etc., which exhibits abnormal variation or a departure from the parent stock or type...a spontaneous mutation; a new variety produced in this way." This variation, spontaneity and departure from parental stock is introduced in the first line of

the story: "Somewhere along the journey the girl shed one name and emerged under the other..... she threw Kim up to the rack with her school pajama and took on Hillela." Hillela continues to develop her unique phenotypic behavior brought on by this spontaneous act and directed by the racially charged environment in which she exists.

An exploration of **Gordimer's** biography identifies elements of her life experiences that are reflected in this novel: **Gordimer's** parents are Jewish immigrants to South Africa (Hillela comes from a Jewish background), **Gordimer's** mother is an activist influenced by the racial problems in South Africa (Hillela's aunt is an activist influenced by the racial problems in South Africa), **Gordimer's** home was raided by the local police confiscating family letters and diaries (there is a raid on one of Hillela's lovers' apartment where his works are confiscated), and **Gordimer** herself was involved in the anti-apartheid movement to the point that several of her books were banned by the apartheid regime (the course of Hillela's life, her many love affairs, her worldly experiences, her marriages and thus this story are all entwined in the anti-apartheid movement).

"It was dangerous to believe anything open, while holed up in refugee status where everything is ulterior. They stared past, willing her to go. Then someone walked in whom she did know. She began from that moment to have credibility of her own: he came back, the man who had appeared so black, so defined, so substantial from out of water running mercurial with light. He had come between them, a girl and man in the sea, paling them in the assertion of his blackness, bearing news whose weight of reality was the obsidian of his form. A slight acquaintance seems more that it was when two people meet again in an unexpected place. Although he had not acknowledged her when he rose from the sea, and she had only put in a word here and there in the conversations he had led at Ma Sophie's, he took her by the shoulders in greeting, shook her a little, comradely, and she was close enough to see the lines made by dealing with the white man, down from either side of his mouth, and the faint nicked scars near the ears made by blacks in some anterior



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Wryly Noted — Books About Books

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The Book: An Homage author **Burkhard Spinnen**; illustrated by **Line Hoven**. (ISBN: 978-1-56792-607-1, David R. Godine, Publisher, 2018. \$19.95 Hardcover, 140 pgs.)

This short book reads both like a diary and a checklist of every aspect of a bibliophile's career. Running a mere one hundred and forty pages it still manages to contain forty-two separate essays under five headings. If you are a book collector you will find a kindred spirit here who explores such topics as "The Beautiful Book," "The Signed Book" and "The Annotated Book," among many others. **Burkhard Spinnen** is a German author and book collector who can tell the history of the book from many different angles. He has been a collector for over forty years and an author for the last twenty years and so he has seen all of the upheaval in publishing, reading, and collecting. Through it all he has remained a lover of the printed word and a champion of all types of book arts. The black and white illustrations by **Line Hoven** perfectly capture this nostalgic, but impassioned calling.

Burkhard Spinnen's work might be considered a bit idiosyncratic, based on his fixation on printed books, but any of us who collect and love books will find his subjects to be quite familiar. For example, his meditation on "New Books" explores our delight



at opening a freshly printed book, however old the text may be. We all enjoy opening a well printed new book and finding that it stays open where we leave off. The smell of new books can be a pleasure as well, but many new books simply give off an industrial strength manufactured aroma, or rather, no smell at all.

Of course his next chapter deals with old books as a counterweight to new books. He first notes that old books have probably had numerous previous readers and that they contain reflections of those readers in signatures, dedications, and other handwriting. At this point a book is no longer a consumer item. Old books have survived because someone wanted to keep them. Old books seem to preserve a secret. And they smell better.

Next **Spinnen** considers the "Damaged Book" and the "Annotated Book." He notes how we still enjoy a text even if it is found in a damaged book. Coffee stains, red wine spillage, cigarette burns, even torn pages cannot hinder our enjoyment of a hard to find text.

In the case of a *Beat* writer's publication it might even add a certain connection with the era. Annotations are generally an

annoying if not completely distracting part of reading older books. Some annotations in pencil can be ignored, but the florid ink or highlighter generally ruin a text. There are exceptions, where a particularly astute reader has added useful notes where we can sometimes learn more about the text at hand. Some textual scholars are even exploring marginal annotations as another form of literary history and many academic libraries are having their holdings scoured by diligent scholars looking for valuable marginalia.

Another chapter where the author shares an experience we can all recall is his meditation on his "Favorite Book." By favorite he distinguishes between text and book, because one might enjoy a work based solely on its content, but a favorite book might require more of an emphasis on the container. The ideal book is when text and container come together in one memorable experience. **Spinnen** recounts how he treasures some books in spite of their poor bindings or awkward illustrations based solely on the fact that this one particular edition was the first that he encountered and thus became his "favorite." Such is the influence of early reading on all of us.

In a similar vein the author emphasizes the importance of choosing the "Right Book" over the "Wrong Book." **Spinnen** gauges that the upper limit both of a personal library and the number of books one can read in a lifetime is somewhere around five thousand volumes. If you read one book a week for sixty years you will only reach three thousand books read. **Thoreau** gave sage advice when he counseled us to read only the best books first, since we don't have time to read everything. Thus we come to the "Wrong Book," one that was received as a gift or picked quickly before a trip. **Spinnen** notes that these can actually be valuable additions to our reading regimen, as they take us out of our well-trodden path of chosen experiences. His best advice for ridding oneself of a truly wrong book: give it away.

Another dichotomy that the author explores is that between the "Expensive Book" and the "Cheap Book." With the rise of the Internet he notes how once expensive books have become commonly available and even cheap. However much this development aids the poor bibliophile, it concerns him that books are thus losing their special aura and that reading itself might become too homogenized.

For the author the "Discovered Book" is the ultimate delight. He spends days on end scouring bookshops and flea markets and is never so happy as when he discovers a book he had no idea existed. He compares that to the simply utilitarian search on the Internet for specific books. In the case of the discovered book he wonders: "Had I chosen these books? Or had they chosen me?"

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life. — How did you find out I'd just arrived? — The shaking of her head, over the sweet warm drinks from a cupboard, became a sign to them both; she must have known without knowing. He was a man who did not laugh loosely but had a slow-developing strong smile when confirming something he was sure of. He was not curious about her presence in the country; the norms of exile were constant displacement and emplacement on orders not to be questioned, or by circumstances over which the one in refuge had no control, either. That fact that she did not have a refuge also gave her some credibility for him — what black man would believe a white girl would leave the luxuries of home without reasons valid for refuge?"

And thus begins the love between Hillela and Whaila that is formalized by marriage, consummated vividly and punctuated with conception. What tone will this new expression from the spontaneous mutation take? It is a question that Hillela ponders: "Our colour. She cannot see the dolour that relaxes his face, closes his

eyes and leaves only his mouth drawn tight by lines on either side. Our colour. A category that doesn't exist: she would invent it. There are Hotnots and half-castes, two-coffee-one-milk, touch-of-the-tar-brush, pure white, black is beautiful — but a creature made of love, without a label; that's a freak." And thus the mutation moves into the population creating a new dynamic. 🌿

Sidebar

I checked two **Nadine Gordimer** novels from the library, tossed a coin and started reading *A Sport of Nature*. I don't often read more than one work from Nobelists, except in the case of **Garcia-Marquez**, one of my all time favorite authors, but I felt compelled to read the second choice. *No Time Like the Present* is a story about a "mixed" couple struggling for freedom against apartheid. It will be interesting to see how **Gordimer** once again uses mixed relations to continue her theme and from what perspective.