

FICTION
IN THIS WEEK'S BOOKLET

Shoot the Freak

BY ALEC MICHOD

THE STORIES
HE TELLS
OBA WILLIAM KING

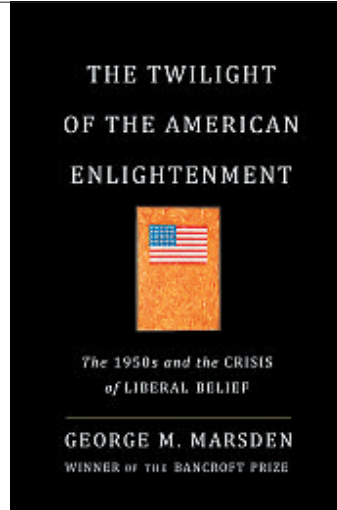
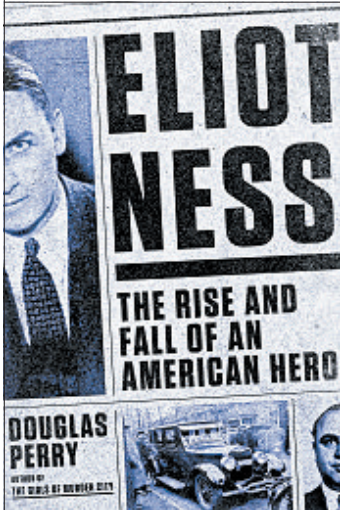
THE JOURNAL

PRINTERS

ROW

Chicago Tribune
FEBRUARY 16,
2014

B.J. NOVAK PROVES HE CAN DO 'ONE MORE THING'



GINA FRANGELLO'S FEROCIOUS NEW NOVEL

JENNIFER SENIOR PUTS PARENTHOOD IN CONTEXT

THE JOURNAL
PRINTERS ROW Chicago Tribune

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THIS WEEK'S CONTRIBUTORS



Bill Hogan/Tribune photo

HEIDI STEVENS

Heidi Stevens is a lifestyles reporter at the Chicago Tribune, where she writes the weekly Balancing Act column. She grew up in Chicago's northwest suburbs and lives in Logan Square with her husband, three children, two dogs and many, many books.

LAURA PEARSON

Laura Pearson is an editor and journalist specializing in arts and culture reporting. She has written for Time Out Chicago, Chicago Reader, Gapers Block and many other outlets; edited Chicago Artists Resource; and helped grow Drag City Books.



Martha Williams photo



Kate Oliva photo

THIS WEEK IN FICTION

ALEC MICHOD

Alec Michod was born in Chicago in 1975. He's a graduate of the University of Chicago and Columbia University and the author of "The White City," a novel. His writing has been published in the pages of the Chicago Tribune, The New York Times, The Village Voice, The Rumpus, The Los Angeles Review of Books and The Believer, and broadcast on TV, most recently on History. He's been a visiting writer at New York University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago as well as a fellow at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Italy.

JOIN US!



Printers Row: Kevin Young

Poet **Kevin Young** will discuss his forthcoming "Book of Hours" with Rick Kogan, Chicago Tribune senior writer/columnist and WGN radio host. 7 p.m., Tribune Tower, 435 N. Michigan Ave., \$15



Printers Row: Lorrie Moore

Lorrie Moore will discuss her new collection of short stories, "Bark," with Printers Row Journal Editor Jennifer Day. 7 p.m., \$15 until March 24, \$20 after.

Printers Row members receive priority seating at all discussions. To buy tickets or redeem your free admission (use code "FREETICKET" and your member number), visit

printersrowjournal.com.

More literary events around town



Bich Minh Nguyen and **Wendy McClure** will discuss Nguyen's new book, "Pioneer Girl," and author Laura Ingalls Wilder. 7 p.m., Anderson's Bookshop, 123 W. Jefferson Ave., Naperville, andersonsbookshop.com, 630-355-2665



Jennifer Weigel, Chicago Tribune columnist and author of "This Isn't the Life I Ordered," will interview **Margaret Overton**, author of "Good in a Crisis." Weigel and Overton will discuss their memoirs, which both deal with divorce.

6:30 p.m., City Lit Books, 2523 N. Kedzie Blvd., citylitbooks.com, 773-235-2523

Corrections

→ In the Feb. 2 edition of Printers Row Journal, the listing for the Jennifer Weigel/Margaret Overton event at City Lit Books had an incorrect date. The event will be held Feb. 20.

→ A portrait of Art Shay featured in the Feb. 2 issue was credited incorrectly. The photo was by Derek Nordstrom.

Printers Row Journal regrets the errors.

On the cover: Illustration by Ben Kirchner

Questions about delivery? Email printersrow@tribune.com.

Chicago Tribune
PRINTERS ROW JOURNAL

Shoot the Freak

Alec Michod

Fiction



\$2

Shoot the Freak

BY ALEC MICHOD

ARAN WAS OUT OF TOWN FOR WORK. Bulgaria. Romania. East Europe somewhere. A new president had been elected or shot, a Nazi in hiding had been found: There was no good reason for him to leave her, Caitlin felt. It was freelance and he was doing it for the money and the reckless sense of adventure, the insanity of being away from her. He would have preferred riots in the streets and explosions a block away, but what he really wanted more and more was to be with her and the baby that was growing inside her.

She wanted that too, but there was no denying that she still liked the unbearable torment of being apart. He was going to be gone two more days and every minute was excruciating.

The whole thing with her mother was excruciating, too. Since she and her father moved into the sublet in Sunset Heights, her mother called her to ask if she, Caitlin, her daughter, was available to hang out. Caitlin: “What did you have in mind, Mom?” Her fifty-four-year-old mom: “Maybe we could hit up some bars. Know any places with a great jukebox? I want to dance.” At first Caitlin was alarmed by this change in

behavior, but one night out with her mom was all she needed to know that there was nothing else she'd rather do — except, of course, have sex with Aran all night. Or not even have sex with him, because her horniness had become wildly inconsistent the bigger her baby was, but just be with him. They still made out like teenagers.

On these nights when she was summoned out, her mother wouldn't even drink and she barely ate anything, just granola bars or she'd nibble on a bag of muesli she kept stashed away in her purse at all times, as if she was preparing for a comet to hit earth and obliterate the open-all-night bodegas that littered the streets of Brooklyn. She wouldn't flirt with the guys who hit on her, either. She'd talk to them but most of the time all she wanted to do was dance. And guys hit on her like crazy, even without her hair — guys ten, fifteen, twenty years her junior, in particular, swarmed around Caitlin's mom at the bars they went to in Williamsburg and the East Village and on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. There were even a couple dudes who were around Caitlin's age, and one guy she thought maybe used to date a girl she'd worked with last year. Nareesh: that was his name, the regretful monogamist.

"Is everything all right with Dad?" Caitlin asked on more than on occasion, and on every occasion she got the same response: "Why are you even asking that?"

Caitlin thought she had all the evidence she needed to be able to inquire into what was going on with her mom and dad, but she knew that this had nothing to do with love and marriage and respect and commitment. It had to do with the fact that her mother wanted to feel the burn of life and adventure as often as she could, in case the cancer was too tough to beat. Of course this was not something Caitlin was worried about when they were out and her mother was shaking her ass. (How had she not noticed what a nice ass her mom had all these years? How did she not have her mother's ass? There was no

justice in the world, Caitlin decided.) And trying to get Caitlin to shake her own ass, which was the funniest thing about her mom's behavior of late. Not just in the bars in front of the jukebox, either. Walking down the street from the subway (her mom only wanted to take the subway, even at the end of the night when Caitlin offered to splurge for a taxi; usually by then her mother was too nauseous or tired to protest), her mom would grab Caitlin around the hips and swerve her around. Passersby — and there were always passersby, where her mom wanted to go — would ogle and laugh and try to join in, although more impressive than her unflinching and unapologetic grab-assing was her mother's ability to shut you down with an iron glare.

“Don't be so stiff, Caity. You're young and beautiful. Live! Don't be afraid to show off what you got before it's too late,” her mother told her one night in front of a group of drunk middle-aged men wearing Brazil soccer jerseys and smoking cigars. “Afraid you're too old for me, boys,” her mother told them, hilariously. They thought it was hilarious too.

That night Caitlin's mom spent the night on her daughter's couch. The next morning Caitlin decided to confront her. “Do you have cancer or not?”

Groggy and hungover, though from an excess of enthusiasm and not alcohol, her mother took a while peeling herself off the couch and gathering her things. “I'm your mother,” she told Caitlin, “not the other way around.”

“I know that, Mom. I'm not—”

“Then act like it.”

“How am I acting any differently?” Caitlin wanted to know.

“You're not respecting me.”

“I respect you!”

“Then respect the fact that I am telling you what I want to tell you, and keeping to myself what I want to be the only one to know. Even if it's selfish and annoying. Even if it makes you want to pull your goddamn

hair out.”

And so Caitlin stopped trying to understand her mom and the way she was acting and just went with it. When her mom called to tell her she was outside, Caitlin went to her front window and saw the convertible red sports car, she didn't bat an eyelid when her mom called up to her, “Get your ass down here. We're going to the beach.” She wasn't surprised, just happy that her mom wanted to spend such a nice late-summer day with her.

She was wearing Isotoner driving gloves despite the heat, which was considerable even with the top down and the wind whipping. In addition to the gloves, she had on a scandalous lace one-piece over what looked like a bikini, a tasseled belt, moccasins. She had a feather in her hair, which had suddenly sprouted into existence since the last time Caitlin saw her. Of course it was a wig, but it was all so very bohemian and chic and Bridget Bardot-ish Caitlin couldn't help but wonder who this stylish sexbomb sitting next to her was, because she definitely wasn't her mother.

“Where'd you get this car anyway, Mom?”

“Does it really matter?”

It did not matter at all. Her mother could have stolen it for all she cared. She was just grateful that it had come into her possession and that it was now taking them at a speed that made her stomach uneasy southbound on the BQE, penned in by trucks and customized SUVs that were twice their size, choking on exhaust and bombarded with catcalls from the leering drivers that slowed down to get a glimpse of these two attractive and vivacious women who were somehow more appealing than anyone else, even the station wagon crammed with pouty models on the way to a shoot. Caitlin felt sexy and as far as she was concerned they weren't in Brooklyn traffic but rather out on some virginal open road out west somewhere driving against the movement of the earth: It

was such a buzz, until it was over and they were in Coney Island.

Her mom parked on a side street by the beach. “I don’t think it’s safe here, Mom,” Caitlin couldn’t help saying.

“For us or for the car? Don’t be such a prude, baby,” her mom said. She had a point. Caitlin didn’t want to be “safe” anyway, not today. “C’mon, Caity – towels and goop are in back. Hurry! It’s almost prime tanning hour!”

“Is that, you know, OK for me to do?” She meant be in the sun with the baby, but of course her mother knew that and knew her daughter well enough to have planned on her being cautious. And she didn’t blame her. She just didn’t want Caitlin to ruin her own fun. “There’s an umbrella back there too, if you want to lug it out. Be my guest.”

It was late morning, but the beach was packed. Caitlin had never been to Coney Island, despite the fact that it was a forty-minute ride away on the F train. She liked it immediately. It was fun and weird and there was an amusement park with a flume and a haunted house. Turned out it was shuttered, thank God – she both wanted and didn’t at all want to see what kind of trouble her mother would get into inside a haunted house. There was also a roller coaster, which horrified her. Every time her mother opened her mouth to say something Caitlin was worried she’d mention the coaster. Caitlin hated roller coasters. She didn’t know if her mom was an aficionado, because she’d never mentioned them before and until recently had never shown a daredevil streak. The spot on the beach where they finally decided to set up camp wasn’t especially close to the coaster, but it was everywhere you looked and in its totally conspicuous way loomed over them, creaking and threatening even at a great distance.

Caitlin ended up bringing out the umbrella, worried about the sun

exposure. She thought she remembered reading something about avoiding suntanning while pregnant in one of the magazines and books she'd tried to commit to memory these past few weeks. Even in the shade, Caitlin was careful about keeping her body untouched and slathered herself with so much lotion she looked like a whipped-cream delicacy of some kind. If the sun went behind a cloud and her foot happened to breach the shade boundaries she had established in her mind and then the sun came back out, she immediately drew her foot back to her, afraid that even a couple seconds in the searing heat might somehow affect her baby. Somehow her mother refrained from commenting on her daughter's antics, until she could no longer contain herself.

"Do you think women back in prehistoric times hid out in caves while they were pregnant? You're acting insane, Caity. You know that, right?"

Caitlin was aware of this fact. "The average age of the prehistoric woman was probably like twenty-one years, Mom."

"Which could be attributed to a whole range of factors, none of which had anything to do with the sun, baby."

It was all in good fun, though, and her mother even told her at one point that she admired Caitlin's resilience. When they were in line at the fried-oyster stand, her mother was more direct. "Are you afraid?" she asked Caitlin, out of nowhere.

"Afraid I'll get skin cancer or something?" she asked her mom. Then she felt guilty she'd brought up the C-word. "Sorry," she said.

"Maybe 'afraid' isn't the right word," her mother said. She had removed her wig by now to tan her bald head, and the change seemed to make her mother even more outgoing, if that was possible. She asked the fat man in front of them if he was going to leave any oysters for them, while at the same time telling Caitlin, "But when I had you, there were nights I was so scared I couldn't sleep. Scared that something would

happen to you. Scared I wouldn't be a good mother. Scared about everything that could possibly scare you, you name it."

"Scared of what?"

"That somehow I'd screw it up, screw you up."

"Because you drank and did drugs and smoked when you were having me, when I was inside you? Is that why?"

"I smoked, OK, as you know, but I never drank! And I definitely didn't do any drugs when you were inside me! Does marijuana count as a drug?"

"Mom! You smoked marijuana when you had me?"

Her mom looked lost in thought for a moment. "I don't remember," she said, "but mathematically speaking it's totally plausible. It was the early eighties. Everyone was freaked out about 1984. Actually not *everyone*." And then her mom was beaming and Caitlin was, too.

"I think it's kind of stupid and defeatist," her mom said, "this whole thing about not doing things because you're worried something will happen to your baby. All those pregnancy Nazis, you know? I mean all that conservatism and fear, it can't be good for childbearing. Live your life, ladies. I know it's unpopular to say so, but kids are tremendously resilient and strong. You know what I mean?"

"I think so," Caitlin said. She wished she had something crazy she could tell her mom. Something she could confess she'd done. Like shooting up after she found out she was pregnant. Or sky diving.

The truth was, though, that Caitlin was terrified about doing things that would hurt her baby. Using the gas stove, scrubbing the toilet with any store-bought cleaning product, taking the subway: She was scared of almost everything almost all the time, except for when Aran was around. And you'd think talking about this kind

of thing would heighten her anxiety and while she and her mom were talking she'd be committing this all to memory so that she could freak out about it when she was alone and anxiety-exposed later, but that wasn't the case at all. She wanted to talk to her mom like this all day. Her mom, however, wanted to explore. A couple hundred feet down the boardwalk, they were standing in front of something called Shoot the Freak.

"Is that a *gun*?" her mom asked. She was wild with curiosity.

"You haven't seen this, Mom?" Caitlin hadn't either, but she'd heard of it and always wanted to try it.

It was unique and unexpected, to be sure: There's a man trapped in an obstacle course, which has been set up in a vacant lot located in a pit below the boardwalk, and he's running around hiding behind makeshift walls and blockades made of plywood and foam and an old rowboat turned on its end, wearing a combination of football and hockey padding and a motorcycle-racing helmet, the kind Aran probably wore when he motocrossed, since probably helmet technology hadn't changed much since then and anyway the helmet this guy had on looked to be at least thirty-five years old, if it was even a helmet. And you were given an air gun with paint bullets and you shot him, this so-called Freak. Sure, the concept was crass and probably dangerous and definitely almost medieval in its simplicity, but Caitlin's mom was dying to try it.

And she was a natural with the air gun, it turned out. Strong-armed holding it, eagle-eyed aiming it and quick-fingered reloading it. When the Freak, who also served as the attendant who collected the money and gave the quick tutorial on using the "weapon" (he called it a "weapon"), climbed down the rusty ladder into the pit and tightened the straps on his padding, and put on his helmet and then put on gloves, standing there swaying because he was drunk (you could smell the

booze from the boardwalk, basically) and/or on something far more lethal, he had no idea what was about to hit him. And hit him again. And again. And then again. By the time he lunged behind the vertical rowboat, Caitlin's mom had emptied the air gun. Every paint pellet had hit its target. She shot the Freak three more times, and each time Caitlin became more involved cheering her on.

“Shoot the Freak, Mom! Shoot him! Shoot him where it hurts!”

Caitlin and her mom had never had that much fun, and they might have stayed there all day if thunderclouds hadn't rolled in and the heavens opened up and cold, thick, heavy drops started to pelt them. While they were both content standing there in the downpour, battered by howling winds from every direction, the Freak ran off to seek shelter somewhere and Caitlin's mom remembered that the top to the convertible was down.

By the time they'd retrieved the umbrella and their towels from the beach and ran back to where the car was parked, both Caitlin and her mom were drenched. Neither one of them seemed to care and they kept laughing long after they figured out how to get the top up. Sitting in the muggy cocoon of the car while the storm surrounded them, it seemed like they were in a different world. For a fleeting instant, a bolt of sunlight dropped out of the otherwise pitch-black sky.

On the way home, Caitlin's father called her cell phone. “How's it going?” he asked.

“Great. Everything's great, Dad. What's up?”

“Not a whole lot, Caitlin. Just checking to see how everything's going. Hey, you haven't talked to your mom today, have you?”

“I have. She's right here. Do you want to talk to her?”

“Sure. How's she holding up?”

She was great, as she had been all day. She didn't want to talk on the phone just then, though. When the red car pulled up in front of the

apartment she shared with Aran, Caitlin's mom grabbed her arm and squeezed so hard she left a mark that was there for the next hour or longer.

"You have to promise me something, Caitlin."

"Yeah, Mom. Anything. What?"

"Promise me you won't do something stupid when I'm gone," her mother said, "like name your baby after me. OK?"

It was a strange request, Caitlin thought at the time. "Why would you say a thing like that? You're not going anywhere!"

"Just — promise," her mother said. She was not smiling at all. "I want to hear you say it."

"Yeah, OK. I promise," Caitlin said. She was suddenly shaking.

"And promise promise promise me you won't forget today, because I am not about to," her mother said. And finally smiled at her daughter. She was radiant.

"How could I ever forget watching you shoot the Freak, Mom?" Caitlin asked. But it was true: She would never forget today, because it was the last day her mother was alive. ■



Alec Michod was born in Chicago in 1975. He's a graduate of the University of Chicago and Columbia University and the author of "The White City," a novel. His writing has been published in the pages of the Chicago Tribune, as well as in The New York Times, The Village Voice, The Rumpus, The Los Angeles Review of Books, and The Believer, and broadcast on TV most recently on History. He's been a visiting writer at New York University and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and a fellow at the Civitella Ranieri Foundation in Italy.

"Shoot the Freak" is from a longer work. @alecmichod

