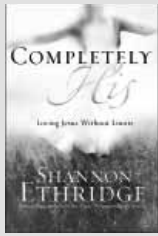


What's on the bookshelves today?



NEXT WEEK'S BOOK RELEASES

"The Maytrees" Annie Dillard (HarperCollins) \$24.95

» "Completely His" Shannon Ethridge (WaterBrook Press) \$15.99

"North River" Pete Hamill (Little, Brown & Company) \$25.99

"The Last Summer (of You and Me)" Ann Brashares (Penguin Group) \$24.95



POLITICS AND PROSE BEST SELLERS

FICTION

1. A Thousand Splendid Suns
2. On Chesil Beach
3. The Yiddish Policemen's Union
4. Divisadero
5. Stalin's Ghost
6. Consequences
7. Bangkok Haunts
8. Summer Reading
9. The Entitled
10. The Gravedigger's Daughter

NONFICTION

1. A Woman in Charge
- » 2. The Diana Chronicles
3. Tales from Q School
4. The Real All Americans
5. The Secret History of the American Empire
6. God Is Not Great
7. FDR
8. The Assault on Reason
9. Second Chance
10. Animal, Vegetable, Miracle

Faux biography pokes fun at Millard Fillmore

By Joanne Collings
Special to The Examiner

Reading "The Remarkable Life of Millard Fillmore: The Unbelievable Life of a Forgotten President" by George Pendle (Three Rivers Press, 2007) is the literary equivalent of looking into the funhouse mirror: The truth may be distorted, but it is in there.

Pendle has written an audacious faux biography of the president who would probably win the contest for most-made-fun-of president. Even his name encourages laughs. And that's his entire name: "such was [Fillmore's parents'] poverty that they could not afford to bestow upon their eldest son a middle name." They were, posits Pendle, "too honest to steal even a letter, as future president Harry S. Truman would do years later."

The biographer bases his book on materials found in "an old portmanteau bearing the presidential seal," by a contact "studying the Aka pygmies in their tribal homelands within the rainforest." Those documents bring to "life" the 13th president and describe his encounters with just about anyone who was anyone and any place of any importance during Fillmore's lifetime. The reader does not have to be well-grounded in 19th-century history and its players — although it is abundantly clear that Pendle is — in order to find this book funny. The fun is not only in the events and characters, but in trying to figure out what is true and what is made up.

This is not always easy. The political boss with the name of a moustache-twirling villain, Thurlow Weed, is a real person. President Taylor really did have a horse called Old Whitey who grazed on the White House lawn. Sadly, there is no record of his friendship with then Vice President Fillmore, who was not liked by Taylor and often kept out of Cabinet meetings. Henry Clay was attacked by a dog on the Capitol steps and died a short time later. My favorite running joke involves Edgar Allan Poe and his regular communications to Fillmore, each threatening a new way he is going to kill himself.

The volume is amply illustrated and the captions are often quite funny, as are the abundant footnotes. They are worth straining your eyesight to read. The notes at the end of the book separate fact from fiction and prove that truth often really is stranger than anything anybody could ever make up.

Q&A WITH LOCAL WRITERS

Portal Press authors talk inspiration

By Joanne Collings
Special to The Examiner

The Portal Press is a Washington independent publisher founded in 2006 by Darick Allan. Its first two titles were "The Shepherd Boy" by Allan and "Tanaki on the Shore" by Bill Smith. Forthcoming titles include "Cedar Tree Christmas" by Anne Marshall, a children's picture book, coming in November, and, in 2008, "The Mindful Vegetarian," a Buddhist cookbook by David Pollock and a collection of Cuban-American short stories by Marisella Veiga titled "Mortar and Pestle."

Darick Allan: I was born in Rio de Janeiro in 1958 into a large family. My father was an American diplomat and my mother a Danish artist. I grew up in Latin America and Africa, with a couple of years in the States in between stints abroad. I've worked in the Art Services industry for most of my adult life, first as an art handler, now as a manager and have lived in the Brookland neighborhood of D.C. for many years.

Q "The Shepherd Boy" is one of the saddest books I've read in a long time. What kind of reaction have you gotten from readers?

A Most ... has been very positive; one of my favorite responses compared it to a 19th century Russian novel. A number of people were stunned by the ending and weren't sure what to make of it. But the ending is what I intended — a chasm of misunderstanding between children of different cultures created by arrogance and innocence. A few people have wondered whether the rock-throwing incident in the first chapter is true. It isn't although I once yelled dirty names at an Indian kid for hobbling his sheep. It's a method of tying an animal's ankle to its thigh, and is very painful. I was ... ashamed of what I said years later when I realized he had no idea why a foreigner was insulting him.

Q What was your inspiration for the book?

A I was always curious about ... how you create your own life story by what you choose to remember. I had two unrelated memories of my life in Ecuador, both very powerful, that I always recalled in conjunction. I wasn't sure why: so I de-



Darick Allan

cid to write a story using one as the beginning of the tale and the other as the end. Most of what happens in between ... is made up, and a number of memories are distorted for dramatic effect, but the place — the mountaintop in Quito — and the feelings are very real.

Q How did you come to start an independent press?

A A couple of years ago, I decided to take my career in my own hands and help a number of other writers I'd had my eye on for a while. When I had first finished "The Shepherd Boy" I was able to get an agent immediately, and the book was almost taken by a number of large publishing houses. But in the end it wasn't and the agent stopped pushing the book. I had a lot more confidence in it. I knew starting a press was very risky, but I talked it over with Anne Truitt, an artist and a good friend who died recently. She knew a lot about the publishing business, and encouraged me strongly. Now I have a different set of problems than before — improving distribution of the books and marketing — but they are much better problems to have.

Q Tell me about the thriller you are currently working on.

A The idea for "The Prisoner of Zone 22" came to me out of nowhere. I kept imagining a police captain, raised as an orphan, playing chess with a prisoner one Friday night in a remote part of Guatemala City. A beautiful woman comes to the station demanding to be put away — otherwise she will commit a murder. That ... breaks open the



Bill Smith

captain's life and leads to a series of disasters. He has to confront the return of death squads to Guatemala, his connection to a few powerful figures, and mysteries around his mother and childhood that go back to the earthquake of 1976.

Bill Smith: I'm a lifelong resident of the Chesapeake region. Various ancestors have lived around the estuary for many generations. My maternal grandfather ... had a little cottage at Shady Side (on the Bay) where he and family spent many weekends. I grew up in the far suburbs, then semi-rural, of Prince George's County. ... I studied literature, cultural anthropology and history at Towson State University, and attended the University of Maryland School of Law. I'm an amateur musician and a student of yoga and the shamanic traditions of Native America. I've traveled and sojourned a lot both in the United States and abroad. I now reside in Bethesda.

Q How much do you have in common with your protagonist?

A I share some traits with David Tanaki, but in other ways we are wholly dissimilar. I am not a scientist nor have I ever been one or even an advanced student of science. My family, of Anglo-Saxon stock, has a long presence in America on both sides, whereas Tanaki is a fourth generation Japanese-American. When I was in my early 30s, Tanaki's age, I was married and fairly settled, not a wandering scholar like my protagonist. ...

I share with Tanaki a curious nature that might be called scientific. Biology was the one science sub-

ject I excelled in and enjoyed in high school and college. As I believe that most modern Americans are more or less scientific in their outlook, I see Tanaki, on one level, as an Everyman. I am deeply fond of the natural world, like Tanaki, and have always craved time spent outdoors hiking and the like. I enjoy observing animals in the wild. ... I have tendencies toward being a loner. I work hard on intellectual projects to which I become enthralled, sometimes at the expense of other areas of my life. Like Tanaki, I've had my ups and downs with the opposite sex, sharing with him, and probably all men, an innate deficiency at understanding what it is that might make these fascinating creatures happy — and what might make them want to make us happy.

Q The dramatic conclusion with the theme park is an incredibly memorable and visual moment. Where did it come from?

A I confess [it] has no basis in any real event that I'm aware of. It's just an idea that came to me. On a symbolic level you might say that in our addiction to bigger-than-life fun and stimulation we often forget to take care of simple but important things like the Earth. I have also tried to portray how we must overcome dissensions growing out of past injustices and misunderstandings in order to work together to solve humanity-threatening issues. ... This is perhaps why I included the historical figures — "forlorn ghosts returning to the scene of their long-quieted struggles."

Q Are you working on a new book?

A I am ... editing my next novel, "Ver Sacrum" (working title). Its protagonist is a Washington, D.C., therapist who works with combat veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. It takes place from the summer of 1990 through early 1991 as the country lurches toward and then fights the Gulf War. The coming of war forces my protagonist and those around her to deal with unhealed wounds from the country's previous major combat action — Vietnam — and with the nature of violence and our complacency toward it. I began the novel before the latest round of fighting in Iraq, from which we are now seeing a whole new crop of trauma-afflicted veterans.