

NDAQ

North Dakota Quarterly

Robert W. Lewis, *Editor*

James Robison, *Fiction Editor*

Jay Meek, *Poetry Editor*

Brian Paulsen, *Art Editor*

Melanie Crow, *Production Manager*

Melissa Mondry, *Production Assistant*

Suzanne Winkel, *Graduate Intern*

Advisory Editors

Michael A. Anderegg

Michael Beard

Sharon Carson

John C. Crawford

Elizabeth M. Hampsten

Birgit Hans

Susan Koprince

James McKenzie

James Mochoruk

Contributing Editors

Peter Nabokov, UCLA

Vito Perrone, Harvard University

Steven Weiland, University of Michigan

Fred Whitehead, University of Kansas

Peter Wild, University of Arizona

Jean Fagan Yellin, Pace University

MEMBER



Council of Editors
of Learned Journals

Copyright 2002 by the University of North Dakota

ISSN 0029-277X

North Dakota Quarterly is published four times a year by the College of Arts and Sciences of the University of North Dakota. Printing is by the University of North Dakota Printing Center. Subscription rates are \$25.00 per year for individuals, \$30 for institutions; overseas rates are \$30 individuals and \$35 institutions; \$8.00 per single copy (\$10 overseas), \$12 for special issues (\$15 overseas). All correspondence concerning editorial, business, change of address, subscription, and Form 3579 matters should be directed to the Editor, *North Dakota Quarterly*, The University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, North Dakota 58202-7209. (Our e-mail address is: <ndq@sage.und.nodak.edu>. Our website address is <<http://www.und.nodak.edu/org/ndq>>.) *North Dakota Quarterly* assumes no responsibility for statements of fact or opinion by its contributors. Manuscripts (with SASE) should follow the *MLA Handbook* style, 4th edition.

ON THE COVER

Timeless Affinity on the front cover is a 1997 oil painting by Zhimin Guan who teaches in the Art Department at Minnesota State University in Moorhead. His *Nature Alliance* on the back cover is a 1997 acrylic.

WALTER B. LEVIS

The Language of Men

While the rest of the family attended the funeral, I stayed behind with the baby and took a book from a shelf in my father-in-law's bedroom. Norman, known affectionately by his Yiddish nickname, Nocky, had died two days ago. Though his death after a long battle with cancer wasn't a surprise, I felt surprisingly numb, as if the news had come across the radio or television, another painful headline dimly acknowledged. I knew what I was struggling with: when he was alive, my father-in-law and I barely said hello; now that he was dead I didn't know how to say goodbye.

Over time I'd come to accept the strain between Nocky and me. The distance in our 17-year relationship had been bridged by nothing but the sheer force and will of the woman we both loved: his daughter, my wife. Again and again she brought us together, but she could never make us enjoy it. The discomfort was like a physical condition, a knotted muscle or achey stiffness or, at our harshest moments, a sore swollen throat choking off the easy breath of laughter and joy, constricting our intimacy to cordial hand-over-your-mouth pleasantries exchanged on holidays.

But now Nocky was gone, and I stood alone in his bedroom looking at his books in a way that I could never have looked at them before. Like sentries at the vigil, the big, thick hardcover books—the classics—stood upright on the top shelves of the built-in floor-to-ceiling bookcases, while on the lower shelves, stacked this way and that, sometimes just piled like hastily flipped pancakes, were the paperbacks, the best-sellers, and the dozens of mysteries discreetly consumed without discussion. My father-in-law loved books. He loved ideas. He loved words. In fact, it's safe to say that he loved writers. He just didn't love his daughter marrying one.

You Just Don't Understand. The title, sandwiched between crime novels on a lower shelf, caught my eye. The book was a best-seller written by sociolinguist Deborah Tannen, and it promised to "help many people put their problems of communication with the opposite sex in a manageable perspective." Under normal circumstances, that blurb alone would ensure that I'd never read a page. Self-help books usually leave me cold. But these

weren't normal circumstances. My father-in-law was dead. *You Just Don't Understand* is precisely how I thought about him when he was alive.

Though he loved literature and art, Nocky's major interest was commerce. After flirting in his youth with Communism, he completed all of the coursework at Yale for a doctorate in economics. Then, feeling pressure to earn what he called "serious money," he dumped the dissertation, turned from academia to business, and, as the story goes, never looked back. He climbed to senior executive positions at various corporations, achieving considerable wealth and corporate power, as well as a reputation for being nothing less than a brilliant strategic planner.

Perhaps it was strategic planning when a short while after meeting me he cautioned his daughter that "a serious writer hoping to earn serious money is like a high school basketball player dreaming of joining the NBA." This ominous analogy found its way into a bit of his own writing, which reached us in a letter he sent to Taiwan, where his daughter and I were spending a year peddling English lessons while studying Chinese and T'ai Chi and the ancient art of flower-arranging. Strategic planners we were not.

And so the lines were drawn: strategy versus spontaneity; maturity versus youth; the sharp pinch of financial reality in conflict with the barefoot-ranked dreams of literary achievement.

We tried to talk. I tried to convey to my father-in-law the inherent value of the writer's process; he offered his views on why publishing is just another big business. I tried to make comprehensible the idea of writing as "a way of life"; he countered with an explanation of why film and television make literature marginal. And once, sipping bourbon late at night while sitting on the leather couch in the den, I tried to explain to my father-in-law the mysterious connection one writer can feel with another. I told him a dream I'd had. Saul Bellow was in it, and so was Philip Roth, and so were several other towering figures of American literature all gathered at an enormous wooden table where a great feast had been spread to celebrate a holy day called "Of Existence."

Nocky listened to me describe this dream. He had a way of sitting that suggested a deep inner quietness, a sense of control. You could see it in the relaxed slope of his heavy shoulders, the stillness of one thick leg crossed over the other, the deliberate lingering of his hand passing through his full gray hair. At moments like these, he spoke in a low, controlled tone, composing sentences that were almost unnaturally perfect in their grammar, as if it weren't just thoughts in his head but complete ideas, written and edited.

That night I remember he took a particularly long time forming a response. We sipped our drinks. He stood up and took off his cardigan sweater. I crossed and recrossed my legs, trying to wriggle a kink from my back. Then I watched closely as he tossed his sweater on the rocking chair. He'd been quite athletic in his youth, a basketball player, and in this small gesture his natural coordination was revealed. The ease of his crouch as he

raised himself from a sitting position, the distinct wrist-flick as he released the sweater, then the fluid transfer of weight from one foot to the other as he leaned forward, picked up his whiskey and took a large, deliberate gulp. Although I never once saw him play basketball, it seems likely he was one of those players who—when the pressure was on—wanted to have the ball. And everyone else must have wanted him to have it, too.

“Well,” he said, settling back on the couch. “We live in a psychological age in which—commensurate with the rise and fall of Sigmund Freud—dream interpretation has gone both in and out of fashion. Personally, I’m on the side of science. Most dreams, I’m afraid, don’t mean anything.”

As he spoke, he looked at me directly, the gray-green center of his eyes gleaming with anticipation. The first stone had been thrown. He knew I took dreams seriously. Now I had to defend it.

But I had no interest in arguing. My father-in-law, I felt, was simply missing the point. So I said nothing. I just shifted my drink from one hand to the other, watching the small cubes of ice swirl, their clink against the cut glass like lonely porch chimes on a drafty night. Finally, my father-in-law broke through the hush and explained why he thought Bellow is superior to Roth.

The bitter frustration of that disappointing moment came back to me on the day of his funeral. Saying goodbye seemed pointless. But still I stood in his empty bedroom trying to wedge my black feelings into the darkness that had always stood between us and was now, forever, insurmountable. It’s true that silence is the souvenir of the living—the cold quiet of an empty bedroom, the hum of central heating, a car door somewhere in the distance slamming shut. Nocky’s room that day smelled too fresh, the lingering medicinal odors overwhelmed by traces of lemon and ammonia and the perfumed fragrance of a dry-cleaned comforter.

On an impulse, I took Deborah Tannen’s book from the shelf and opened to this passage:

Though all humans need both intimacy and independence, women tend to focus on the first and men on the second. It is as if their life-blood ran in different directions.

It was eerie the way these few lines inspired a vision—or revision—of talking with Nocky. His “masculine” need for independence; my “feminine” desire for intimacy. I tried to imagine him looking at these lines as I sat down on the edge of his bed and read further:

. . . my husband was simply engaging the world in a way that many men do: as an individual in a hierarchical social order in which he was either one-up or one-down. In this world, conversations are negotiations in which people try to achieve and maintain the upper hand if they can, and protect themselves from others’ attempts to put them down and push them around. Life, then, is a contest, a struggle to preserve independence and avoid failure.

I, on the other hand, was approaching the world as many women do: as an individual in a network of connections. In this world, conversations are negotiations for closeness in which people try to seek and give confirmation and support, and to reach consensus. They try to protect themselves from others' attempts to push them away. Life, then, is a community, a struggle to preserve intimacy and avoid isolation. Though there are hierarchies in this world too, they are hierarchies more of friendship than of power and accomplishment.

I put down the book and thought again about Nocky: his riff on success in the NBA, his reflex to rank the writers in my dream. He did, indeed, have an instinct to view life as a contest, and to approach even the smallest conversation as a negotiation for power and control. And sitting there in his empty bedroom, I wondered: Where is this masculine "life-blood" in me, especially now that Nocky is gone?

It occurred to me then that I counted on Nocky. I counted on him to touch my wounds in a way that kept me one step ahead of my pain.

For example, I could be angry at Nocky instead of feeling the hurt of having three over-achieving older brothers: one with a genius I.Q., another with a shelf full of television awards, and the third with a successful doctor's tendency to offer advice on everything. For me, the blessing of being the youngest contains its curse: my three warm, funny, friendly big brothers treated me like a prince, ensuring that I would never feel like a king.

And I could be angry at Nocky instead of feeling the confusing ache of having a father who climbed his way up from hawking suits on Maxwell Street to selling office buildings in the heart of Chicago's Loop—but still my dad doesn't quite wear the air of a wealthy man. My father feels most himself clipping drugstore coupons alone in the kitchen with a can of herring and a box of crackers. You can take the man out of poverty without taking the poverty out of the man. It's maddening, but it's so difficult to be mad at my father, who's such a generous, gentle, kind person.

Much easier to be angry at Nocky.

And it was much easier to be angry at Nocky than to admit my own "masculine" failures to seize the day's triumphs. A memorable flop: at 17, after years of practicing tennis with the devotion of a wanna-be-champ, I had a shot at a number-one ranking for boys 18 years and under in the state of Illinois. It was the end of the summer; I'd won two Chicago District Tennis Association tournaments in a row; I was seeded first at the prestigious Hinsdale Open. The prize was within my reach, but while driving to the tournament, I became mysteriously nauseous. I tried to ignore it and kept driving, whispering to myself, "I can do it, I can win this tournament, yes, I can do it."

But I couldn't do it. My stomach knotted and cramped until I pulled over to vomit on the shoulder of the highway. Then, convinced now that I

was really sick, I rushed to the nearest pay phone to withdraw from the competition.

“Do you realize that you’re the number-one seed?” asked the tournament director. “If you default, it throws off the whole draw sheet! How about if we delay the match? Maybe you’ll feel better by this afternoon.”

“No,” I said. “I’m sorry. I’m really very sorry. I’m quite sick.”

And I’ll never forget how I hung up the phone and got back in the car and by the time I drove home felt fine. But it was too late. The default had been entered. I finished that year ranked seventh.

Of course, this little tennis tale is nothing but a boyhood trifle, inconsequential to my adult life—except in one important way: I wish now that before Nocky had died I had told him about pulling over to vomit on the shoulder of the highway the summer I had a chance to be ranked number one. Nocky knew only that I played successfully on the tennis team at a Big 10 university, and that, when it comes to competition, I’ve won some small (quite small) awards for my fiction and plays. But I wish now that he had known how much I’ve struggled with being “ranked,” and, more important, I wish Nocky had known that of all the men in my life—including my own father and three older brothers—it was he alone who insisted on speaking to me in this “language of men,” reminding me that the world is, indeed, in part, a contest.

My fantasy about all of this is simple: if Nocky and I had discussed Deborah Tannen’s book, our relationship would have been transformed. I would have explained how the “sensitive man” of my generation easily casts himself in the “feminine” role, valuing connection over competition and intimacy over independence. Yes, if we had only talked about this book, we would have been closer. And that’s why it seemed so spooky to sit there in his empty bedroom. I was reading the conversation Nocky and I never had. But when several days later I was back home and had finished the book, I learned that I had made a stupid, almost comical mistake. I’d been standing on the wrong side of the bed. It was my mother-in-law who, at the suggestion of a therapist, had been reading *You Just Don’t Understand*. Nocky never cracked a page.

So much for my fantasy. Nocky wasn’t speaking to me from the grave through the pages of a paperback best-seller. But the ridiculous urge for that helps me realize now why it’s been so hard to say goodbye. I don’t understand death. It’s the mystery that dwarfs all other mysteries. The simple unknown. From the standpoint of this unbearable ignorance, I can see that saying goodbye to Nocky means finding a way to keep alive the complicated questions and difficult dynamics that made our relationship so painful, and so important. And who knows why, but these lasting entanglements of the soul seem to mock life’s ordinary boundaries of space and time. Yes, I needed Nocky—and I still need him.

