

6/26/08

BOOK WORLD*There Goes the Neighborhood***WRACK AND RUIN**

By Don Lee

Norton. 333 pp. \$23.95

By STEVE AMICK,

author of *"The Lake, the River & the Other Lake"*
and a second novel to be published next year

In his masterly "Wrack and Ruin," Don Lee gives us the lighter side of Rosarita Bay, the fictional California town that was the setting for his equally fine short-story collection, "Yellow." When his protagonist, Lyndon Song, first moved there, Lee writes, "it had been a sleepy little backwater with a population of ten thousand . . . a wonderfully sad, forlorn, gone-to-seed town with gone-to-seed inhabitants, a good majority of whom, for one reason or another preferred to be forgotten." It was, in other words, pure Eden for the secretive Lyndon, who "on principle, did not like other people" and wanted to quietly reinvent himself as an underachiever, a glamourless organic Brussels sprout farmer, welder of gates and recreational pot smoker.

Unfortunately, in the years since he bought an oceanside farm there, Rosarita

Bay has changed. And it will change much more if the new breed of go-getter Chamber of Commerce types have their way. These new Rosaritans, with their cute ice cream parlors, cozy bookstores and coffee shops, art galleries, upscale bistros and chili and chowder festivals, have no patience for the original residents, who "weren't so much environmentalists or conservationists but isolationists — independent spirits, loners, libertarians, iconoclasts, garden-variety curmudgeons."

Of the bunch, Lyndon is the most nettlesome to the town's gung-ho boosters, since he's holding up completion of a new resort. The conflict is delectable: These cocksure developers have actually begun building a golf course designed to run through his farm under the foolish assumption that he will eventually cave and sell.

At the heart of this mistake in judgment is the fact that no one truly knows Lyndon. Everyone — even his sometime girlfriend/sometime stalker, the overly-entrepreneurial and precariously hinged town mayor, Sheila Lemke — believes he's less a has-been than a never-was. She thinks he gave the New York starving-



artist bit his best shot and succeeded only at the starving part. This, however, is far from the truth: Lyndon was once the darling of the international art world, raking in outrageous sums for his metal sculptures. His only real failure was a

disappointment in self, in his artistic direction.

Even his own brother, Woody, a disgraced investment banker turned low-rent film producer, is privy to very few of Lyndon's secrets, as we find out when Woody comes to stay with Lyndon and brings along his new, high-maintenance star. Pampered, short-tempered Ling Ling (she has the same name and fame as the late panda but none of that creature's peaceful nature) is an aging prima donna of kung fu imports with the troubling habit of kicking teeth out first and asking questions later. Woody, desperate to finance his new martial arts movie, agrees to aid Lyndon's real estate enemies by snooping, prying and meddling.

This is a less malicious, more accident-prone Cain-and-Abel situation. The strife includes Monkey Wrench Gang-style mischief, with Lyndon and his surfer pal Juju running midnight commando raids against the bullying developer. Both brothers seem to be at war with harmony itself: In the novel's opening line, we learn that lately "things kept breaking down on Lyndon." His truck is vandalized every time he visits town, his water supply is

poisoned, his crops are destroyed, he's fired from his moonlighting gig at a touristy bar, and he's kidnapped by drug dealers. The inventory of physical injuries sustained during the brothers' reunion is impressive: Lyndon even gets knocked unconscious.

Brilliant farce conveys a sense of the characters' agony, and that is true here. But there are also moments of gentle joy, and the author's affection for this little corner of the world can be infectious. Despite the calamitous-sounding title, this is ultimately the story of a man coping with flux by repositioning himself rather than letting himself be ruined.

As richly satisfying as his first two books were (his other novel, "Country of Origin," won both an Edgar and an American Book Award), Lee has outdone himself here. His prose moves and sparkles. He gives his characters a depth and thoroughness not commonly achieved by practitioners of the comic novel, a label that seems almost a disservice to a book as thoughtful as this one. Lee shows us, right from the outset, that these are people we're going to care about, even if we do enjoy watching them flounder.

When Brothers Collide

In this madcap novel, two siblings reunite, and crises ensue.

BY LISA DIERBECK

A BATTLE is raging in California between two species: benign, slothful potheads versus driven, Machiavellian yuppies. Don Lee's satiric novel, "Wrack and Ruin," is narrated by two prime representatives of these rival camps. Lyndon Song is a reclusive slacker and an aimless has-been. He earns a living growing organic Brussels sprouts. Woody Song, an aspiring Hollywood deal-maker, is a pill-popping, germ-phobic

WRACK AND RUIN

By Don Lee.

333 pp. W. W. Norton & Company. \$23.95.

overachiever. The two men are brothers. Polar opposites, they despise each other with manic intensity.

In Lyndon's eyes, Woody is "ever greedy and malevolent." A financier, he was charged with embezzlement; he lost their parents' investments and emptied out their savings account. Lee creates a credible antipathy between the brothers, both of whom are engaging, fully imagined

A novel filled with loners, libertarians, iconoclasts and curmudgeons.

characters. Lyndon, now middle-aged, was a renowned sculptor in his youth. For mysterious reasons, he fled the glamorous life — dating supermodels in Manhattan — to live anonymously in Rosarita Bay on the Pacific coast. Though Lyndon is now a penniless bachelor, Woody has never forgiven him for his meteoric ascension and remains envious of his brother's long-vanished success.

"Lyndon," he ruminates, smoldering with outrage, "who as a kid used to sit for hours over the same sheet of paper, a piece of charcoal in his fist, running it over and over in rectangles until the entire paper was blackened. Lyndon, who they used to worry was autistic. He became the toast of the art world, Lyndon did, his sculptures — these beastly incomprehensible junk piles ... selling for tens of thousands of dollars."

When Woody shows up at Lyndon's farmhouse one weekend, the brothers' percolating rancor unleashes vaguely supernatural forces. A Stephen King horror plot dreamed up by stoners and upended by the Marx Brothers — that is the zany universe Lee edges toward. Although he never quite elicits gut-splitting laughter, he makes mischief, and by the

end, lunacy bursts forth. An elephant goes on a rampage through the streets. Subversives play pranks on avaricious real estate developers. A washed-up actress is rejuvenated by a deadbeat surfer who lost his left foot to a great white shark.

We're on the road to a certain beloved, much-imitated territory here, though this novel rides along a byway distant from the ones that lead eventually to Pynchon Land. Comparatively plain and simple, Lee's story has none of Pynchon's inventive flamboyance, dense allusions or exuberant genius. But Oedipa Maas and Lardass Levine might have spent the night at a motel in Rosarita Bay, a backwater with a faintly underground quality. "It was a wonderfully sad, forlorn, gone-to-seed town with gone-to-seed inhabitants, a good majority of whom, for one reason or another, preferred to be forgotten." The place attracts an assortment of profoundly unambitious oddballs, with names like Skunk B., Tank and JuJu. They are "independent spirits, loners, libertarians, iconoclasts, garden-variety curmudgeons."

Playful and lighthearted, "Wrack and Ruin" has an accidental elegance that is un-self-conscious and refreshing. The deceptively straightforward storytelling conceals considerable craftsmanship. At times, however, Lee succumbs to a weakness that often dogs writers of comedy. He flattens his minor characters, exaggerating their flaws and playing them for laughs. The bitter, unstable ex-girlfriend stalks Lyndon and vandalizes his car. The kung fu star drinks and flies into destructive rages. The lesbian environmentalists camp on the beach to rescue an endangered species.

Three newly hatched plover chicks are marvelously well-drawn creatures. The tiny birds have more personality and verve than the women. □



Lisa Dierbeck is the author of "One Pill Makes You Smaller," a novel.

NEW YORK
TIMES
BOOK REVIEW
JUNE 22, 2008

tion of Hitler. Although most of the characters lack complexity, Bohjalian's well-chosen descriptions capture the anguish of a tragic era and the dehumanizing desolation wrought by war. (May)

The Legend of Mickey Tussler

FRANK NAPPI. St. Martin's, \$24.95 (304p) ISBN 978-0-312-38109-7

Nappi (*Echoes from the Infantry*) has produced a knowledgeable yet unsentimental book starring an autistic teenager with a fearsome fastball. Milwaukee Brewer's manager Arthur Murphy recruits 17-year-old farm boy Mickey Tussler as a pitcher for his team. And though Mickey's slowness enrages his impossibly cruel father (who abuses his wife and derides Mickey as a "retard"), the boy's dad is happy to collect his son's pro baseball salary. In short order, Mickey achieves local stardom despite his mental disability and his teammates' clubhouse pranks. Lefty Rogers, the Brewers' southpaw ace, resents Mickey's triumphs on the mound and plots to sabotage his rival's budding career. At the same time, Murphy romances Mickey's much-abused mother and leads his resurging team in a hot pennant race. The writing is clear and direct, and there's no confusing who's a good guy and who's a bad guy. The baseball elements really sing; baseball fans will find much to appreciate, while the sports treatment of triumphing over adversity adds crossover appeal to the YA market. (May)

Whatever Makes You Happy

WILLIAM SUTCLIFFE. Bloomsbury, \$23.95 (304p) ISBN 978-1-59691-450-6

Three British mothers decide that it's time their 34-year-old sons start to act like mature grownups. And if their sons aren't going to get with the program on their own, it's high time for a little maternal nudging. Each son has problems: Daniel has just been through a bad breakup and can think of few things worse than his mother, Gillian, nagging him about his bachelor state; Paul, Helen's son, who reminds her of her first husband, has never come out to her even though she knows he's gay; Carol's son, Matt, seems stuck in a life as shallow and glossy as *Balls!*—the magazine he works for. The result is an excellent comic novel that

interweaves the romance, humor and pathos of three complicated families. Though it at first appears to be a simple roast of overly interfering mothers, the novel reveals itself to be a story of every mother's desire to receive in return some small measure of the love they have given. (Apr.)

Wrack and Ruin

DON LEE. Norton, \$23.95 (288p) ISBN 978-0-393-06232-8

The trick to reading Don Lee's wonderfully silly second novel (after *Country of Origin* and a story collection, *Yellow*) is to take nothing seriously, even when you should. The book concerns the eccentric sculptor-turned-brussels sprout farmer, Lyndon Song, and his estranged brother, Woody, an upright Hollywood producer. Lyndon's refusal to sell his farmland to a golf course developer results in an unwelcome visit from his brother, who has been secretly hired by the developer. The author has corralled an array of misfits and minor characters—Lyndon's friend Juju, a philosophizing surfer with a prosthetic limb, and Yi Ling Ling, a has-been kung fu film star—to season the backdrop of the brothers' misadventures and muster up some drama and didactic spiritualism. The novel's best sections are lighthearted in their delivery, but hint at deeper substance and self-reflection. At times the author starts pulling too adamantly at readers' heartstrings, but before long he's back to slathering on the sarcasm. This novel thrives on unlikely unions, unseemly humor and happy endings while maintaining a constant examination of family and identity, in keeping with the themes of the author's previous book. (Apr.)

Perfect Family

PAM LEWIS. Simon & Schuster, \$25 (288p) ISBN 978-0-7432-9145-3

Long-festered secrets erupt with devastating consequences to Connecticut's moneyed Carteret clan in Lewis's second novel (after *Speak Softly, She Can Hear*), a literate page-turner. When 24-year-old Pony, the family's daredevil golden girl, drowns while skinny-dipping at their Vermont lake house, her death leaves her year-old son, Andrew, an orphan—as well as a hornet's nest of troubling questions. Why had Pony begged big brother William to

meet her in Vermont that day? Did someone else show up after they quarreled and William stormed off? Who is Andrew's father? And was Pony's death really an accident? Widowed patriarch Jasper Carteret III and bossy eldest daughter Tinker seem less interested in answers than damage control. But William, heartsick at whatever role his departure might have played in the tragedy, starts digging. Before long, some of his startling discoveries challenge his core beliefs about the people he thought he knew well. Lewis skillfully lures the reader through her narrative maze with plenty of plot twists—most of them credible until an over-the-top climax—without compromising a masterful portrait of a quirky New England family in crisis. (Apr.)

★ Killing Rommel

STEVEN PRESSFIELD. Doubleday, \$24.95 (368p) ISBN 978-0-385-51970-0

After five novels about conflict in ancient times (*Gates of War*, etc.), Pressfield effortlessly gives fresh life to wartime romance and the rigors of combat in a superior WWII thriller. Framed as the memoir of a British officer, the book is based on an actual British plot to assassinate the "Desert Fox," German field marshal Erwin Rommel, during late 1942 and early 1943 in North Africa. The author painstakingly sets the stage for later fireworks by charting the prewar career of R. Lawrence "Chap" Chapman, especially his relationship with the brilliant but doomed Zachary Stein, Chap's tutor and mentor at Oxford. Chap also falls in love with sexy Rose McCall, whose brains and brass later get her posted to naval intelligence in Egypt. As a young lieutenant, Chap joins the team assembled to go after Rommel. Pressfield expertly juxtaposes the personal with the historical, with authentic battle descriptions. Crisp writing carries readers through success, failure and a final face-to-face encounter with Rommel that's no less exciting for knowing the outcome. (Apr.)

Things I Want My Daughters to Know

ELIZABETH NOBLE. Morrow, \$22.95 (384p) ISBN 978-0-06-112219-4

Noble (*The Reading Group*) hits her stride in her tearjerker fourth novel.

Booklist

Advanced Review – Uncorrected Proof

Issue: March 15, 2008

Wrack and Ruin.

Lee, Don (Author)

Apr 2008. 288 p. Norton, hardcover, \$23.95. (9780393062328).

The author of *Yellow* (2001) and *Country of Origin* (2004) delivers another warmly humorous take on identity in this entertaining novel featuring Lyndon Song, a sculptor turned brussels-sprouts farmer. In his youth, Lyndon made it to the top of the cutthroat art world in New York City but soon tired of the egos, politicking, and harsh criticism. He gave it all up to settle in Rosarita Bay, California, a sleepy, foggy town ideal for organic farming. But his low-key lifestyle is threatened when a developer decides to build a golf course and needs Lyndon's land to complete his deal. Lyndon's long-estranged brother, Woody, a disgraced financier turned movie producer, makes a secret deal with the developer to work on Lyndon, but their wild Labor Day weekend visit changes both of them in unforeseen ways. An eccentric cast of secondary characters, including a fading Hong Kong kung-fu star and a perpetually stoned surfer, adds to the merriment in a highly appealing novel that swerves ever so gracefully from rollicking humor to poignant moments of reflection.

— *Joanne Wilkinson*

★ **Hemon, Aleksandar**
THE LAZARUS PROJECT
 Riverhead (292 pp.)
 \$24.95
 May 1, 2008
 ISBN: 978-1-59448-988-4

A profoundly moving novel that finds striking parallels between the America of a hundred years ago and now, as an immigrant Bosnian author, straining to come to terms with his identity, returns to his troubled homeland.

The second novel by Hemon (*Nowhere Man*, 2002) begins in the Chicago of 1908, when a 19-year-old Jewish refugee named Lazarus Averbuch undertakes a mysterious mission to deliver a letter to the city's chief of police. He has made the trek from his impoverished ghetto home to one of the city's richest neighborhoods and is plainly out of his element. When he attempts to deliver the letter, the chief shoots him, fearing that the stranger is an armed anarchist. A reporter who serves as a mouthpiece for the police spreads the word that the murdered immigrant was actually a murderer, killed in an attempt to assassinate the chief. A hundred years later, the incident piques the interest of Vladimir Brik, a struggling writer whose column for the city's alternative weekly has given him a readership but not much of a career, and who relies on the financial support of his wife, an American brain surgeon. Occasionally mistaken for being either Jewish or Muslim—though he is neither—Brik sees the demonizing of Lazarus in a contemporary light: "The war against anarchism was much like the current war on terror—funny how old habits never die." Chapters alternate between Brik's account of the events of 1908 and his current research into the truth about Lazarus, a mission that takes him back to Eastern Europe on an extended journey, accompanied by an amoral former war photographer named Rora. Yet as the novel progresses, it seems that Brik is more concerned with finding the truth about himself—Who am I? Where is home?—than he is with the perhaps impossible task of learning what really happened with Lazarus.

A literary page-turner that combines narrative momentum with meditations on identity and mortality. (Agent: Nicole Aragi/Aragi Inc.)

Jacobs, Kate
COMFORT FOOD
 Putnam (352 pp.)
 \$24.95
 CD \$39.95
 May 1, 2008
 ISBN: 978-0-399-15465-2
 CD 978-0-143-14316-1

The lives and loves of a TV chef, her daughters, neighbor and associates all receive a makeover in this lighthearted but sometimes sagging romantic problem-solver.

Jacobs (*The Friday Night Knitting Club*, 2007) turns to the subject of food on television. Widowed control-freak and mother of two Gus Simpson, approaching 50, has been a star of the CookingChannel for 12 years with her show *Cooking with Gusto!* But now, under pressure to improve her drooping ratings, she finds herself sharing a new program—*Eat Drink and Be*—filmed in her own kitchen, with pushy Carmen Vega, a ruthlessly ambitious ex-Miss Spain. Helping out on the live program are Gus's adult daughters Sabrina and Aimee, her neighbor Hannah (a reclusive journalist with a disgraced sporting past), one of Sabrina's ex-boyfriends and Oliver, the show's attractive producer. In a rather slack middle section, the story gets diverted down multiple paths, involving career, family, finance and relationships, while dodging from one mini-crisis or set piece to the next: a kitchen fire, a teambuilding weekend, a bride with extreme wedding nerves. But late in the day, Jacobs marshals her occasionally tepid characters, cuts back on the life philosophy, connects various predictable dots (and one or two less predictable ones) and delivers a slew of happy endings.

Not quite as satisfying as the title would lead us to expect. (Agent: Dorian Karchmar/William Morris Agency)

Lee, Don
WRACK AND RUIN
 Norton (288 pp.)
 \$23.95
 Apr. 1, 2008
 ISBN: 978-0-393-06232-8

Lee (*Country of Origin*, 2004, etc.) whimsically examines the intertwining of some rather fey lives over a Labor Day weekend in a small California community. ←

The title is both apposite and ironic, for Lyndon Song's life seems to be heading south. Living in Rosarita Bay, Lyndon is a refugee from his former life as a successful sculptor in New York City. He has now opted for a more Arcadian lifestyle as a Brussels sprout farmer—and on the side he grows an impressive crop of marijuana. Family matters also grow thick when Lyndon's brother Woody decides to visit. Woody is a formerly hot movie producer whose specialty is taking Asian action movies and "translating" them into English, but his recent projects have been derailed. The brothers haven't seen one another for 16 years, and Lyndon would be perfectly happy to keep Woody away for another 16. Lee tries to harmonize multiple strands of the narrative, as Woody tries to lure Yi Ling Ling, an aging and out-of-control kung-fu actress, into his project. Meanwhile, Lyndon continues to fight off two powerful forces, both economic (a powerful developer wants his farm) and personal (Lyndon's former lover, the current mayor of Rosarita Bay, is angry with him and keeps slashing his tires). Lyndon finds himself attracted to Laura Diaz-McClatchey, a masseuse who eases his tense muscles, but who also, we find out later, is a former museum curator interested in his work. Lyndon would like to keep his life intact, for it's at least pleasant if not perfect, but over the weekend everything threatens to spin out of control (see title); an anarchic energy emerges that infects and unites both Lyndon and Woody. Subplots propagate like bunnies, as Woody tries to track down why an old acquaintance committed suicide. (Woody also gets involved with two lesbian environmentalists studying snowy plovers.)

Over-the-top complications sometimes get in the way of Lee's wry commentary on contemporary life. (Agent: Maria Massie/Inkwell Management)

Lee, Jen Sookfong
THE END OF EAST
 Dunne/St. Martin's (256 pp.)
 \$23.95
 May 1, 2008
 ISBN: 978-0-312-37985-8

An impressive debut novel that delves into the immigration experiences of three generations.

Delivered in lyrical language radiating with apt metaphors, the story alternates between Sammy Chan's modern-day life and her family's past. Unannounced jumps in time create an unpredictable and sometimes spotty narrative that functions to mirror the memories it seeks to illustrate. Vancouver provides the dreary, oppressive backdrop, reinforcing the gray emotions of the Chan family, whose constant theme is a longing to escape. Sammy, the youngest Chan daughter, spent her life waiting for the day she could



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Wrack & Ruin

[Alexander Brasfield bio](#) ↓ · June 9th, 2009 · filed under [Original Content](#), [books](#), [reviews](#), [rumpus original](#)

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Don Lee returns to Rosarita Bay with a novel that features Brussels sprouts, kung fu divas, feuding brothers, and a complex look at ethnic identity.

Humor can be a beautiful literary device: a combination of impeccable timing, precision language, and self-awareness that's at once surprising and delightful, thought-provoking yet lighthearted, offering readers a glimpse of humanity while upholding a buffer of intrigue. Of course, humor can be a difficult thing to pull off, requiring not only a proper handling of build-up, execution, and payoff, but also a thorough understanding of tone and character. But although it is sometimes crude and occasionally ludicrous, humor, when properly employed, can reveal great truth.

Such is the case in *Wrack & Ruin*, Don Lee's return to the fictional town of Rosarita Bay, CA, locale of his 2002 short story collection, *Yellow*. This time around, the action follows Lyndon Song, a former hot-shot artist resigned to a life of Brussels sprouts farming and part-time bartending. Song's a bit of a recluse, content with keeping to

himself, enjoying his daily bowl of 420, and sabotaging his relationships with members of the opposite sex. Upon the arrival of his estranged brother, an aspiring film producer named Woody, Lyndon's bucolic existence is quickly turned on end. Suddenly, he finds himself embroiled in a struggle for both his land and his sense of self, the former of which is threatened by developers intent on turning the farm into a golf course, the latter of which threatens to expose his secrets, including the reason he traded the glamour and prestige of the New York art scene for sleepy California anonymity.

Appropriately, the backdrop of Rosarita Bay is significant to the way in which the events of *Wrack & Ruin* unfold. It's a town whose identity—like Lyndon's own—seems largely undefined: Is it a coastal secret tucked away beneath the fog, or the next big thing in manufactured high-end resorts? Whatever the case, the size of the town facilitates the various interactions among Lee's extensive cast of characters—including a surfer with a prosthetic foot, an overly zealous USC alum, and an aging kung fu diva with a drinking problem and a knack for getting thrown out of hotels—interactions that complicate the plot while also providing ironic comic relief. Over a two-page span in the first chapter, for example, Lyndon, while on an impromptu ice-cream date with his shiatsu masseuse, turns a corner to discover his ex-lover (who happens to be the mayor) hammering nails into his truck tires, after the repair of which he is pulled over by the bitter town sheriff, and then, upon arriving home, roundhouse kicked in the head by a mysterious woman stepping out of his shower.

Of course, things aren't all bad for Lyndon, who, by the novel's end, matures from a rebellious prankster to a sobered pragmatic—a course of discovery that Lee handles expertly, weaving together a twisting plot and a playful prose style to result in a wholly immersive and highly enjoyable read. Here is a writer able to create thoughtful, well-rounded characters who command attention yet don't overwhelm, who allow the drama to unfold at a natural pace, sometimes laidback, sometimes rapid fire.

But *Wrack & Ruin* is more than an engaging plot and a likable ensemble of characters. It's also a discussion of identity—specifically Asian American identity—and how it influences the choices of three prominent personalities: Lyndon, Woody, and Dalton Lee, an art-house filmmaker struggling to break into the mainstream. For Lyndon and Dalton, this is a conflict of ethnicity, one borne of their respective artistic endeavors and the stereotypes ascribed to them by the critical world. Both, despite American upbringings, have been branded “Asian” artists, a label that's limited their creative efforts and against which each has rebelled against in his own way. For Woody, with his Harvard education and Berluti loafers, the conflict is one of assimilation, the desire to cast aside any lingering Asian-ness for a chance to succeed in the “White” world.

Despite this focus on race, the novel avoids heavy-handedness. Lee proposes no definitive answers to the various questions raised; rather, he keeps true to his role as storyteller, creating and manipulating authentic characters who must deal with the shit that happens (or has happened) to them. For the most part, this method is effective, and many of the interactions and revelations have a serendipitous feel. To bring the story to a close, however, Lee relies on a change in tempo that readers are not entirely trained for, an effect that succeeds in purpose yet comes off as a bit jarring, too conveniently offered.

Overall, though, *Wrack & Ruin* is a delight to read, a wonderfully imagined world that draws us in from the opening sentence and keeps us hooked with surprising insight and pitch-perfect humor. It is a novel that takes itself seriously but not too seriously, one unafraid to acknowledge that while “[n]othing happens in this country without the involutions of race,” these complications sometimes allow us to examine ourselves, a process that, even when undertaken in earnest, is bound to elicit at least a few honest laughs.

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Alexander Brasfield is writing a collection of short stories. He is a native of San Francisco. [More from this author](#)

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ground, becoming in his later work more subtle and indirect and subversive.

Publishing a writer's early unpublished work inevitably raises the question of whether the writer would approve. It is possible that Stafford, for whom the act of writing seemed more important than a particular poem, would not have objected. *Another World Instead* is intriguing for showing Stafford doing his own hard apprentice work both as a writer and as a human being writing to understand himself in unconscionable times. One must conclude that the simple, easy grace often associated with William Stafford's mature poetry was not easily arrived at, nor, once achieved, was it actually simple.

—Michele Glazer

Wrack and Ruin

A Novel

BY DON LEE

W. W. Norton, 2008. \$23.95, 333 pages.

THE FIRST FEW PAGES of *Wrack and Ruin* start off quietly enough. Lyndon Song, a famous sculptor who renounced celebrity for a life of obscurity growing organic Brussels sprouts, is having a small stretch of bad luck. Broken farm equipment, computer on the blink, flat tire, nothing too extraordinarily bad. By the time Lyndon's gotten a spasm in his neck, had a crown replaced, suffered his third flat tire courtesy of his ex-girlfriend, and been kicked unconscious by an aging kung fu film star all before the end of chapter one, you realize you're smack dab in the middle of a modern day, multicultural, environmental, and existential farce.

Lyndon's quiet life on the farm takes a careen-

ing turn all over the course of a fateful Labor Day weekend. His scheming huckster brother, Woody, comes to pay him a visit at the behest of the multinational corporation trying to buy his farm. The farm just happens to be the last tract of land standing between the corporation and its planned behemoth hotel and golf course.

There's been bad blood between Lyndon and Woody all their lives, owing to their diametrically opposed natures and Woody's tendency to use everyone and everything around him. Neither one is happy to see the other and the visit soon turns into an epic string of accidents. The weekend's chaos is punctuated by the Buddha's four Noble Truths being mysteriously delivered via paper airplane. Somehow during all the mayhem (which also includes monkey-wrenching at the golf course, a windsurfing chase, a chowder festival, and a run-in with the law and six-foot-high marijuana plants) Woody manages to experience nature for perhaps the first time in his life, guided by a wildlife conservationist trying to save the western snowy plover from the golf course Woody is lobbying for. And Lyndon realizes for all his solitary ways he really is and wants to be a part of the small community of Rosarita Bay.

Lee manages to weave together an unbelievable number of characters, all wildly colorful and articulate. Their sarcasm and wit illuminate at least as much about liberal small-town life as their more sober, reflective moments. While the book is entertaining as it lurches from one improbable accident to the next, the action at times seems better suited for the screen than the page, and some of the characters feel more

like plot devices than actual people with their expository dialogue. Still, the book is an interesting and humorous cross-section of life in a small town with big personalities.

—Erin Connor

Making Waves and Riding the Currents

Activism and the Practice of Wisdom

BY CHARLES HALPERN

Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2008. \$24.95, 290 pages.

THOSE OF US WHO spend our days working to shield the planet from the howling winds of rapacious greed are well acquainted with a pair of burdens: hopelessness and burnout.

We know how to cry in our beers after city council votes (and presidential elections), and how to demonize our opponents. Oh, how we know how to demonize our opponents!—those faceless corporations ripping off mountaintops, brewing poisons, and killing innocent creatures.

It's a broken-hearted world, and Charles Halpern wants to show us a path out. He wants us to soften our attitudes and our bodies until our intentions—and our arguments—are as clear as a cold spring. In his new book, *Making Waves and Riding the Currents*, Halpern, a pioneer public-interest rabble-rouser, takes us along on his journey from pinstripe-suited corporate lawyer to yoga-practicing meditator. Halpern has the reputation to bring us this wake-up message. The Dalai Lama wrote his book's foreword, and top-notch journalist Bill Moyers gushes: "A nation wandering in the wilderness, as we are, could not ask for a better guide toward clarity and compassion."

As a smart and well-connected young lawyer in Washington DC in the late

