have an American ballet within 3 yrs. time…. Do you know George Balanchine…the most ingenious technician in ballet I have ever seen…. Please, please Chick if you have any love for anything we both do adore, rack your brains and try to make this all come true…. We have the future in our hands…” [and later] “This will be no collection, but living art—and the chance for perfect creation.”

Duberman’s monumental story ends on a somber note when the failing, bedridden Kirstein loses all interest in looking at the books on art that he had loved. Yet readers will have no doubt that on certain nights—from his seat at the New York State Theater, as he watched the dancers materialize on stage and bring to life one of George Balanchine’s miraculous gifts to the world—Kirstein knew that he was in the presence of the “perfect creation” that would not have happened without him.


Rhythms of Race
African-American poet Kevin Young talks shop.
by SHAUN SUTNER

At age 36, Kevin Young ’92 ranks among the most accomplished poets of his generation. The recipient of Guggenheim, Stegner, and NEA fellowships, he recently left Indiana University to become Haywood professor of English and creative writing at Emory University in Atlanta, where he is also curator of the 75,000-volume Raymond Danowski Poetry Library, believed to be one of the world’s largest private collections of English-language poetry.

Young was born in Lincoln, Nebraska, to Louisiana natives. As a child, he lived in Chicago, Syracuse, Boston, and Natick, Massachusetts. His late father was a physician; his mother, who has a doctorate in chemistry, is president and CEO of the Mattapan Health Center in Boston.

At Harvard, Young was one of the youngest members of the Dark Room Collective, an influential group of black Boston-area writers. Having spent his high-school years in Kansas, he writes poems that reflect his midwestern roots as well as his ancestral Southern heritage.

In January, Alfred A. Knopf published his most recent book of poems, For the Confederate Dead. His earlier Jelly Roll was a finalist for the National Book Award and the Los Angeles Times Book Prize, and won the Paterson Poetry Prize. He is the author of three other poetry collections—including Black Maria, recently adapted for the stage and performed by the Providence Black Repertory Company—and To Repel Ghosts: The Remix, a retelling of the life and work of the late New York graffiti artist and painter Jean-Michel Basquiat.

Young has also edited the Library of America’s John Berryman: Selected Poems and two other poetry and prose collections. He divides his time between Atlanta and Belmont, Massachusetts, where he and his wife, Catherine Tuttle, live with their two children.

Q. What made you want to become a poet?
A. I took a creative-writing summer course when I was 12 or 13. I wrote short stories and was into comic books. Suddenly I wrote a poem because we were supposed to, and the teacher liked it and passed it around. In retrospect, I don’t see why, because [my] poems were terrible. I still remember them, but they’re best left undiscussed.

Q. When he heard the title of your new book, an African-American colleague of mine responded: “[Bleep] the Confederate dead!” Are you expressing sympathy for the Confederate dead?
A. I thought long and hard about the title. It’s trying to deal with the ironies of Ameri-

Poet Kevin Young at Emory University
**Off the Shelf**

Recent books with Harvard connections

Philoṣophers without Gods: Medita­tions on Atheism and the Secular Life, edited by Louise M. Antony, Ph.D. ’82 (Oxford University Press, $28). Twenty philo­sopher-atheists testify that atheists need not be eli­tist or hostile to reli­tion to hold that morality is inde­pendent of the existence of God. Antony is pro­fessor of phi­losophy at the University of Massachu­setts, Amherst, and nine of the contri­butors are Harvard alums.

The Panic of 1907: Lessons Learned from the Market’s Perfect Storm, by Robert F. Bruner, M.B.A. ’74, D.B.A. ’82, and Sean D. Carr (Wiley, $29.95). Why and how does panic unfold? The panic of 1907, now celebrat­ing its centennial, was managed by pri­vate bankers J.P. Morgan, Charles F. Baker, and oth­ers, but spawned the Federal Reserve System. The authors teach at the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration, University of Virginia, where Bruner is dean.

Wayne’s College of Beauty, by David Swanger, Ed.D. ’70 (BkMk Press, University of Missouri-Kansas City, $13.95, paper). This collection of poems has won the John Ciardi Prize for Poetry. Like the patrons of Wayne’s, readers will “have come at last to the right place.”

Lawrence and Aaronsohn: T.E. Lawrence, Aaron Aaronsohn, and the Seeds of the Arab-Israeli Conflict, by Ronald Florence, Ph.D. ’69 (Viking, $27.95). Two colleagues in British intelligence had con­flicting obses­sions that presaged the Arab-Israeli conflict. As the Ottoman empire faltered, one of the two (an archae­ologist from Oxford­shire, later Lawrence of Ar­abia) promoted Arab na­tionalism. The other (a Jewish agrono­mist from Palestine) hoped for a Jewish state. Each was cock­sure. Histo­rian and novelist Florence tells their story well.

Heal Your Aching Back: What a Harvard Doctor Wants You to Know (McGraw Hill, $14.95, paper). Why does your back ache, and what’s the smartest way to treat it?

The Americano: Fighting for Freedom in Castro’s Cuba, by Aran Shetterly ’92 (Algonquin Books, $24.95). An American janitor from Toledo became a coman­dante in Castro’s army, the only foreign­er other than Che Guevara with that rank, and a hero in Cuba. Then Castro had him shot. Exciting history, and the author has a movie deal.

Jack and Lem: John F. Kennedy and Lem Billings, The Untold Story of an Extraordinary Friendship, by David Pitts (Carroll & Graf, $26.95). From the time they were schoolboys together at Choate until the gunfire in Dallas, John F. Kennedy ’40 and Kirk LeMoyne “Lem” Billings were each other’s best friends, despite this fact that Billings was gay. Journalist Pitts has written “a Kennedy book” with something new to offer.

**About Finding Relief and Keeping Your Back Strong,** by Jeffrey N. Katz, S.M. ’90, M.D., associate professor of medi­cine, with Gloria Parkinson ’83, BF ’88 (McGraw Hill, $14.95, paper). Why does your back ache, and what’s the smartest way to treat it?

Q. You write a lot about Reconstruction, the South, the Civil War and slavery. Are these your main themes?
   A. All these things permeate a lot of my work. My first book has a lot about Louisiana, where my parents are from. The Basquiat book is about race, and art, and history, but recent history, a history of the ‘80s.

Q. You purposely use misspellings. Why?
   A. In the Basquiat book especially, the power of the vernacular sometimes insists on that. But you can’t just do misspellings for misspelling’s sake. It’s like a blue note. You have to use a kind of precision when you’re doing something like that. Mostly it comes from the sound and that leads to the spelling, and not the other way around.

Q. What role does music, particularly the blues, have in your work?
   A. I think of the blues both very specifically and broadly. The blues form, I think, is a mix of sorrow and sass and humor. The form of the blues fights the feeling of the blues. So when you encounter something like Hurricane Katrina, the blues come in a profound way to talk about that kind of destruction and loss. How do you talk about exile and displacement? The blues are a great avenue for that, and in a way, while the new book isn’t directly about the blues, it’s about the South.

Q. What’s it like to curate, and to teach?
   A. For me it’s a lot of fun. It allows me to explore the collection. I’ve taught through it, using first editions to tell the
history of poetry. The real special part of it, I think, is, when we’re talking about *Leaves of Grass*, I bring the students *Leaves of Grass*. We talk about Eliot and *The Waste Land*, and I show them first editions of it. I show them a first edition of “Prufrock” signed by Eliot. I show them the range of poetry, how it happened. I also acquire new books. So there are very few holes in the collection. I patch those. Some of it is quite fugitive. It’s not easily findable.

Q: How much fun is it, being able to go out and find and buy great books?
A: Oh, it’s great. I’m a book collector by habit and inclination.

Q: You’re a collector of everything, I hear, including comic books and baseball cards.
A: This is true. It’s not just by habit; it’s also [as a curator] by necessity. I really started collecting when I was in San Francisco and I had a Stegner fellowship. There were such great used bookstores there and there was such a history I saw in these bookstores that I didn’t see other places, whether it was for West Coast versions of poetry or anything else. I was in the Mission District, which had about 20 bookstores.

Q: Seamus Heaney [the Irish poet and 1995 Nobel Prize laureate] was one of your biggest influences in college. What was your relationship like?
A: He was great—very thoughtful, very hands-off. He’d give you suggestions and meet with you, but he wasn’t rewriting your poem or anything. But I remember his suggestions were always right. He was very generous.

Q: Who are some of your biggest influences?
A: People like Heaney and Yeats. Gwendolyn Brooks [the late black American poet]. Sylvia Plath. The poetry I really admire, say, is [John] Berryman. He’s

“You can’t just do misspellings for misspelling’s sake. It’s like a blue note. You have to use a kind of precision.”

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such a mix of high and low culture. I think poetry aspires to the best of both.

Q. Why do you write such long books? One reviewer called For the Confederate Dead “ hefty.”

A. It’s not as long as my last book [Black Maria]! But those were short poems. I don’t like that image: the ‘ slim volume of poetry.’ I think poetry has an intensity that’s not always served by length, but you have to say what you have to say. I’m just happy that Knopf has put out my work and has kept it coming out. I always admire long poems and the way they can take in a whole world, not just a slice of the world. Poetry isn’t meant to just be devoured in one sitting. It’s something you are meant to return to, something you can get lost in.

What I like about poetry is that it’s not like poetry is here and life is over here. To me, poetry feels at its best when it’s like life, which is fragmented, sometimes full of language and sometimes full of silence, but ultimately redemptive. I think that lyrical quality is important to our lives.

Shaun Sutner, a reporter at the Worcester Telegram & Gazette since 1992, has written for the Harvard Education Letter and Commonwealth Magazine.