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?

The Americano: Fighting for Freedom in Castro’s Cuba, by Aran Shetterly ’92 (Algonquin Books, $24.95). An American janitor from Toledo became a commandante 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” 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

Philosophers 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 religion 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 alumni.

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 do panics 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.”

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. 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. 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’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