dress a moment of change in American history—and many of the cycle’s plays ended up revolving around the 1960s and ’70s. At first Carey worried that meant they’d done something wrong, failed to ask the right question. But playwright Lynn Nottage (whose Pulitzer-winning play for the cycle, Sweat, about Pennsylvania factory workers in the aftermath of industrial decline, went to Broadway this year) said no. “Lynn said, ‘It’s because we’re still trying to work it out,’” Carey reports. “Whatever that revolutionary moment was, it’s still sitting in the American psyche as either a time of great success or a time of great failure, or something stuck in the middle.”

In a divided country, Carey says, “I think these plays can be a path to understanding.” She thinks back to her Cornerstone days: how much the ensemble members learned about the specific, individual histories of the towns they visited, and how the townspeople came to know and trust the coastal-city strangers who showed up in their communities. All through the work of putting on a play together. “Good plays make you see whole people,” Carey says. “And they make you feel more whole yourself.”

“Patchwork Futures”  
Sci-fi meets the political thriller.  
by MARINA BOLOTNIKOVA

In the future imagined by Malka Older ’99, author of Infomocracy and its new sequel, Null States, the inability to distinguish narrative from reality has become a medical diagnosis, officially codified as “narrative disorder.” Older describes the condition as a rewiring of the mind in a world shaped by shared narratives. “On the one hand, there’s an addiction to narrative content, to wanting to distract ourselves with stories,” she says. “But this is also changing how our brains work. We’re changing our expectations of what’s going to happen and the way people act and the kinds of characters we’re likely to meet, and by changing those expectations we end up changing reality, because people act on those expectations.”

Older’s series takes place sometime during the 2060s, 20 years after the collapse of national boundaries has produced a global pax democratica. Save for some “null states” that opt out of the system—Saudi Arabia, China, Switzerland—most of the globe is carved into plots of around 100,000 people, or “centenals,” each electing its local government from among dozens of political parties. The most popular party then controls the global government. The system, called “micro-democracy,” relies on enforcement by “Information,” the massive organization that runs the world’s internet, elections, and intelligence gathering. “Through elections and relatively free immigration policies, people vote in this marketplace of ideas and innovation,” Older writes, tongue-in-cheek. (Her chatty, often breathless prose can be unexpectedly funny and sarcastic—of one character, she writes, “She’s sick of feeling like a teenager in love.”)

In exchange for relative stability, citizens have accepted a complete breakdown of privacy, with virtually all their public actions recorded by Information’s cameras and the details of their lives accessible through its search engines. They’re also exposed to an overwhelming stream of data from Information’s feeds.

Almost as a corrective to the incoherence, this society has developed a collective addiction to fiction narratives, produced by teenagers in content-creation sweatshops. The sensory overload also results in individuals like Infomocracy’s Mishima, who was diagnosed with narrative disorder as a child. The condition often leaves her unable to treat people as individuals, rather than characters—as when, misreading her lover as a spy, she stabs him in the leg. But it also empowers her to anticipate real political events—a veiled threat to go to war, a party leader bombing her own people—before anyone else can, and so only she can untangle the election-stealing scheme that’s emerged within Information.

Older says she’s thought about symptoms of narrative disorder since she was in college (citing Don Quixote as the classic example), though the idea coalesced only after she had the opportunity to travel widely. She’s spent most of what she calls her not time, or something stuck in the middle.”

Peter Frechette (left) plays Hubert Humphrey and Jack Willis is Lyndon Johnson in the Tony-winning All the Way.
Instead of relying on cyberpunk’s heavily urbanized landscape, Older’s writing is informed by the full breadth of her experience abroad.

Poetic trio. Farrar, Straus and Giroux has published Half-light: Collected Poems 1965-2016, by Frank Bidart, A.M. ’67 ($35), including a new grouping, Thirst, in which the subject is increasingly the poet himself. The Surveyors (Knopf, $27) is a new group of poems by Mary Jo Salter ’76, who sees much in life anew, like the narrator of “Bratislava”: (“So I’m still alive and now I’m in Bratislava…/That’s funny. I’d assumed my travel companion/through life would be my husband…”). Tom Jones ’63—former human-rights lawyer and teacher, now poet and photographer—has gathered some of the latter work in Beyond Existentialism (FootHills, $20); classmates from his decade may detect a little—and they say these foreign women are so liberal smugness.

“Narrative disorder is certainly something that I myself suffer from,” the author says. To counteract the impulse in her work, and avoid clinging to genre conventions, she mostly doesn’t plan the plots of her novels. As for the rest: “The way I plan my life is kind of the same deal,” she jokes—though now that she’s living in Washington, D.C., raising two children, and finishing a Ph.D. from the Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris, Older’s life has become more settled. About two-thirds finished with what will (probably) be the final book in the series, she admits, “I still don’t know a lot of what’s going to happen. Maybe don’t tell my editor that.”

The Shadow in the Garden, by James Atlas ’71 (Pantheon, $28.95). The biographer (Saul Bellow, Delmore Schwartz) and publisher of biographies now delivers “A Biographer’s Tale” (the subtitle) on his own life’s path. Fittingly, he writes of Edmund Wilson, “I wonder if it might have been the hybrid of biographical and autobiographical portraiture—the fugitive presence of the writer in the writing—that I admired.”

Paris in the Present Tense (Overlook, $28.95) is the new novel by Mark Helprin ’69, A.M. ’72, who was memorably profiled in “Literary Warrior” in these pages (May-June 2005, page 38).

The First Serious Optimist, by Ian Kumekawa (Princeton, $35). The author, a doctoral candidate in economic history, delivers an intellectual biography of A.C. Pigou, bringing the British economist out of the shadow of Keynes and focusing attention on the origins of welfare economics, ideas such as spillovers and externalities, and measures like a carbon tax to address the latter.

Ways of seeing. Chromaphilia: The Story of Color in Art, by Stella Paul ’77 (Phaidon, $49.95), is a breathtaking survey of materials and colors (separate chapters for each) in art, by a former chief exhibitions educator at the Met. From Photon to Neuron: Light, Imaging, Vision, by Philip Nelson, Ph.D. ’84 (Princeton, $49.50 paper), based on a course by the University of Pennsylvania physicist, joins physics and neuroscience—a suggestion of the interdisciplinary gaps and opportunities just within the sciences. Combining the two volumes implies further gains from collaborations between sciences and humanities, for those with the skill to understand—and then to translate for curious civilians.