The sparsely populated and regional conflict in ones that animate ethnic with a different type of pressed ethnicities, is assassinated. “Noth-er says. If the series has any center of grav- ing makes nationalists so fast as persecution,” one analyst remarks. The In-
formation establishment appears so earnest about the promise of a post-na-
tional world as to be will-
fully blind to the reality that nationalism and eth-
ic-based identity still ex-
ert a strong pull within the micro-democratic system.

So far in the series, the former United States gets hardly a mention (aside from a snide remark in Infomoc-
acy about how it remains embroiled in a polarized party conflict)—and deliberately so, Old-
er says. If the series has any center of grav-
ity, it’s Tokyo, where the main Information hub is based. She started writing Infomoc-
acy while in Japan, working in emergency response after the 2011 tsunami: “Being in Japan is a good reflection of a kind of patch-
work future,” she says. In that regard, her series shows the influence of cyberpunk, a noir-ish sci-fi subgenre often taking inspira-
tion from that country’s technological scene. But instead of relying solely on cyberpunk’s heavily urbanized landscape, Older’s writing is informed by the full breadth of her experience abroad. She wanted the novels to reflect a truly global system in which people on different sides of the planet still have difficulty understanding one another despite real-time translation technology. “It was re-
ally important to me—and really fun for me as a writer—to draw from Jakarta, and Sin-

null states
MALKA OLDER

Off the Shelf
Recent books with Harvard connections

Harvardiana. The Selected Letters of
John Kenneth Galbraith, edited by
Richard P.F. Holt (Cambridge, $34.99). Eco-
nomists today may look down on Gal-
braih’s economics—but can any of them write as he did? Includes the classic ex-
change with Dean Henry Rosovsky on the
selling of Faculty of Arts and Sciences in-
dulgences. Man of the Hour: James B.
Conant, Warrior Scientist, by Jennet
Conant (Simon & Schuster, $30); a massive
biography of Conant ’14, Ph.D. ’16, LL.D.
’55, whose consequential Harvard presi-
dency seems only an episode in a life also
devoted to public service during World War II and after—both in developing the most fearful weapons of mass destruction and then to reining them in. Uncompro-
mising Activist, by Katherine R. Chad-
dock (Johns Hopkins, $24.95), is a life of
Richard Theodore Greener, A.B. 1870, the
first black graduate of Harvard College—a
prerequisite to diplomatic service in Vladivo-
stok, a law deanship, and complications
about “passing” in a society sharply demar-
cated by color lines.

Akhil Sharma, J.D. ’98, took 13 years to
write his autobiographical novel Family
Life. Now he has followed up in a fleet three
with his collection A Life of Adventure and Delight (W.W.Norton, $24.95). One story, “Surrounded by Sleep,” returns to that novel’s central trauma, of a young boy suffering brain damage after hitting the bot-
tom of a swimming pool; the rest concern
characters full of submerged longing. Sharm-
a’s portraits of stilted courtships and
childhood disappointments are finely ob-
served, and surprisingly funny.

Just a Journalist, by Linda Greenhouse
’68 (Harvard, $22.95). This modestly titled,
succinct memoir and reflection (concern-
ing the modestly subtitled subjects, “On
the Press, Life, and the Spaces Between”) con-
tends with the boundaries of journalism,
citizenship, and balance—in a new era
for each. The author, a former Overseer
and now lecturer in law at Yale, writes with
the clarity that distinguished her New York
Times coverage of the Supreme Court and
American law.

The Development Dilemma: Secu-
rity, Prosperity, and a Return to His-
tory, by Robert H. Bates, Eaton professor
of the science of government and professor
of African and African American studies
(Princeton, $27.95). A distinguished scholar
of development, or the lack thereof, in
Africa, where he has often and long put his
boots on the ground, looks back into the
divergent historical paths of England and
France to examine state security and the
political role in decisions about the use of
wealth in his effort to tease out, succinctly,
trajectories toward prosperity.

In time for the World Series, Smart
Baseball, by Keith Law ’94 (Morrow,
$27.99), senior baseball writer/analyst for
ESPN, equips readers to appreciate the
beauties of UZR, WAR, and other fancy
metrics—often with vivid humor (on “small ball” and bunting: “so called, I think,
because it produces smaller numbers on the
scoreboard”). Or, you can revert to
old-fashioned fandom.

Other cultures. A New Literary His-
tory of Modern China, edited by David
Der-Wei Wang, Henderson professor of
Chinese literature and of comparative lit-
terature (Harvard, $45), contains scores of
essays on the field—engagingly including,
for nonexperts, film, theater, and popular
song. Pious Fashion: How Muslim
Women Dress, by Elizabeth Bucar ’96
(Harvard, $29.95), looks seriously at the
meanings of clothing choices, extending far
beyond the political values and controvers-
ies assigned to veiling in, say, Europe or
parts of the United States. The author is
associate professor of philosophy and reli-
gion at Northeastern. Tokyo Boogie-
Woogie: Japan’s Pop Era and Its Dis-
contents, by Hiromu Nagahara, Ph.D. ’11
(Harvard, $35), examines a genre, and era,
and Japan’s postwar transition into a mid-
dle-class, consumer society.
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.

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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.