MAN UNDERWATER
The democratic fiction of Richard Brautigan
By Wes Enzinna

Discussed in this essay:

Every year, countless people submit their fiction and non-fiction to magazines and book publishers and are rejected. At the places I’ve worked as an editor—not the most selective magazines in the country, but not the least, either—we’ve typically accepted about one of every thousand stories. Naturally, most of these submissions are dreck—the preferred term in the industry for unsolicited manuscripts, “slush,” comes from an early-twentieth-century colloquialism for rotten fruit—but accidents inevitably happen. Philip Roth and John Ashbery were both rescued from slush piles. One editor wrote of Samuel Beckett that he “wouldn’t touch [Beckett’s novels] with a barge-pole”; another advised Harry Crews to burn his work, explaining that “fire is a great refiner.” A publisher sent John Barth a note saying that his stories sounded “like a penny-whistle out of a windbag full of bad odors.”

The Brautigan Library for unpublished manuscripts is a sanctuary for the world’s literary rejects. “People think the library might be a trolling spot for publishers and talent scouts,” John Barber, the librarian, told me last May when I visited him at the brick building on a leafy corner lot in Vancouver, Washington. The space beyond the arched double doors is modest: the floor is black and red checkered tile, like an Italian restaurant’s, and the main room doubles as a gallery for the Clark County Historical Museum, which, on the day of my visit, featured an exhibit of Vancouver’s newspapers. The shop sells such dreary volumes as For the Love of Farming and Weather of the Pacific Northwest.

The library is situated in a corner of the museum and looks like a living room, with two stuffed chairs and an end table facing a set of bookshelves. A whitewashed sign announces that this is the Brautigan Library: A Very Public Library, though there’s no one around except a tall man standing behind one of the chairs, who turns out to be a life-size cardboard cutout of the late author Richard Brautigan. Patrons from across the United States have paid twenty-five dollars apiece to house their unpublished novels here, books with titles like “Autobiography About a Nobody” and “Sterling Silver Cockroaches.” The shelves hold 291 of these cheap vinyl-bound volumes, which are organized into categories according to a schema called the Mayonnaise System: Adventure, Natural World, Street Life, Family, Future, Humor, Love, War and Peace, Meaning of Life, Poetry, Spirituality, Social/Political/Cultural, and All the Rest. Bylines and titles don’t appear on the covers. “The only way to browse the stacks is to choose a category and pick at random,” Barber explains. “Are you in the mood for Adventure or the Meaning of Life?”

The Mayonnaise System was never intended for use. It’s based on an idea in Brautigan’s novel The Abortion: An Historical Romance 1966, in which an earnest, overworked man in his thirties presides over a library whose sole purpose is to collect and store the world’s unpublished manuscripts. Patrons drop by day and night (mostly night) to deposit their works. When the narrator’s girlfriend, Vida, gets pregnant and the couple travels to Tijuana for an abortion, a clever metaphor is spun about unwanted children and unwanted books. “You have to be friendly,” the librarian explains to the man filling in for him. “To make the person and the book feel wanted... and to gather pleasantly together the unwanted, the lyrical and haunted volumes of American writing.”
“If you rummaged through the sock drawers of every person in America,” Barber tells me as I pluck a manuscript called “Stalin’s Chicken and Other Abominations” from the shelf, “you could fill this building with thousands of failed dreams.” Though Barber looks like a stereotypical academic—wild hair and combed white mustache—he has had a restless past: a tour guide for eight years in Yellowstone, Barber spent years writing and failing to publish his own fiction before getting his Ph.D. in linguistics and becoming a professor of creative media and digital culture at Washington State University Vancouver. He’s also compiled the world’s most exhaustive bibliography of Brautigan’s work. “This is a place Brautigan dreamed of his entire life,” Barber said before leaving me alone in the library to read. “It’s a place where rejection before getting his Ph.D. in linguistics and becoming a professor of creative media and digital culture at Washington State University Vancouver. He’s also compiled the world’s most exhaustive bibliography of Brautigan’s work. “This is a place Brautigan dreamed of his entire life,” Barber said before leaving me alone in the library to read. “It’s a place where rejection doesn’t exist.”

On September 16, 1984, Richard Brautigan woke—he was then forty-nine years old, his hairline retreating and his belly bloating like a stereotypical salesman’s moustache, and pulled the drawer of every person in America,” Barber tells me as I pluck a manuscript called “Stalin’s Chicken and Other Abominations” from the shelf, “you could fill this building with thousands of failed dreams.” Though Barber looks like a stereotypical academic—wild hair and combed white mustache—he has had a restless past: a tour guide for eight years in Yellowstone, Barber spent years writing and failing to publish his own fiction before getting his Ph.D. in linguistics and becoming a professor of creative media and digital culture at Washington State University Vancouver. He’s also compiled the world’s most exhaustive bibliography of Brautigan’s work. “This is a place Brautigan dreamed of his entire life,” Barber said before leaving me alone in the library to read. “It’s a place where rejection doesn’t exist.”

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Richard Brautigan was born in 1935 to a waitress and raised in the drizzly environs of Tacoma. He was for most of his youth called Dick Porterfield; his mother had left his biological father, Bernard Brautigan, without even mentioning she was pregnant. After high school, Brautigan worked off and on at a cannery and lived with his mother and her new husband in a tar-paper shack on the pastoral outskirts of Eugene, Oregon. Determined to become a writer in the mold of his idols Ernest Hemingway and William Saroyan, and prevented by scoliosis from joining World War II, Brautigan spent his nights hunched over his typewriter, sending off poems and stories to be rejected by The Atlantic, The New Yorker, and Playboy.

Then, one day in December 1955, at the age of twenty, Brautigan walked through the sleet-covered streets of Eugene to the local police station. “I want to go to jail,” he told the officer on duty, explaining that he was hungry and depressed. When the cop told him he had to be a criminal to go to jail, Brautigan came back with a rock. “I am a criminal,” he said, hurling it through the glass of the station’s front door. A judge sentenced him to ten days in jail, during which time he was sent to Oregon State Hospital (One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest was filmed there twenty years later), where he would remain for the next three months. His commitment papers quoted friends and teachers as saying that his writings “were without question some of the most weird and lewd material they had ever read,” and he was treated with twelve sessions of electroshock therapy.

Brautigan left Oregon soon after his release in 1956 and moved to San Francisco; he did not return home or speak to family members for another twenty years. The twenty-two-year-old traded his denim overalls for a black leather jacket, ingratiated himself at parties with Allen Ginsberg and Lawrence Ferlinghetti (along with members of the anarchist street-theater group the Diggers), and fell under the tutelage of a locally notorious drunk, homosexual, linguist, and renegade poet named Jack Spicer. Brautigan later referred to these years as his “apprenticeship,” and like many polished stylists, he worked very, very hard to make the work look easy, writing as many as twenty poems a day and publishing them in small journals, vigilant and avoiding paid work and accepting poverty as the poet’s natural condition. His poems were dark and ambiguous. Take, for example, “The Pill Versus the Springhill Mine Disaster,” a riff on the emergence of birth-control pills:

When you take your pill it’s like a mine disaster.
I think of all the people lost inside of you.

In 1967, Brautigan published his best-known novel, Trout Fishing in America, which he’d been working on for close to six years. It’s a poet’s novel: in it, Brautigan turns one conceit over
and over with inventive variations. “Trout Fishing” is by turns a character, the novel, the narrator, and a “hotel half a block from Broadway and Columbus.” It is also, the narrator discovers, for sale. In one chapter, he sees an ad for a “used trout stream” at a scrap shop. “We’re selling it by the foot length,” a salesman explains. “You can buy as little as you want or you can buy all we’ve got left. A man came in here this morning and bought 563 feet…. The waterfalls are upstairs in the used plumbing department.”

Reviewers heralded Brautigan as an unwitting spokesman for the hippies then flooding into San Francisco, and the novel would go on to sell 2 million copies. Guy Davenport, in an essay for The Hudson Review, described Brautigan as one of the era’s greatest young writers, “a kind of Thoreau who cannot keep a straight face,” and Newsweek gushed that “he combines the surface finality of Hemingway, the straightforwardness of Sherwood Anderson, and the synesthetic guile of Baudelaire.” Soon he was playing basketball with Jack Nicholson and partying with Andy Warhol, staying in the Chelsea Hotel alongside Patti Smith and Leonard Cohen, and being photographed for Life and People. He received enormous quantities of fan mail, little of which he answered, but most of which he filed under either “Unrequited Publishers” or “Pests.” “Richard Brautigan’s sperm,” one woman exclaimed after she’d fertilized him, spitting the poet’s semen into her hand and examining it, Hjortsberg tells us, as if it were “some precious treasure, bright pearls from the crown jewels of an emperor.”

When Brautigan published The Abortion several years later, he seemed to be making a sly joke of it all. Completed in San Francisco in 1963, the novel had been rejected by a dozen publishers; now Brautigan received a $100,000 advance from Simon & Schuster. In one chapter of the novel, the narrator describes twenty-three people who deliver their manuscripts to the library for unpublished writers. A middle-aged man dressed in leather brings in a 290-page book about bikers and bondage that is, appropriately, printed on cowhide. An old man with the dull name of Charles Green brings in an equally dull novel called “Love Always Beautiful,” which

he’s been trying to publish since he was seventeen and has had rejected a record-breaking 459 times. And then a tall man with a long blond mustache comes in with a manuscript entitled “Moose.” His name is Richard Brautigan, and he’s a failed writer like all the rest. “This was the third or fourth book [Brautigan] had brought to the library,” the narrator explains.

Every time he brought in a new book he looked a little older, a little more tired. He looked quite young when he brought in his first book. I can’t remember the title of it, but it seems to me the book had something to do with America.

“What’s this one about?” I asked, because he looked as if he wanted me to ask him something.

“Just another book,” he said.

Back at the real Brautigan Library, I had found a memoir in the Family section entitled “Strive for Mediocrity Even If It Is Beyond You: The Memoirs of Leo Witz.” It tells the life story of its author, a seventy-five-year-old grandfather whose “single, fifty-eight-year love affair” with his wife, a “most wonderful lady,” made, in the author’s opinion, “the involvements of Tristan and Isolde or Romeo and Juliet come off as rather bland friendships,” and who, if asked, “If you had your life to live over, what would you do differently?” could truthfully answer, “All I’d want is to do it all over again.” It’s dreadfully boring stuff, though it does have a certain resonance with the average man’s experience:

Barbara and I have now been members of Green Acres Country Club, in Northbrook, Illinois, for forty years. When I was a kid I couldn’t wait for school to let out. Now that I have retired, I can be out to play every day, and I don’t even have to go to school. Playing consists of tennis on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday mornings, with golf filling out Wednesdays, Fridays, and Sundays. Barb plays golf with the girls on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and we play together on Sundays.

The book proves that Witz was, in his own words, “better than average at just about everything he tried but not all that good at anything.”

By the 1970s Brautigan had become more ambitious, and in 1976 he came up with a plan to “make one million dollars” every year by writing a new novel satirizing a different genre every year. Brautigan had always hated money. He delighted at how the Diggers made a spectacle of burning dollar bills, and he often said his favorite work of his own was a homemade project called “Please Plant This Book,” a series of seed packets and poems he put together in 1968 to inspire amateur writers and distributed, for free, on the streets of San Francisco. Yet Brautigan had also developed a miser’s knack for accounting and saving his receipts. Hjortsberg suggests that Brautigan’s decline originated from his inability to handle the internal schism precipitated by wealth and fame. Hjortsberg tells of a late-night meal at a diner in 1973 during which Brautigan, viciously drunk, got up, left his table, and jammed his finger into every single other customer’s plate of food. When he had finished, he went to the cashier and paid each person’s tab. “Two dozen free breakfasts anointed by the touch of a poet,” Hjortsberg writes.

The previous year, fed up with San Francisco and in search of a new muse, Brautigan had taken a fishing trip to the mountain town of Pine Creek, Montana, where he met a group of macho writers and artists, including the novelists Thomas McGuane and Jim Harrison and the singer Jimmy Buffett. The crew lived in farmhouses in the shadow of the Rocky Mountains, where they partied and fished and fired guns. Brautigan, burned out from months of book tours and sick of his hippie reputation in San Francisco, soon bought land and joined them. “Montana has re-established my proximity to heroic nature,” he said.

If there’s a love story in Brautigan’s life, it’s a brief one, and it began around this time—on a visit to Japan Brautigan took after moving to Montana—when a married Japanese fan cold-called the author in his hotel room and he asked her on a date. Hjortsberg describes this woman, Akiko Yoshimura, as a “daughter in a box,” the Japanese term for an obedient woman, and it’s not hard to see Brautigan’s attraction to submissive types. He had a bondage fetish, and, in an April 1985 Rolling Stone profile, Lawrence Wright reported that women in San Francisco bars would warn one another of his predilection for tying lov-
ers up. It was perhaps no surprise when Brautigan and Yoshimura, after a monthlong romance, got engaged—but when the couple returned to Montana, their life together quickly fell apart.

At this time, in 1976, William Hjortsberg was a thirty-five-year-old novelist, and, in addition to being part of the Montana crowd, he was also Brautigan's nearest neighbor. "Had I even guessed... that someday I'd be his biographer," Hjortsberg writes forty years later, "I'd have been a proper little Boswell, jotting down every overheard witticism." He's being falsely modest; Jubilee Hitchhiker is a book of Boswellian completeness. Nearly every dinner, drinking bout, fight, and one-night stand—and there were a lot of all four—is recounted in minute detail. In the scenes where Hjortsberg reconstructs events from interviews and journals, he uses the third person, going so far as to refer to himself as "Gatz," his nickname; but when he recalls his personal experiences with Brautigan—drinking in Palo Alto or fishing in Montana—he uses the first person. The result is a book that is rigorous yet warm, one that smudges the person. The result is a book that is rigorous and one-verse that makes Brautigan—recalls his personal experiences with Brautigan's career and legacy, an important part of what aligned him with West Coast literature; he saw himself as the archetypal Constance, who, in the 1970s, as his novels increasingly were rejected, the writer and his characters merged into one snubbed identity—a figure like the archetypal Constance, who, in Brautigan's 1975 play on porno paperbacks, Willard and His Bowling Trophies, was once a promising novelist but by her late twenties has been forgotten. Critics called Trophies "vile," and Michael Rogers, in the New York Times, suggested that "perhaps Richard Brautigan should make a retreat from the novel form." Not long after, Brautigan gave up on his genre project.

Perseverance in the face of critical scorn, however, soon became a key element of Brautigan's career and legacy, an important part of what aligned him with West Coast literature; he saw himself as the archetypal Constance, who, in the 1970s, as his novels increasingly were rejected, the writer and his characters merged into one snubbed identity—a figure like the archetypal Constance, who, in Brautigan's 1975 play on porno paperbacks, Willard and His Bowling Trophies, was once a promising novelist but by her late twenties has been forgotten. Critics called Trophies "vile," and Michael Rogers, in the New York Times, suggested that "perhaps Richard Brautigan should make a retreat from the novel form." Not long after, Brautigan gave up on his genre project. Barter himself knew Brautigan at the end of his life. "He was probably the most unusual teacher I've ever had," he told me in the library, explaining how, in 1982, he'd taken a creative-writing course with Brautigan at Montana State University. Brautigan, by then, had a lot of lessons to offer by way of negative example. Unwilling to acclaim himself to an impoverished lifestyle, he had taken out a suicide loan, the kind he knew he'd never be able to pay back, from the First Security Bank of Livingston, and used the money for extravagant alcohol binges and stays at five-star hotels. He was so desperate for affection that, when a fawning study of his oeuvre was published by the French critic Marc Chénier, he had a woman he'd once dated read him the book as a bedtime story.

At school, Brautigan was a mess, and he made jokes about checking out of the "Big Hotel." He'd broken his leg and could be seen tottering across campus in a cane, overweight and bleary-eyed. To soothe a herpes outbreak, he swaddled his genitals in toilet paper, which faculty reported seeing falling out of the cuffs of his jeans. "Whatever magic Montana once possessed had vanished," Hjortsberg writes. With his borrowed money, Brautigan left to travel Europe. When he read to a crowd of punks in Amsterdam and they demanded an encore, he demurred, saying that he didn't have any more. He visited friends in Munich and told them that "a computer at the Keio Plaza Hotel in Tokyo now handled all his future literary business." When he met a Spanish woman who was in Amsterdam to have an abortion, the two began a romance so bleak and blackly humorous it could have come straight from one of his own stories. He returned to the island of Majorca with her, where, one night, he got so drunk that he passed out in an alley with a stray dog. "American millionaire writer found drunk in the gutter sleeping with a dog," reported the local paper. With about $10,000 left, Brautigan flew to Bolinas, California, where he owned a home. He began carrying a gun everywhere. He published a final novel, So the Wind Won't Blow It All Away, a lyrical story about a welfare kid in rural 1940s Washington who fishes in his sneakers, collects beer bottles in a baby buggy, and hangs out with a corpulent couple who bring their living-room set to a pond, casting their lines from the sofa. "I didn't know that afternoon that the ground was waiting to become another grave," says the narrator in the opening line.
of the novel; by its end, he has accidently killed his friend with a rifle. He hides in the grass, watching the couple fish, gradually disappearing into the landscape himself.

I had become so quiet and so small in the grass by the pond that I was barely noticeable, hardly there. I think they had forgotten all about me. I sat there watching their living room shining out of the dark beside the pond. It looked like a fairy tale functioning happily in the post–World War II gothic of America before television crippled the imagination of America and turned people indoors and away from living out their own fantasies with dignity.

The novel is a small masterpiece of autobiographical fiction. But in relation to its era—it was written in 1982, as contemporaries like Don DeLillo and Thomas Pynchon were tracking late capitalism’s information overload and deconstructing postwar narratives of American power—the themes of So the Wind Won’t Blow It All Away seem quaint. If, in the 1960s, Brautigan offered a kaleidoscopic vision of America—its dropouts, its environmental degradation, its swelling aspirations—now he offered simply a parable of a lost world and a lost writer. Reviews of the novel were tepid or downright frigid, and Brautigan wrote to his agent: “Book sales are not paying the rent. It’s sort of sad to publish a book to his agent: “Book sales are not paying the rent. It’s sort of sad to publish a book to his agent: “Book sales are not paying the rent. It’s sort of sad to publish a book to his agent: “Book sales are not paying the rent. It’s sort of sad to publish a book to his agent: “Book sales are not paying the rent. It’s sort of sad to publish a book to his agent: “Book sales are not paying the rent. It’s sort of sad to publish a book to his agent: “Book sales are not paying the rent. It’s sort of sad to publish a book...