Arts & Humanities

Bookmakers

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1966: Eric Banks ’88CC is born in Vicksburg, Mississippi. In New York, Katherine Anne Porter wins the National Book Award for fiction and the Pulitzer Prize. Kauai King wins the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness but finishes fourth in the Belmont Stakes.

1975: John Ashbery ’50GSAS publishes his poetry collection *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. Eric Banks listens on the radio to a battle of the sexes between the magnificent filly Ruffian and the Derby-winning colt Foolish Pleasure. On the backstretch at Belmont Park, Ruffian breaks down, and is later destroyed.

1976: Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait* wins the literary triple crown — the Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award, and the first-ever National Book Critics Circle (NBCC) award for poetry. Banks, for his tenth birthday, receives from his father an open account at the

local bookstore.

1977: Seattle Slew wins that other Triple Crown. Banks reads *On the Road*.

1978: Affirmed wins the Triple Crown. Of the eleven Triple Crown wins in history, this is the only time two have come back-to-back, putting a gallop in a boy's chest in Vicksburg. Ashbery is an NBCC poetry finalist for *Houseboat Days*. In the criticism category, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties*, by Morris Dickstein '61CC, finishes behind Susan Sontag's *On Photography*.

1979: The NBCC finalists for criticism include three books by Columbians: *Orientalism*, by Professor Edward Said, *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries*, by Professor Meyer Schapiro '24CC, '35GSAS, and *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*, by Mississippian Eudora Welty, who attended the business school in the early thirties. It's *Modern Art* by a nose.

1981: Banks enters high school in Vicksburg, where the reading is skewed toward Oxford's William Faulkner. Greenville-raised Walker Percy '41PS is an NBCC fiction finalist for *The Second Coming*.

1981–2011: MTV. The Internet. Amazon. Barnes & Noble megastores. E-books. Reports of death, some exaggerated, some not: the death of independent bookshops, of newspapers, of book-review sections, of publishing, of Barnes & Noble.

2012: Books still exist. So does the NBCC. So does Eric Banks, who, as the NBCC's president, has just marshaled his first NBCC Awards — a month of events and intense book devouring, culminating in a two-day run of readings and ceremonies — and is well-nigh about to drop.

"I feel like a character in *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*" says Banks, the day after the NBCC Awards ceremony in New York. (Lest one think Banks has a one-track mind, the referenced novel concerns not *Equus caballus* but a group of Depression-era dance marathoners.) Banks, a Southern-inflected gentleman of lavender shirts, white-and-black checked jackets, and glasses perhaps unavoidably evocative of Tennessee Williams, has an out-of-time quality, and would not appear incongruous at a Plimpton cocktail party circa 1963 or in the grandstand last summer at Saratoga

or at the Algonquin Hotel in 1974 when critics John Leonard, Nona Balakian ’43JRN, and Ivan Sandrof got the idea for a book award granted by working critics and reviewers. Banks, in preparation for the 2012 awards, has been reading, chairing panels, deliberating with the other critics, stuffing goody bags for the guests, printing out thank-you letters to the finalists, and rushing to the market to pick up lemons, limes, and an extra bottle of vodka for the reception.

On the evening of March 8, four hundred people crowded into the New School’s Tishman Auditorium to witness this literary Run for the Roses. The event was free and open to the public, but it had the feel of an advance-sale affair. A few flashbulbs burst in the front rows, raising the glamour factor a notch, but never beyond a level of tasteful understatement, a sense of proportion in the digital age. The atmosphere was one of reverence for books, not personalities. A luster of high accomplishment did radiate from the thoroughbreds in the room, but any air of intimidation was genteelly absorbed into a larger spirit that followed Banks’s lead: humble, gracious, bighearted, hungry for the printed word.

In his opening remarks, Robert Polito, director of the New School’s writing programs, honored the NBCC’s thirty-seven-year history by reading a passage from the title poem of Ashbery’s *Self-Portrait* that began:

> On the surface of it
> There seems no special reason why that light
> Should be focused by love . . .

Polito then introduced Banks, who informed the audience that the six winners — for autobiography, biography, criticism, fiction, nonfiction, and poetry — had been selected just an hour before. This gave matters a fresh-off-the-presses glow. “We are fortunate,” Banks said, “to have represented on the stage this evening the most exemplary works published in 2011.”

“The most exciting thing about Columbia for me was the great-books program,” says Banks, who was an anthropology major and a John Jay Scholar. While chewing on Homer and Plato, Banks sat in on Andreas Huyssen’s class in the Department of Germanic Languages, where he read Nietzsche, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt School writers. In anthropologist Robert Murphy’s Introduction to Structuralism, he studied Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, and Althusser. He gives much credit for this

intellectual romp to the efforts of Michael Rosenthal ’67GSAS, the assistant dean at the time. “The John Jay Scholarship, which Rosenthal oversaw, made it possible for me to come to Columbia,” Banks says. “Rosenthal was incredibly generous about helping students. I was a middleclass kid from a small town, and he and the program made me feel comfortable.”

After Columbia, Banks began graduate studies in anthropology at the University of Chicago. It was in the Windy City that he developed a taste for playing the ponies. He frequented two Chicago racetracks — Sportsman’s Park and Hawthorne, which he describes as “rinky-dink, the equivalent of a bad card at Aqueduct.” He worked as a copyeditor for the University of Chicago Press, but the horses, too, kept his critical faculties sharp. “I love handicapping, looking at a set of races and trying to figure out which horse is the most likely winner. You have to process a lot of information and determine what’s relevant and what’s not.”

Banks returned to New York in 1994. He freelanced as a copyeditor at the university presses of Oxford, Chicago, and Nebraska, and for Zone Books, which was publishing art-history and theoretical texts from France being translated for the first time. A year later, he became a senior editor at Artforum, and in 2002 he resurrected that journal’s book review, Bookforum, where he was editor in chief until 2008. That year, Banks joined the board of the NBCC, and in March 2011 he was elected president.

“We look for literary excellence, originality, and intellectual substance,” Banks says, the “we” being the board’s twenty-five members, who read the thirty finalists — five books apiece in the six categories — and discuss, debate, and vote. “A book should be worth the time it takes to read it. The finalists are books that are worth the time.”

After the winners gave their speeches, each a gem of grace and humor, the festivities moved to a New School hall on West 13th Street. There, guests filled plates with meatballs, broccoli florets, hummus, and pita crisps. At the bar, beer and wine trailed behind bourbon. Banks was in meet-and-greet mode among the milling editors and writers, many of whom figured into the NBCC’s six-hundred-strong membership. Nearby, NBCC vice president Steven Kellman, a critic and University of Texas professor dressed in chestnut tweed, talked to writer Jay Neugeboren ’59CC, well-groomed in a red shirt and checked blazer and about to publish his nineteenth book. Parul Sehgal ’10SOA, winner of last year’s NBCC Nona Balakian Citation for

Excellence in Reviewing, in a black dress that matched her long hair, chatted with Craig Morgan Teicher ’05SOA, a brown-maned bard in a pale buttoned shirt who is chair of the NBCC poetry committee. And there, moving fluidly through the room, her glimpsed face reminiscent of one of those fair and regal film actresses who play Queen Elizabeth, was Jennifer Egan, whose novel *A Visit from the Goon Squad* won the 2011 NBCC Award for fiction and the Pulitzer Prize. Over in a corner, James Marcus ’84SOA, the deputy editor of *Harper’s*, was heard to say, “You learn how to write a book and not write a book at the same time.” No one disagreed.

Meanwhile, Banks, who has written about racetrack life for the *New York Times*, *Slate*, and the *Guardian*, was discussing his side interest with a man from the neighborhood.

“When people talk about literature and sports, it’s usually baseball, but horseracing has a very rich literature,” Banks said, and tossed off names like flinging flowers off a bridge: William Nack’s *Big Red of Meadow Stable*, Jaimy Gordon’s *Lord of Misrule*, Laura Hillenbrand’s *Seabiscuit*, Jane Smiley’s *Horse Heaven*, Joe H. Palmer’s *This Was Racing*, W. C. Heinz’s article “Death of a Racehorse.”

Death. The neighbor, holding a salmon-on-pumpernickel finger sandwich, said to Banks, “As a young boy, you must have been traumatized when they shot Ruffian.”

“They didn’t shoot her,” Banks said.

“They didn’t?”

“They don’t shoot horses anymore.”

“They don’t?”

“No, they stopped doing that back in the 1940s and ’50s. Now they use an injection containing barbiturates.”

We’d like to go on, but it seems we’re in the homestretch; the finish line approaches, and so we must leave Banks to his marathon and announce the 2012 NBCC winners: for criticism, Geoff Dyer (*Otherwise Known as the Human Condition: Selected Essays and Reviews*); for poetry, Laura Kasischke (*Space, in Chains*); for biography, John Lewis Gaddis (*George F. Kennan: An American Life*); for autobiography, Mira Bartók (*The Memory Palace*); for nonfiction, Maya Jasanoff (*Liberty’s Exiles: American Loyalists in the Revolutionary World*). In the evening’s most talked-about contest,

the fiction prize went to Boston writer Edith Pearlman for *Binocular Vision: New and Selected Stories*.

Pearlman, who has received little recognition until now (she was also a finalist for the National Book Award), is seventy-five years old, reminding us, as the Good Book says: the race is not always to the swift.

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