

*Laurence Goldstein*



## Introduction

The public history of a city can be written by a single author, but its inner history—the story of its cultural evolution, the ever-unfinished portrait of its shape-shifting identity—can only be written by a composite author. Jonathan Marwil provided us with *A History of Ann Arbor* in 1987; the present volume is a complementary account of how its citizens have periodically imagined this region of Southeast Michigan into life. Since its founding in 1824, and especially after the establishment of the University of Michigan in 1837, Ann Arbor has provoked a multitude of men and women into wielding their pens and keyboards with the aim of defining their alma mater.

Not every writer on the subject was (or is) a professor or alumnus of the university. As far back as 1836, Harriet Martineau, the British social reformer who traveled through the United States in the same decade as Tocqueville, remarked suggestively, “At Ypsilanti I picked up an Ann Arbor newspaper. It was printed badly, but the contents were pretty good. It could happen nowhere out of America that so raw a settlement as Ann Arbor, where there is difficulty in procuring decent accommodations, should have a newspaper.” Martineau singled out the theme that writers ever since have returned to when they chose to characterize the city. It is a place distinguished by *intellectual culture*. I borrow this term from the eminent philosopher John Dewey’s contribution to a student publication later in the century, when he was teaching at the University of Michigan. Of course, every university town (or city) sponsors cerebral activity, but Ann Arbor gets credited by the writers in this anthology with an extra-ordinary amount of intellectual vitality. Some of the rhetoric is raw boosterism, no doubt about it. But most of it is well-earned admiration for the city’s scholarly and literary journals, bookstores and libraries, professoriat and student bodies, visiting speakers, scientific and technological laboratories, and socially progressive citizenry.

Ann Arbor’s reputation as a “literary city” may be a default recognition that it is not an industrial or commercial center and that the failure

of its efforts in the early nineteenth century to become the state's capital shaped its self-image in significant ways. Detroit, Lansing, Flint, Grand Rapids, and the expansive wilderness of the Upper Peninsula achieved real and symbolic power while Ann Arbor cultivated its identity as an arca-dian retreat, though a crowded one. The University of Michigan became the most populous university in the country by the Civil War era, and the "college town" that grew up around it was destined to become a city sooner or later. The first novel with scenes set in Ann Arbor, by Justin McCarthy in 1875, disguised the town under the name New Padua and depicted it as hardly more than a few streets servicing the faculty and students. By the end of the century, a book of fiction could be titled *Ann Arbor Tales* under the working assumption that the name would be recognized throughout the nation. Thanks in good part to German immigration, the city increasingly took on a social, economic, and religious identity connected to European cultures.

After World War I, Ann Arbor became urbanized at a rate that dis-comfited the genteel part of the population, those who had cherished it as a village made up of fine old residences with large, lovely gardens and plentiful clothing stores and markets making up the downtown. Massive construction projects on and off campus, many of them initiated to accommodate the automobile, gave Ann Arbor the metropolitan profile of cities with much larger populations. New technologies nourished what became known as "The Research Center of the Midwest," including high-tech and pharmaceutical companies catering to the entire country. If residents off campus resented the increasing power of the uni-versity to set the agenda for the city, so did many instructors and stu-dents begrudge the increasing commercialization of public space, often for the benefit of faraway investors and developers. Town and gown con-flicts were exacerbated in the 1960s when students put Ann Arbor on the map as a radical force in American life. When the activism repre-sented by the first teach-in on the Vietnam War, Students for a Demo-cratic Society (SDS), the Black Action Movement, and the White Pan-ther Party, along with a notorious five-dollar fine for possession of marijuana, drew national attention to the city, even many conservative Ann Arborites felt a certain pride in challenging the status quo. They felt it again in the early years of the twenty-first century when the con-flict over affirmative action resulted in landmark Supreme Court deci-sions. All of these volatile growing pains of an important cultural site nourished the vitality of literary production from the beginnings of the city's history to the present day.

Ann Arbor was first characterized in print as an asylum by Frederika Bremer, a Swedish traveler scouting out the contours of America, who described it in *The Homes of the New World* (1853) as “a peaceful retreat from the unquiet life of the world.” More recently it has jokingly been called a six-square-mile world of ideas surrounded by reality. It may be useful to focus for a moment on that statement. That Ann Arbor is a realm apart from reality makes perfect sense when one considers the qualities of an intellectual culture. A world of ideas—of argument, of spirited discourse, of new and subversive formulations about everything—is indeed a glass house through which the inhabitants catch sight of a different world than the one presented to them by conventional wisdom. That is one function of a university. Living in a privileged place, one can become accustomed to thinking that the rest of the world conforms to the shape of one’s own experience, rather like the old woman in Nancy Willard’s novel *Sister Water* who thinks that everything she sees on television is happening in Ann Arbor. For students especially, the retraction of parental monitoring creates an enchanted and liberated space for powerful dreaming, for radical new forms of self-definition and community action. Sexual politics gets a lot of attention in the creative writing in this anthology, but there are defiant and influential assertions of communal political change as well. The students who rioted in favor of joining the Civil War in the 1860s and the students who demonstrated in opposition to the Vietnam War in the 1960s based their activism to some degree on the values fermenting on the campus.

So “reality” gets changed in the process and not just by being put in ironizing quotation marks. At a time when 70 percent of all Americans attend some institution of higher education, the surrounding world of hard knocks and lifelong opportunities is constantly reshaped by the ideas percolating in the university and pouring into the world outside the ivied walls. Surely the relationship is a symbiotic one. When John F. Kennedy visited Ann Arbor in 1960 to announce his idea for a Peace Corps on the steps of the Michigan Union, and when Lyndon Johnson came four years later to propose the creation of a “Great Society” during a commencement address in the football stadium, the dreams of an older establishment mingled with the radical ideas fostered on campus to generate an innovative and potent sea change in the cultural life of this nation and the world beyond. “The permanent and fruitful outcome of a college education should be the training of one’s *human nature*,” John Dewey insisted in the aforementioned essay. And Ann Arbor’s writers have risen gladly to that pointed challenge by seeking to effect a

merger of classroom concepts and policies of social betterment. From President E. O. Haven's prophecy in the mid-nineteenth century of a Christian civilizing force marching outward from Ann Arbor to the *Port Huron Statement* fashioned by the Students for a Democratic Society a century later, Ann Arbor has been the site of humanizing, indeed utopian, models for social transformation.

But there is more to being human than being intellectual. It would be a gross distortion of the literary record if an editor filled his anthology with writings about ideas, all-important as they are. It's fair to say that the majority of writings about the university, from first to last, focus on two other aspects of the academic condition: sports and recreational social life. There is no overestimating the passion for football, especially, in Ann Arbor, around the state of Michigan and in the hearts of alumni throughout the world. Football appears as a leitmotif in this anthology, first appearing in the nineteenth century (though it's interesting to note in a novel of 1899 that baseball had more respect on campus) and carrying forward into the fiction of Charles Baxter and Elwood Reid and the poetry of Donald Hall. (Alumnus Lawrence Kasdan rightly set his reunion film *The Big Chill* on the day of an important Michigan football game.) Because there are so many books available about football at Michigan I have represented only one actual game, in the lean journalistic prose of Pete Waldmeir writing about the historic victory of Michigan over Ohio State in 1969, "the greatest college football game of all time," in the words of Don Canham, athletic director of the University of Michigan. Likewise, "Homage to Cazzie Russell" by Richard Goodman composes a vision of basketball "perfection" as awesome as a theorem of Euclid or a lyric of Emily Dickinson.

And then there are the infinitely complex social relations, on and off campus, undertaken by young people spending four or more years of their lives in the privileged space of an academic milieu. I have chosen brief samples of fiction from the nineteenth century to demonstrate the earlier forms of what might be called *affiliations*, be they same-sex (fraternities, sororities, dormitories) or, more often, mixed-gender dynamics (dances, courtship, professional rivalries). I invite the reader to keep an eye on the slang, on the language in general, in which these early authors and characters speak their minds. The way of speaking about everything will change by the time we get to Allan Seager, Marge Piercy, and Wendy Wasserstein, but the forms of attraction and repulsion remain steady. Notice, too, how romance shades into intellectual culture in some of these writings, as in a novel of 1933 by Richard Meeker, called by its editor in

1987 “possibly the first novel published in America to show male homosexuality in a positive light,” or a Joyce Carol Oates novella in which the push and pull of sexual desire has much to do with the way graduate students at a party promiscuously exchange their axioms and postulates. Nothing is more essentially Ann Arbor than a raucous argument about philosophy and literature at a pack-the-flat party.

When I mentioned to people during the last couple of years that I was assembling writings about Ann Arbor for an anthology, especially to acquaintances over forty, almost always the first response was, “Don’t forget to include the scene in the underground tunnels in that Ross Macdonald book!” The reference was to Macdonald’s novel of 1944, *The Dark Tunnel*, which was written shortly after the author received his M.A. at the University of Michigan. (He wrote a thesis on Coleridge.) When Macdonald returned to Michigan in the early 1970s to receive an honorary degree, he was invited to revisit the steam tunnels running under the main campus and declined. Macdonald’s novel is so memorable, perhaps, because it grapples with the dark side of Ann Arbor, here figured as a Nazi presence and visible in later writings about the university as a forbidding cold war regimen of control, which, if not fascist, is portrayed as oppressive to the spirit of a free intellectual culture.

Some writers nostalgically depict Ann Arbor as a sort of utopian open society, a crucible of soul making that prepares the individual to withstand the pressures of the outer world. This view of the educational experience nourishes the iconography of the ivory tower. Other writers who revisit Ann Arbor in their memoirs see the matter with more complexity. Ann Arbor, in this view, is part and parcel of the everyday conflicts of the rest of the world, and what is most happily remembered is the vehemence with which the creative spirit struggled—in classrooms, in dorm rooms, in fraternity lounges, in the offices of the *Michigan Daily* or the Union or the Administration Building—against the temptation toward passivity and indifference. I have included two full-length essay-memoirs, by Arthur Miller and Dorothy Gies McGuigan, that render the nuances and subtleties of self-creation in an environment that is not always hospitable to the individual will. Excerpts from book-length memoirs by Tom Hayden, Sven Birkerts, and Ted Solotaroff likewise document how the values taking form in Ann Arbor strengthened the author when he left the city for larger venues—Los Angeles, Boston, and New York. Just as Alice Hamilton forged her social activism in the late nineteenth century by determined study and pragmatic actions, so the post–World War II students who lingered in Ann Arbor for several

seasons armed themselves for the polemics they would write in later years. In each case, the author pays tribute to Ann Arbor mentors who guided them into a wiser adulthood.

Two *Michigan Daily* columns by twenty-first-century undergraduates conclude the anthology. Johanna Hanink's thoughtful response to the horrific events of September 11, 2001, models for us how one young writer registered the historical catastrophe, immediately, journalistically, on the pulse of her fragile belief system. The other, by Michael Grass, concludes the volume in the only way possible, by welcoming us (as imaginary freshmen) to the city of Ann Arbor.

Unlike the thankless task of editors such as Phillip Lopate, who in *Writing New York: A Literary Anthology* (1998) had to select a small number of poems from thousands of worthy possibilities, I encountered a relatively small range of first-rate poems. The poems enlarge our sense of the topography of Ann Arbor, taking us into neighborhoods, hospitals, art galleries, and other places unvisited by the prose writers. As with the fiction and essays, I kept to the rule that the work had to be clearly anchored in Ann Arbor, mentioning actual locations and not just set in a place that could be anywhere—even if the poem were written in and about Ann Arbor. Of course, rules are made to be broken, and there is some flexibility in the selection. For example, Robert Hayden does not mention Ann Arbor in “The Performers,” but I can testify personally to the authenticity of his little drama: I, too, had an office on the seventh floor of Haven Hall in the early 1970s and well remember Hayden telling me of his delighted surprise upon swiveling in his chair one day and finding two window washers seemingly dangling in space in order to scrub his windows clean.

I have chosen to omit a famous poem popularly associated with Ann Arbor. Robert Frost's lyric “Acquainted with the Night” describes a forlorn figure walking through an unnamed city. “One luminary clock against the sky / Proclaimed the time was neither wrong nor right,” he laments. Some partisans have identified this clock as the one on Burton Tower, but that is impossible since the tower was not built till long after the poem's date of composition. Others identify the tower clock as part of a downtown building in the 1920s, which Frost would have noted during his tenure as writer-in-residence. Frost remarked to Charles H. Miller, “I'm often asked which tower belongs to that poem. . . . It's true there was a clock on high in Ann Arbor, and I liked looking at it. And it's true that I wrote the poem in Ann Arbor. But the poem isn't about

any one clock, or about Ann Arbor. It's about acquaintance with the night!" I'll let the poet have the last word on that subject.

Under the title "Authors and Wolverines" in the March 4, 1939, issue of the *Saturday Review of Literature*, Arnold Mulder wrote that "sober honesty compels the admission that authors—upper case authors—are about as rare in Michigan as the 'skunk bear' ever was and that the flowering of literary Michigan is still in the future." Sober honesty compels me to agree with Mulder that there is no major literary figure, no canonical masterpiece, in the annals of pre-1939 Michigan, let alone Ann Arbor. One looks jealously at a kindred anthology, *Berkeley: A Literary Tribute*, edited by Danielle La France in 1997, which boasts of writings by the likes of Lincoln Steffens, Frank Norris, and Jack London from the prewar period. When I began scouting for writing by the masters for this collection, I was told that Sinclair Lewis's novel *Arrowsmith* contained a hefty portion of scenes set in Ann Arbor. But that's not the case. Martin Arrowsmith attends a midwestern university called Winnimac, a portmanteau word combining Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Michigan, and there is no single reference to any location smacking of Ann Arbor—nor is the nearby big city of Zenith anything like Detroit. Authors who clearly had Ann Arbor in mind, based on their verifiable residence in the city, often took pains to disguise or radically distort its specific features in order to achieve some specious goal of "universality." With regret I excluded for this reason otherwise good writing by Lloyd C. Douglas, Chaym Zeldis, James Hynes, and others. Room had to be made, in any case, for that "flowering" of first-rate discourse about Ann Arbor that began to appear after 1939.

Nevertheless, I found much writing from the period 1824–1939 worthy of reprinting. If nothing else, these early documents provide a context or backstory for the themes that rush forth in full vigor during the last half century. It seemed useful to devote a full section of the anthology to scenes of matriculation at the university. The following two sections are somewhat arbitrary in their boundaries; they present thematic clusters that may have more continuity in the editor's eye than anyone else's. I was tempted to poach upon a sister publication, *The Huron River: Voices from the Watershed*, edited by John Knott and Keith Taylor in 2000. As numerous authors in that anthology point out, Ann Arbor cannot be fully brought to life without consideration of the river that runs through it. However, I have left the book entirely alone and direct attention to it here as required reading for anyone who enjoys the material in

this anthology. I did poach one item, by Charles Baxter, from another anthology, *Ann Arbor (W)rites: A Community Memoir*, edited by Nicholas Delbanco for the Ann Arbor District Library (2004). In this charming collection, café owners, business people, social workers, journalists, public school teachers, and librarians mingle with young fiction writers and poets to convey the texture and flavor of the city.

I agreed to undertake the editing of this book in part because I had mentally and otherwise noted during my teaching and editing life most of the significant texts about Ann Arbor. In seminars with titles such as “Landscape and Literature” I had constantly made the point that the personal experience of local places is always enhanced by reading other people’s versions of the same setting. The places we visit or live in are made more real by engaging textual versions of them. I am grateful to many sources that suggested avenues of inquiry, beginning with Mary Beth Lewis’s article “Fictional Ann Arbor” in the 2003–2004 *City Guide* published by the *Ann Arbor Observer*. Andrea Beauchamp, Sue Burris, Nicholas Harp, Patricia Hooper, Lawrence Joseph, Jonathan Marwil, Scottie Parrish, Grace Shackman, and Alan Wald tipped me off to possibilities, and Kristen Bloomstrom turned up some useful sources for further investigation. I am grateful to LeAnn Fields of the University of Michigan Press for suggesting the project in the first place and then messaging me with suggestions thereafter. I am also grateful to the host of congenial spirits at the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan who made key recommendations and guided me expertly through their holdings, especially Nancy Bartlett, head of university archives, and Francis Blouin, director of the Library, as well as Len Coombs, Karen Jania, Greg Kinney, and Bill Wallach.

Once, on visiting Oahu, I noticed the slogan printed on every issue of its chief newspaper: “Lucky you live Hawaii.” I have lived in many places that sported the same kind of smug satisfaction with themselves. Ann Arbor is not immune from a kind of snobbery about its identity, and this book might be cited as further evidence of its *amour propre*. The truth is, every populated place on the globe has a rich inner life and a long tradition worthy of comprehensive portraiture. Aracataca, Colombia, must have possessed a profound identity in order for Gabriel García Márquez to have immortalized it as Macondo in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Lafayette County, Mississippi, nourished William Faulkner’s astonishing reinvention of it as Yoknapatawpha, and Wahpeton, North Dakota, has served its native daughter Louise Erdrich as the inspiration for a series of outstanding novels. The writers who observe and then delineate their

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favorite locales help to bring those regions to enhanced and vivid life. Someday every remarkable place in the world will have its own anthology. Now it is Ann Arbor's turn—and the present offering is only the beginning.