



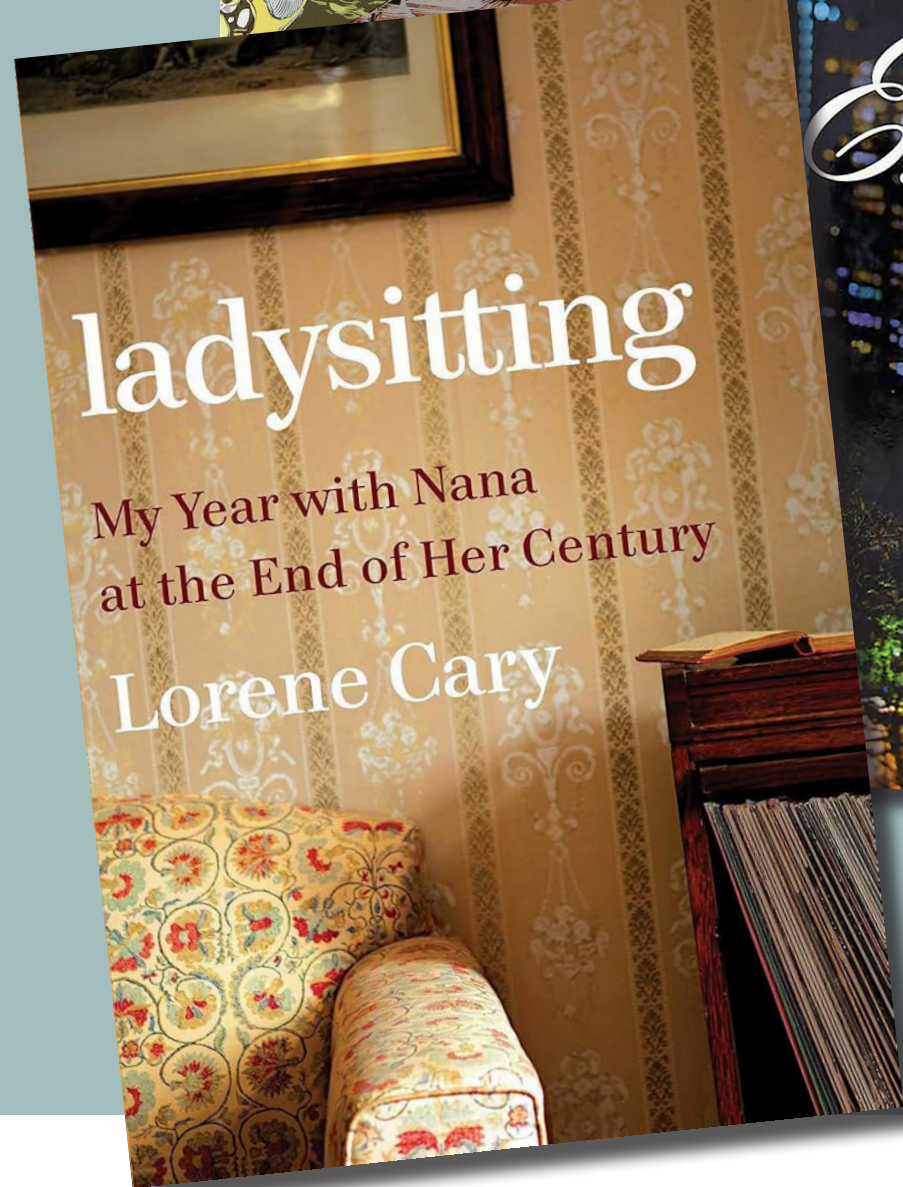
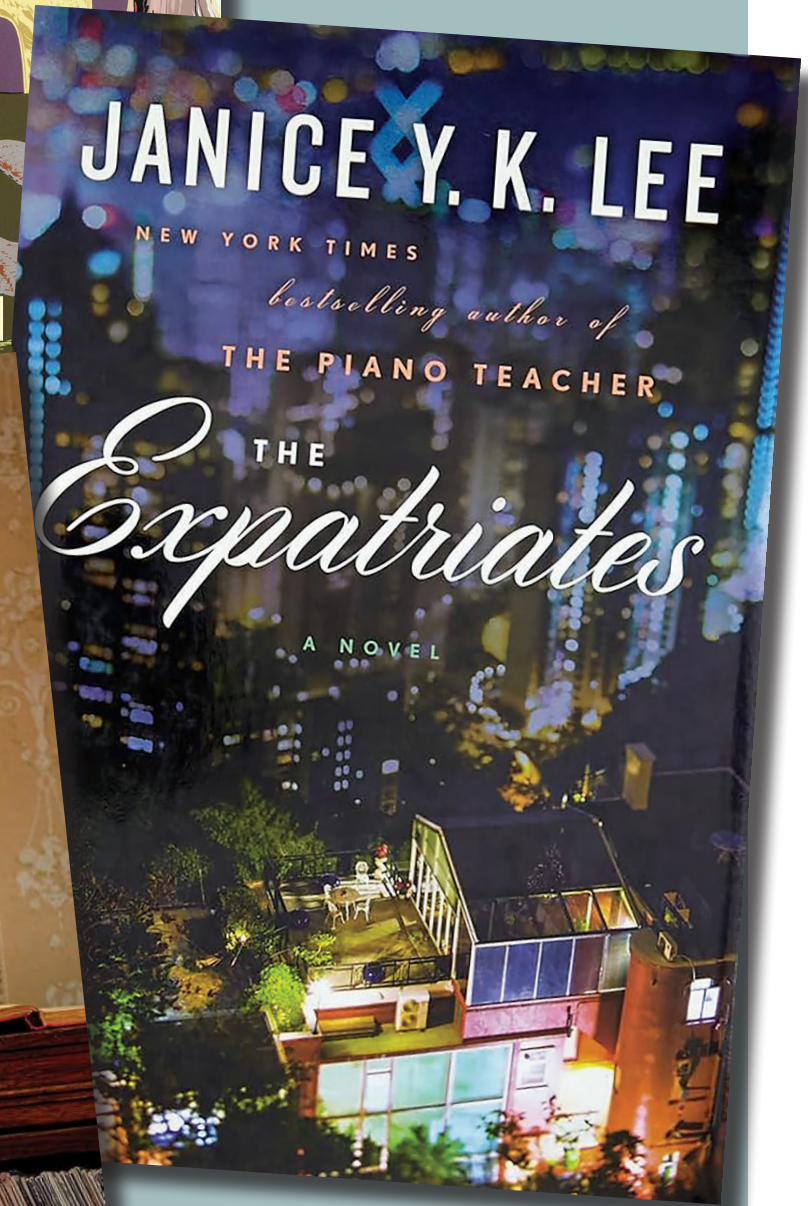
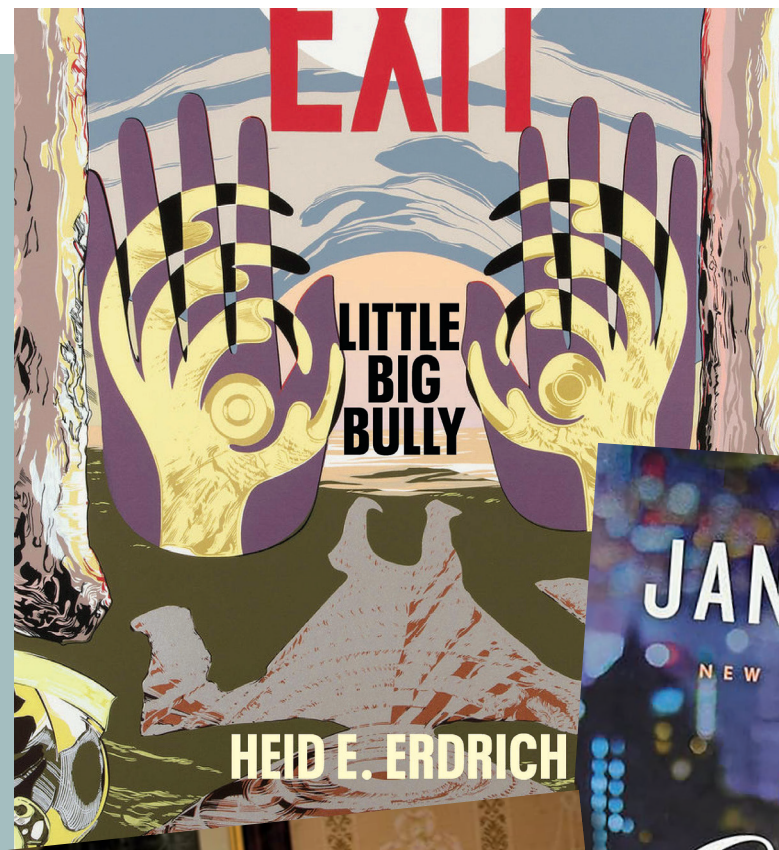
COURTESY HEID ERDRICH



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WRITING THEIR WAY

The long literary careers of three alumnae artists have taken some exciting new turns.

JANA F. BROWN

In December 2023, Heid E. Erdrich '82 was named the inaugural poet laureate of Minneapolis, the city where she's lived since 2008. A month later, Janice Y.K. Lee '90 saw the TV version of her 2016 novel "The Expatriates" come to life on Amazon Prime Video — the same month that the curtain went up at Philadelphia's Arden Theater on "Ladysitting," a play by Lorene Cary '74 based on her 2019 novel of the same name. Three of the many St. Paul's School graduates who have gone on to successful and rewarding literary careers, these alumnae are enjoying an eventful year that is seeing their past work bear new fruit — and lead to new artistic opportunities.



Erdrich with "Original Local," her 2019 homage to Indigenous ancestors and living relatives in stories, photos and recipes.

MEET THE NEW POET LAUREATE

Heid Erdrich likes to joke that she's the "busiest person I know who doesn't have a job." It's a facetious comment because Erdrich actually has more jobs simultaneously than some people have in a lifetime.

A renowned poet, teacher, editor, researcher, curator and mother of two, in her "free" time, Erdrich chaired the panel of poetry judges for the 2023 National Book Awards. She has a chapbook of poetry due out in October and is considering a winter teaching gig in Montana. And then there's her appointment as the inaugural poet laureate of Minneapolis.

"I'm trying to dial it back significantly," Erdrich says in earnest, "but I love it."

Erdrich did not have a chance to dial it back when it came to her work selecting finalists for the National Book Awards. Between April and November last year, when the winners were announced, she and four other judges reviewed nearly 300 books submitted in the poetry category. "Books arrived in my mail in alarmingly increasing volume through June," Erdrich says. "I warned my mail carrier, and we agreed he should bring only two full mail tubs a week for his back's sake."

While she continues to fill many roles, at heart Erdrich is a poet. She has published six collections of her work —

so far — from her distinct Native American perspective. Born in Minnesota, Erdrich spent her early life on the campus of a federally operated boarding school in North Dakota, where her parents were employed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Erdrich's mother was a member of the Turtle Mountain Ojibwe Band of Chippewa Indians, one of the consortium of tribes that ran the school. With strict limits on TV time at home, Erdrich and her six siblings became avid readers. While her mother was a visual artist who taught her to sew and paint, Erdrich's father consumed and recited poetry throughout his life and encouraged his children to memorize and perform poems for him.

"It was not an enriched environment like we think of now," Erdrich recalls, "except it was rich in creative, silent time."

Erdrich's path to St. Paul's School was entirely self-motivated, but triggered by her oldest sister, Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist Louise Erdrich. Though it wasn't always the case, the Erdrich sisters now live near one another in Minneapolis, and they talk about their work on a regular basis. Their grandfather, Patrick Gourneau, was the Turtle Mountain tribal chair, and wrote histories of the Ojibwe people. Another sister, Lise, is also a published author, while sister Angie is a doctor and children's book illustrator.

"There always have been a few writers in the family," Erdrich says. "Louise and I take walks and talk about work

all the time now. For decades, we never discussed writing, then she started sending me manuscripts, and occasionally she would come to a reading and I would show her my poems."

It was Louise who told her younger sister about A Better Chance, a program that offers pathways for young people of color to attend secondary schools. Erdrich remembers informing her parents that she was going to apply for a scholarship, and taking the necessary steps to fulfill application requirements. Her mother and father knew Erdrich wanted to study in a place where she could excel academically, creatively and socially, so they wholeheartedly supported the plan.

"Never in my wildest dreams did it occur to me that an important part of my life would center on New England," Erdrich says.

At SPS, Erdrich contributed to the student literary journal *Horae Scholasticae* and served as editor one year, though her first writing was published in the magazine of the Institute of American Indian Arts. Erdrich distinctly recalls the thrill of picking up a copy of the publication from her mailbox at the SPS Post Office. She found a home in the Poetry Society at St. Paul's, joy in reciting poems in chapel, and engagement in discussing writers and their works around the Harkness table.

"I didn't think I was going to be a poet at first," admits Erdrich, who studied English and creative writing at Dartmouth College. "I thought I would write children's books; that was my dream. I started writing poetry around the time I got to St. Paul's. I had teachers who helped me build my interest in it, and I felt completely supported."

In her not-so-spare time, Erdrich has become a trusted instructor herself, first at Johns Hopkins University and the University of St. Thomas, and more recently for a term back at Dartmouth, where she developed a special course focused on Native women and creativity to celebrate the 50th anniversary of coeducation at the college. One of Erdrich's favorite professional endeavors is giving writing workshops in Native communities, including her mother's Turtle Mountain Reservation in North Dakota, where Erdrich is an enrolled member. She serves on the board of Indigenous Nations Poets, an organization that supports Native American writers through fellowships and retreats. "The poets get to spend a week with a mentor, go to various sessions, meet their peers, and develop opportunities with the guidance of more established poets," she explains.

In addition to writing from her own perspective as a Native woman, Erdrich continues to promote the voices of others. In 2018, Graywolf Press published "New Poets of Native Nations," an Erdrich-edited collection featuring 21 emerging Native American poets. The tome has become a teaching tool, replacing similar — but outdated — volumes that go as far back as the 1980s. Erdrich also has become a champion of Native artists through thoughtful curatorial efforts, most recently producing "Boundless," an exhibition at Amherst College's Mead

Museum, for which Erdrich spearheaded the curation of creative literary and visual works.

"The exhibit is a combination of the archives and special collections of Native American literature at Amherst College and the visual art of the Mead Museum," Erdrich explains. "I gathered an advisory committee to make sure I had the input of those closest to indigenous people near Amherst. Consequently, there was a lot of inclusion of rare and historic literature by Massachusetts indigenous people."

The "Boundless" exhibit continues through July 6, and Erdrich is hard at work editing a companion publication that will be accessible both as a printed book and an online edition.

But before she takes a true pause from her many commitments, Erdrich will spend much of 2024 completing a project for her role as Minneapolis' poet laureate. For that, she will conduct a series of poetry listening sessions in different parts of the city, focusing on residents who live near the Dakota sacred sites, geography that's significant to the state's first inhabitants.

"I grew up in a Dakota village, and I've come here and made my home," she says. "I wanted to honor that by having public events and recording what folks have to say about the role of poetry in their community. My hope is that collecting voices from different quadrants, putting them together in a video, and installing that as public art will help spread a unifying message about the land we live on and how we encounter that through our differences."

Her packed schedule does not leave a lot of time for respite, but Erdrich isn't concerned.

"I love what I do," she says, "and feel lucky that these wonderful things keep coming to me."

“I started writing poetry around the time I got to St. Paul's. I had teachers who helped me build my interest in it, and I felt completely supported.”

— Heid Erdrich



AMANDA RHO

Lee in Hong Kong, the setting for her novel "The Expatriates" and the series based on it, "Expats."

A STORY GETS THE STAR TREATMENT

Sometime in 2017, Janice Lee '90 received a call from her agent, who had news regarding Lee's New York Times bestselling novel, "The Expatriates."

"She said, 'Nicole Kidman wants to buy your book,'" Lee recalls. "I guess when [Kidman] options something, she does really try to make it. There are lots of things that get optioned but never get made, so it was just thrilling."

Nearly seven years later, the TV version of Lee's original story premiered on the small screen as the six-episode limited series "Expats," starring Kidman, Sarayu Blue and Ji-young Yoo as a trio of American expatriates living in Hong Kong. In the years between acquisition and production, filmmaker Lulu Wang signed on as director. While it's not common practice in Hollywood to invite the novelist into the writer's room, Wang enlisted Lee to collaborate on the project.

"I give [Lulu] credit for that, because a lot of people don't want the writer in the room since they think your vision might not align with theirs," says Lee, whose debut novel, "The Piano Teacher," also was a New York Times bestseller. "I think it's only artists of enormous ability that have the confidence to include many voices, and that was my experience with her."

As part of a five-woman writers' room, Lee was credited as the author of the series' sixth and final episode. Even with all of her professional experience, writing for television was a new pursuit, and she was grateful for the opportunity to learn about the medium. With in-person

collaboration replaced by Zoom during the pandemic, Lee was impressed by the fortitude of Wang, Kidman and others to finish the subsequent production and filming process at such a challenging time.

Beyond creating the original characters and narrative that inspired the television adaptation, Lee's role in the production was complete once the scripts were locked. Because much of the series was set in Hong Kong, which mandated a multi-week quarantine during COVID-19, Lee was only able to visit the set briefly when the series shifted to Los Angeles. She never imagined her story as a novel, so seeing her characters spring to life through somebody's else's eyes — with select dialogue plucked directly from her novel — was an experience that both "thrilled and flattered" Lee.

"I didn't envision ["The Expatriates"] as a show," Lee says. "They're not the same thing at all, but you can feel the DNA running through them. I'm the mother of my novel, and [Lulu's] the mother of the show, so we've made things that are related like cousins. I feel lucky because she really got the spirit of the novel."

As in its book format, the "Expats" series explores themes that bind the characters together, from guilt and grief to purpose and social status and more. In writing the initial story, Lee set out to examine female relationships and motherhood, based on her own experience of living in Hong Kong while her four children were young.

"When you're an expat," she says, "you form very close relationships with people who are not displaced, but who

are there in that temporary environment with you. The show explores those things in a different way ... but I thought they came through beautifully."

In both formats, Margaret grapples with adjusting to cultural norms in Hong Kong while contemplating her purpose, her situational loss of personal career goals, and, most profoundly, the disappearance of her young son, Gus. That inciting incident emerged from Lee's experience of losing one of her own children for a few traumatic minutes years ago. Writing about such a sad event "spooked" Lee, and she put "The Expatriates" away for several months because she "didn't want to call this into the world." But she eventually followed that unsettling kernel, imagining what would happen if those few minutes became forever. "If that happens to you, how do you live?" she wondered at the time. "I was exploring that, and it's a very uncomfortable place to be."

Once the character of Margaret is in that unenviable position, the story begins to unveil the depth of friendship and understanding, both from the perspective of Margaret and her husband, Clarke, and from those whose lives also are impacted by the incident. The concept of grief levels led to a discussion in the writers' room about the way people tend to rank pain. In the final telling, Lee was impressed by Kidman's skillful portrayal of Margaret's complex emotions, and the way in which the Academy Award-winning actress was able to bring humanity and meaning to the character.

Lee is in the early stages of developing an outline for a new novel, but the chance to emerge from the solitary life of a novelist to collaborate with other creative minds in television is something she would gladly embrace again. For now, she's grateful to everyone who helped shepherd "Expats" on its journey from book to screen.

"To have artists like Nicole Kidman and Lulu Wong translate the vision was a privilege," Lee says. "When you write a novel, that's your artistic vision, and then when you sign it away to someone to make a movie or TV show, you're signing up to accept their vision. With that lens in mind ... I loved the end product they gave to the world."

PUTTING THE PERSONAL ON STAGE

When "Black Ice," the critically acclaimed memoir of her years at St. Paul's School, was released in 1991, Lorene Cary had one hope.

"The initial run was 7,500 copies, and all I kept thinking was, 'Please, let that sell out so I can get a contract to write another book,'" Cary recalls. "And then people wrote me letters because they had read it and wanted to talk to me about it. [And] I thought, 'I don't want to talk to anybody about this. I didn't even really want you to read it.'"

In the more than three decades that have passed since the book's release, "Black Ice" has sold hundreds of thousands of copies and is required reading at many schools. Over the course of her career as an author, educator and social activist, Cary has flashed her writing skills in many genres, from fiction to opera to plays. But until the 2019 publication of "Ladysitting: My Year with Nana at the End of Her Century," she had not felt the pull to explore the personal exposure of memoir again.

Early in 2024, Cary's recollections of caring for her grandmother in the last 18 months of her 101 years were brought to life in a production staged by the Arden Theatre in Cary's native Philadelphia. Cary wrote ("and rewrote again and again") the play version, transforming her experience into a stage version of the emotions and characters she had lived. But asked how it feels to see her memories come to life through performance, Cary pauses.

"It's like asking, 'How's it been walking around with no skin on?'" she says. "It's beyond walking around naked; it's like somebody takes off the skin and then the wind blows. It was like the first time doing a reading of 'Black Ice' and realizing that people wanted to talk about it. Seeing the play in the theater after a month of rehearsal readies one to see life turn into art. You keep company with others who face end-of-life with loved ones. I hear them laugh ... and then hear them sobbing."

Although she previously had been commissioned to write "My General Tubman," a play exploring the life of abolitionist Harriet Tubman that premiered at the Arden Theatre in early 2020, Cary had not intended to turn "Ladysitting" into a live-action story. Concerned about how the theater would survive the COVID-19 shutdown (including the last five performances of "My General Tubman"), the venue's artistic director approached Cary about adapting "Ladysitting" for the stage to help revive the Arden after an extended dormancy. She had previously turned the memoir into a 30-minute opera, so did not anticipate any difficulties reimagining it once again.

"I said I'd be happy to," Cary says, "But I had no idea how difficult that would be. I've rewritten the whole thing over and over, particularly after listening to actors read it around the table. And then, once the designer makes a wonderful set that is not our home, once the music is put in, once the director has come in and said, 'I have a vision,' by the time it gets to the stage, it's no longer me; it's a character I've written based on my experiences."

It's been 15 years since Alumni Horae first profiled the writing career of Lee, a member of the St. Paul's School Board of Trustees from 2013 to 2022, following the 2009 publication of her debut novel, "The Piano Teacher." Read about that New York Times bestselling work, and Lee's own journey from apologetic writer to confident novelist in this excerpt from the fall 2009 Horae.



As to why she chose to write about the year she spent caring for Nana at the end of her life, Cary points to the preface of “Ladysitting,” where she recounts childhood weekends at her grandmother’s home. There she “traveled with a sun patch across the floor of the suburban New Jersey neo-colonial, and soaked in more light and lux than my parents’ West Philadelphia apartment could ever offer.” Weekends at Nana’s meant being spoiled, and Cary glowed in her grandmother’s affection. Cary explains that she felt compelled to write about Nana — her stubbornness, her feistiness, her vanity, how she drove herself to work until the age of 94, how she was relentlessly independent, and how profoundly she feared death. Her fierce autonomy came with a refusal to leave her beloved home, despite her growing need for assistance — which Cary provided, though doing so was at times immensely challenging.

“I couldn’t just live it and then go on,” Cary explains. “There are some parts of life that I have to examine more deeply ... For this one, the only form I could do it in was memoir, and it felt to me like my own need for self-discovery, but also for honesty to readers. Fiction is about truth, but memoir is about truth and honesty.”

While Cary remained at the Arden through the first two weeks of rehearsal, and returned in the last week to give final notes, the stage version of “Ladysitting” reflected the vision of director Zuhairah McGill and the portrayals of Cary’s “characters” by Trezana Beverley (Nana), Monet Debose (Cary’s daughter, Zoë), Melanye Finister (Cary) and David Ingram (Cary’s husband,

Bob). There also was an additional character that Cary created for the stage that wasn’t in her memoir — Death, a shapeshifter played by Brian Anthony Wilson who even takes the form of Nana’s father.

“I made Death a character because you have to externalize the thing, which is Nana’s fear of Death, her fighting against Death, her having no company in her generation anymore, no siblings, no parents, no best friends, no husband,” Cary explains. “So Death keeps her company and talks to her with compassion and firmness. Nana breathes her last breath, and then Death comes back and holds her hand.”

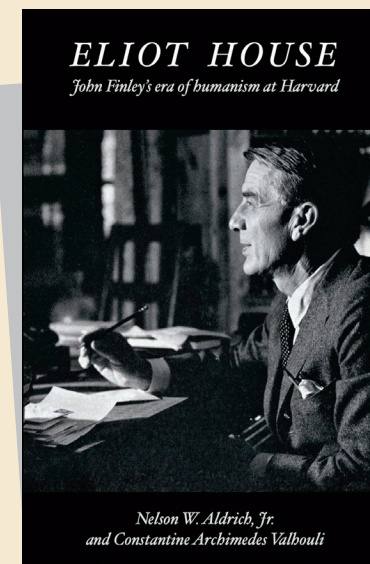
“Ladysitting” enjoyed a successful run at the Arden from Jan. 28 to March 10, including a Feb. 15 performance attended by a large group of SPS alumni. Cary plans to shop the play to other companies at the end of her term of teaching at the University of Pennsylvania.

At one time, just meeting the challenge of writing the memoir in the first place would have been enough to satisfy her. Now, though, Cary finds that telling the story of her time with Nana has redirected her thinking.

“It made me more certainly mortal,” she says. “I’m at the stage of life where I say, ‘How do I orient myself toward death? What do I think? How do I feel? How do I accept it?’ You get this life in this moment, and you get the opportunity to give and receive love. You either use that opportunity, or you mess it up.”

It’s an opportunity Cary has used well, much as Lee and Erdrich have done with opportunities of their own.

“Ladysitting” is the second play by Cary to be staged at Philadelphia’s Arden Theater.



ELIOT HOUSE

Nelson W. Aldrich Jr. '53 and Constantine A. Valhouli
johnfinleybook.com, 2024

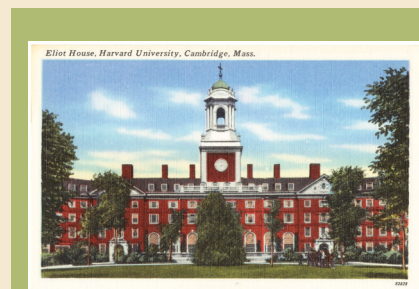
“Where else but Harvard would you find the grandson of Matisse, the grandson of Joyce and the great-great-grandson of God?”

In the 1950s, Eliot House master and classics professor John Finley made that remark to a New York Times reporter in reference to a dormitory suite that housed Paul Matisse, Stephen Joyce and Sadruddin Aga Khan, a lineal descendant of the prophet Mohammed. The line brought considerable attention to a college residence that would ultimately become known as “more Harvard than Harvard itself,” home over the decades to a cast of characters that included composer Leonard Bernstein, journalist Ben Bradlee and Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox '30. Poet Frank O’Hara roomed with writer-illustrator Edward Gorey and played Bernstein’s piano with art critic John Ashbery. Beat poet Gregory Corso, not even a Harvard student, lived in a tent in a friend’s Eliot House suite. Other houses had Pulitzer Prize winners; Eliot House had Joseph Pulitzer Jr. himself.

As a professor, Finley transformed philistines into philhellenes; as a public intellectual, he was the force behind “General Education in a Free Society,” Harvard’s 1946 post-World War II blueprint for education at the college that remained in place until the

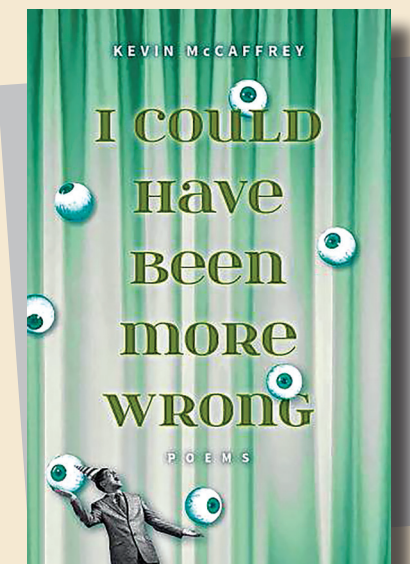
1980s. But it was as the master of Eliot House that Finley entered into Harvard’s mythology, stewarding the futures of his residents to opportunities that included — at least in one year — more Rhodes Scholarships than those awarded to entire universities. During his 1940-1968 tenure and long after, the manner in which he evaluated the applications of first-year students who wanted to spend their remaining three years under his guidance, and the depth in which he advised those students, was the stuff of Harvard legend. Decades before the term “life coach” entered the argot, Finley distinguished himself for his commitment to mentoring his residents with as much dedication as he put into educating his students.

A project of many years in the making, “The Master of Eliot House” was finished by Constantine Valhouli following the 2022 death of Nelson Aldrich '53, an Eliot House resident in his own right who is perhaps best known as poetry editor of The Paris Review and author of the book “George, Being George,” about Paris Review founder George Plimpton (yes, another Eliot House denizen). More than 600 pages in length, “Eliot House” illuminates the life of one of the most revered figures at one of education’s most revered institutions, and both asks and answers the question, “What is college for?”



“To an outsider, Eliot House is just another of Harvard’s eight masses of brick and steel. But buildings, particularly college buildings, have a way of impressing themselves on the minds and memories of those who live in them.”

— Harvard College Yearbook (1949)



I COULD HAVE BEEN MORE WRONG

Kevin McCaffrey '75
Four Winds Press, March 2024

There’s perhaps no better way to capture the sensibility of “I Could Have Been More Wrong,” the second volume of poems by Kevin McCaffrey '75 (he published “Laughing Cult” in 2014), than to note that the titular poem includes, in close proximity, an allusion to Homer’s “Odyssey” and a reference to Cheech and Chong. There are also poems titled “My Friend Zuckerberg” (in which McCaffrey marvels at the breadth of the personal information his “friend” knows about him, from what he ate for breakfast to where his political leanings lie), “Karl Marx, Lord of the Leprechauns,” “Robot Spies Watching Elves Watch a Fish,” “Reformed Hunters Seeking Praise”; there’s one about land acknowledgements and another about a man who juggles his own eyeballs. Mostly set in traditional form, the pieces in McCaffrey’s second collection are whimsical, cynical — and often surprising as they turn on a dime from bathos into pathos.

— Reviewed by Kristin Duisberg