



The Progressive

December 2013/January 2014

Making the World a Better Place

Rick Bass

Wendell Berry

Kathy Kelly

Naomi Klein

Terry Tempest Williams

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\$4.95

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KALI CJESEMER

Bass has created a bonfire of belief ignited by joy.

Margaret Fuller—A New American Life (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt), by Megan Marshall.

We know Ralph Waldo Emerson. We know Henry David Thoreau. But do we know Margaret Fuller, a woman as key to the Transcendental Movement as these two men? Do we know that she was in an electric rela-

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tionship of minds with both, one as an intellectual companion, the other as his tutor?

Fuller had a mind of her own and edited a Transcendentalist literary journal, *The Dial*, which helped to define American Romanticism. She showed women the importance of “activity of mind, accuracy of processes, constant looking for principles, and to search after the good and beautiful.” Her voice was clear and razor sharp, cutting through social complacency and advocating for equality for the poor and protection for prostitutes. But most importantly, Fuller exhibited a daring spirit of inquiry and a devotion to authentic experience, which was her indefatigable power. “Where I make an impression, it must be by most being myself,” she wrote to her editor, John Wiley, in 1846. Megan Marshall has

written an affecting biography of a great American intellectual who continually raised the question: “What were we born to do?”

The Unknown Universe (New Directions), by Roberto Bolaño (Translated by Laura Healy).

This beautiful bilingual edition of Roberto Bolaño’s poetry has been my companion for months. “Don’t write poems but sentences,” Bolaño states. And this is exactly what he does. One of his sentences has become my daily mantra: “What has yet to take shape will protect me.”

A combination of words will suddenly ignite and illuminate where we find ourselves at this moment in time: “Despair. Fury. Dusk.” And then, you turn the pages and find this: “Took risks.” Every poem feels like a risk, a transgression, a moment of fire releasing the heat of uncommon perception. Everyday encounters are translated onto the page as fact and allegory. Bolaño inspires me in his fiction and poetry. Sentence by sentence, he continues to live on the page: “His face, in fragments around him, materializes at the mercy of his eye, which reorganizes it, the ideal kaleidoscope.”

Terry Tempest Williams is a writer and naturalist. Her most recent book is “When Women Were Birds.”

By Dave Zirin

I have argued for years that sports should be understood the same way as art, though I have no actual theoretical or practical understanding of the art world, art history, or the ways that our commodity culture distorts the artistic process. That is why the book **9.5 Theses on Art and Class** (Haymarket Books), by Ben Davis, makes my list. It is a politically bracing, utterly illuminating, and never-boring excavation of the political economy of the contemporary art world. The analysis of everything from video game designers to experimental artists is fascinating. It has

also illuminated my understanding of sports, even though the words LeBron James never once make it into the text.

This year has seen a slew of remarkable sports books, such as Jeffrey Benedict and Armen Keteyian’s *The System: The Glory and Scandal of Big-Time College Football and League of Denial: The NFL, Concussions and the Battle for Truth*, by Steve Fainaru and Mark Fainaru-Wada.

But the sports book I want to recognize is the reissue of Jackie Robinson’s autobiography, *I Never Had It Made* (Ecco), in conjunction with the box-office smash biopic *42*. I found *42* to be a disappointing caricature of the complicated man who smashed baseball’s color line. *I Never Had It Made* is arguably the best sports memoir ever written precisely because it is so unlike *42*. Its brutal honesty about baseball, patriotism, and his disappointments of the civil rights era make it the antithesis of Hollywood. *I Never Had It Made* also does proper justice to a man committed to mass struggle, not the magically talented individuals, in the fight against racism.

But one cannot live on treatises about art and sports history alone. The work of fiction that floored me this year was **Long Division** (Agate Bolden), by Kiese Laymon. Following a massive meltdown on a televised spelling bee, a fourteen-year-old named Citoyen “City” Coldson goes to live with his grandmother in Melahatchie, Mississippi. The story then jumps to 1985 and weaves it back to the present. Honestly, to say any more would give too much away. I will just say that it is the most unforgettable book I have ever had the joy to read.

Dave Zirin is the host of Sirius XM Radio’s popular weekly show, “Edge of Sports Radio,” and the sports editor for The Nation magazine. His newest book is “Game Over: How Politics Has Turned the Sports World Upside Down” (The New Press).