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THE WHOLE PERSON:
*Heart & Mind*
Psychology/Culture

The Lotus Class:
*An Interview with*
TED CONOVER

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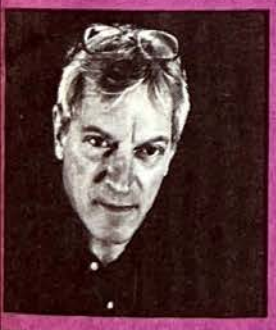

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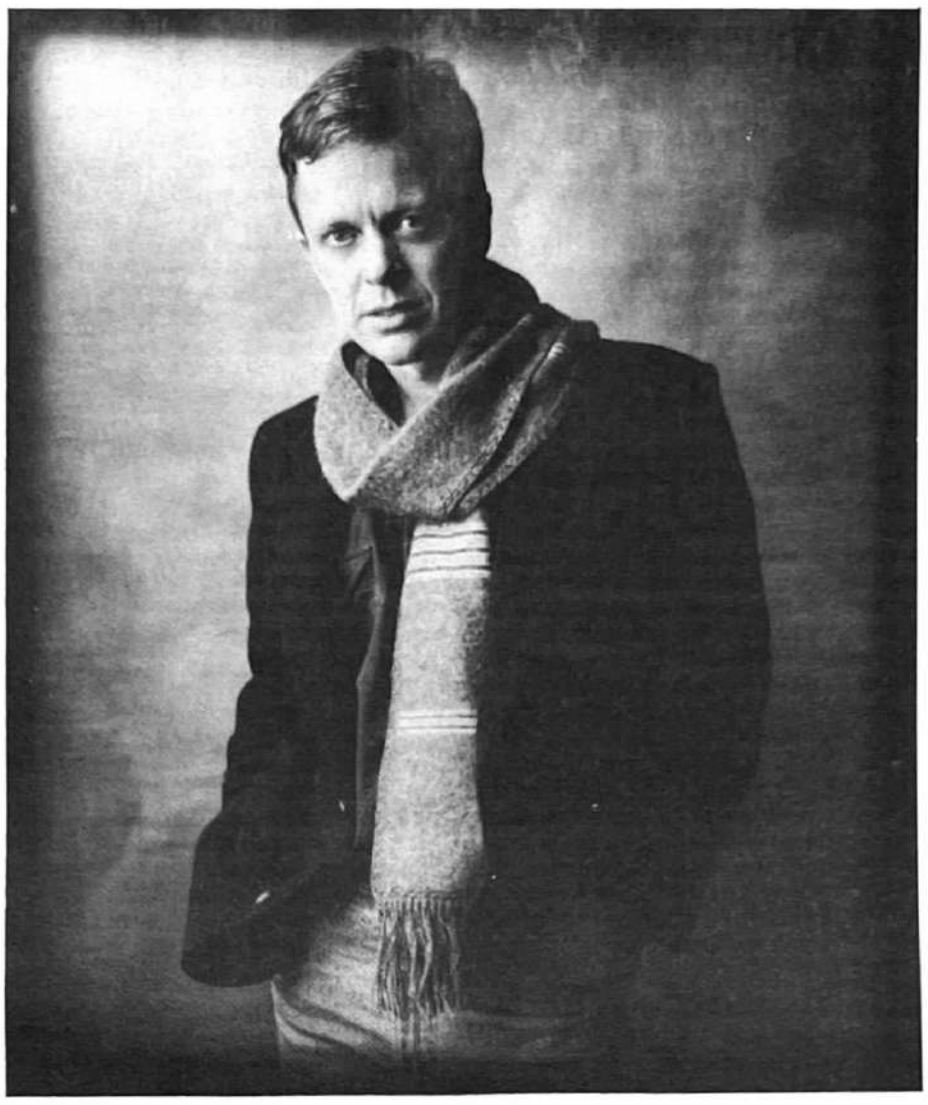
# The Lotus Class: *An Interview with* TED CONOVER

By James Anderson

In a relatively brief period of time, Ted Conover has produced three major works of participatory nonfiction. Beginning in 1985 with the publication of *Rolling Nowhere: A Young Man's Adventures Riding the Rails with America's Hoboes* (Penguin), followed in 1987 by the critically acclaimed *Coyotes: A Journey Through the Secret World of America's Illegal Aliens* (Vintage), Conover has infused his works with a first-person quality of adventure and discovery while exploring the social and cultural ambiguities of America's disenfranchised. His willingness to accept physical risk to bring back the truth has always added a visceral edge to his prose, which makes the experience of reading his books a form of socially aware skydiving. So it was with both eyebrows raised that his growing readership awaited the publication of his latest work, *Whiteout: Lost in Aspen*, published in hardcover in November 1991 by Viking and in paperback by Vintage in January 1993. From hoboes to illegal aliens to . . . Aspen? A prospective reader had to wonder what Conover could say about Aspen that wasn't immediately available from such impeccable news sources as *People* magazine and "Entertainment Tonight"? And after all, why would he want to bother? The very idea of a book on Aspen had "sell-out" written all over it. But *Whiteout* delivered distinctive Conover, peppered with scholarship and compassion, and complete with jeopardy, though in an unexpected form.

This interview took place in Aspen, Colorado, in November 1991.



. . . if you acknowledge the existence today of railroad hoboes, millions of Mexican illegals, and Aspen as more and more a symbol of an elite group of Americans slowly breaking away, establishing a place for themselves apart from the rest of the country, then I think you have to admit that class is an interesting lens through which to view America.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *Your first book,* Rolling Nowhere, *is about riding the freights, and your second,* Coyotes, *chronicles your life among illegal aliens from Mexico. It seems like quite a jump from hoboes and disempowered minorities to the subject of Aspen. How are your books similar? Or do you feel there is a departure?*

**Ted Conover:** I think the books have a great deal in common, though on the surface *Whiteout* appears to be a departure. I am interested in the subject of class—one of those things Americans don't like to think about. The idea of the classless society—of an America consisting of lower middle-class, middle middle-class, and upper middle-class, all of us as the same entity—is an enduring myth. But if you acknowledge the existence today of railroad hoboes, millions of Mexican illegals, and Aspen as more and more a symbol of an elite group of Americans slowly breaking away, establishing a place for themselves apart from the rest of the country, then I think you have to admit that class is an interesting lens through which to view America.

At the same time, many essays on this subject bore me. I'm interested in topics to which I can give some sort of narrative life through my immersion in them. Working as a Mellow Yellow taxi driver appealed to me for this reason. I thought it could perhaps present a side of Aspen that people hadn't deemed important or interesting, and could provide an unusual window into the life and economy of the town. Aspen is about working people working, and the leisure class having a hell of a good time. What the two groups have in common, another thing that attracted me to Aspen, was clearly articulated to me in New York by a guy who lived here in the seventies. Summing up all the misadventures he had here, he said, "Ted, I hope your book at least gets this across, that Aspen is about sex."

It's as much of an oversimplification as any of the other blanket statements made about Aspen. But there's something to it. The incident I describe in *Whiteout* about being taken from a lecture at the Aspen Writers Conference to Hunter Thompson's house in the vintage Porsche convertible of a very beautiful woman is an example of how this works. It wasn't the sort of encounter that had happened much in my life up to that point. I'd never been to a place with so many attractive people. Despite having lived my life in terms of adventure, there is an ascetic scholarly side to me that had not indulged in things like late-night partying, hanging out with beautiful people, or being bad in the ways Aspen makes it easy to be bad. That had a great appeal to me also. And the town itself is so beautiful.

So there were these two attractions: the sensual side and the idea of issues of culture and class. Somewhere in between those poles I thought there lay the makings of a good book.

**TBR:** *You start off* Whiteout *by writing about the grudge you had against Aspen. So you didn't really begin your book as a journalist or scientist would have, with a null hypothesis. One of the interesting movements in the narrative of the book is how you began with the grudge and how the book ended—how Ted Conover changed.*

**TC:** Yes. During the course of this experience, I changed a lot. What I refer to as my seduction by Aspen is what I think you're getting at. "Aspen," I wrote, "was like a pretty rich girl with a reputation for being bad. Though unsuitable for the long term, you might want to go out with a girl like that."

**TBR:** Aspen Magazine *said, "we know who got screwed." Meaning Aspen. But it sounds to me like it's a two-way street here.*

**TC:** I don't think the "screwed" comment is fair. I don't think Aspen is at all the worse for my having written about it. I told practically everyone I came in contact with here what I was doing, that I was writing a book; I gave public lectures about it. This meant that some people immediately didn't want to talk to me, some didn't mind at all, and some definitely wanted to get in my book. *Whiteout* has now been available for a couple of months and read by most of the people who are in it, and I have yet to hear any other complaint.

*Aspen Magazine* has accused me of "selling" Aspen, to which my immediate response is, "Who is really selling Aspen here?" *Aspen Magazine* sells Aspen monthly and apparently makes lots and lots of money at it, which is more than I can say. I think the attack grew partly out of their particular role as a booster publication, a sort of adjunct Chamber of Commerce. The book is critical of Aspen in some ways, but it would have been too easy to simply come to Aspen and trash it. I like to think that in *Whiteout* I aim to make a larger statement about the cultural trends that Aspen represents.

**TBR:** *Though you start out by acknowledging this grudge, the movement of the book takes you into Aspen, where you actually become very much a part of the place. One of the things that struck me most is that while you are tough on people and maybe some institutions, you are equally tough on yourself. There is always this constant examination not only of Aspen but of Ted Conover and his involvement in Aspen.*

**TC:** The book was hard for me to write until I figured out that, despite the grudge, there was a lot about Aspen that I liked. After I had lived in Aspen for a time and begun to feel included, it became impossible to think of Aspen in purely condemnatory terms. I knew I had to admit that I loved the beauty of this place. I loved the arts activities that go on. I loved the writers conference. I met so many interesting people. The longer I was here, in particular after I got out of the taxi cab—because taxi drivers are in a position to be resentful—I started having other, more interesting experiences that brought out Aspen in its multiple dimensions. I realized when I sat down to write the book that I had to tell about those things even when they were incriminating. The experience, for example, of being a guest in a very nice, $3 million house and being secretly critical of the life-style of its owner, my friend Johanna. That made me feel like a bad guy because there I was, enjoying her hospitality.

What I say about myself in certain places is unflattering, and people who dislike the book may use some of that against me. *Aspen Magazine* already has: My given name has a "III" tacked on to the end of it. That's something I offered to readers of *Rolling Nowhere* because I thought it was important they know where I come from. I'm not from a poor, working-class background. I'm from a comfortable, wealthier background, and here is what I'm going to be trying to deal with as I attempt to understand hoboes. You put yourself at risk as a writer when you do that.

**TBR:** *But that's what really begins to give* Whiteout *its depth. The first sign of it is when you're driving the taxi and you go to pick up the young boy after his skiing class at the Aspen Country Day School. Out of nowhere you say he looks familiar and you realize he reminds you of you.*

**TC:** Yes. This is a little kid who, three months earlier, I might have described as just a little rich kid down from after school skiing at the Aspen Country Day School.

**TBR:** *Spoiled brat?*

**TC:** Right. That's easy. It's easy to say those things. It's easy to count people out with that kind of language. Yet, as you say, I liked that kid. I suddenly realized that he reminded me of myself. At a certain point I had to acknowledge that.

**TBR:** *From that point, you have an openness, a generosity of spirit and are not so quick to condemn or be derisive of the wealthy. One of the things that impressed me about your generosity is that Aspen's wealthy and celebrities are easy targets, as was the Alive Tribe. But I had the feeling, as you were talking about John Denver and the Alive Tribers, that you were really trying very hard to understand what they were doing and saying, and not just take a shot at them.*

**TC:** You have to listen to what people have to say. Usually their lives make sense on their own terms. The Alive Tribe members, Diamond Ecstacy, Laser Nightsky, M.D., and the others, may seem like kooks from afar. But once you talk to them and try to understand why they changed their names and why they've become the way they are, you see they're not entirely crazy. You have to give them their due and take it from there.

**TBR:** *But the invasive procedure you mentioned in the book did have an element of craziness in it.*

**TC:** Well, that's true. And I refused to participate in that particular exercise during the Domain Shift weekend—the procedure in which we delved into our partner's body cavities with pointed fingertips with the idea of causing pain. Or, as they would say, the idea of *releasing* pain—of poking till it hurts. That just seemed to me a very bad idea. You find you've got limits. Usually when you reach those limits, you know you've found something interesting. After Barbi Benton's pajama party at the end of my stay, I felt so bad about them and about me that I wanted to leave town. Or like the Food & Wine Classic, where I overindulged to the point of shame and nausea. When you reach those crises, that's important to the story.

**TBR:** *One of the things that immediately tips one off that the book is not going to be your standard Aspen, resort, or celebrity expose are the two quite telling and perfect epigraphs, one from* The Odyssey, *and the other from Coetzee's* Age of Iron *(Random House, 1990). You touch upon both of those as you move through the book. What is interesting is that in the end, likening yourself to a member of Ulysses' crew, you refuse to blame the lotus eaters for what happened.*

**TC:** Exactly. I should offer some background to those who haven't read the book. At the end of the lotus eaters passage in *The Odyssey*, Ulysses bids his crew to return to the ship. But they won't go because they've eaten the lotus. Other crewmen have to go and tie them down to the benches, and they row away under duress. What struck me as unusual in that scene, and in the lotus metaphor as it is applied generally in our culture, is that those who have eaten the lotus, who have fallen under its spell, are never blamed. Instead, the blame falls on the lotus. It's similar to the metaphor of the bewitching woman who ruins a good man—a good man simply falls into the orbit of evil and through no fault of his own becomes bad himself. The lotus, or bewitching woman, metaphor seems interesting to me partly for what it fails to cover, which is the idea that good men will put themselves in that orbit, good men want to taste the lotus. People want to open Pandora's Box. We've all got something in us that is not so good. Sometimes I think I came to Aspen to indulge that side of me. But ultimately you have to claim responsibility for what you do. You can't blame a town for seducing you. You can't blame a woman for seducing you. The lotus metaphor seemed a way into that whole question.

**TBR:** *Many people who have read* Whiteout *have commented that they found the most moving and, oddly, most beautiful part of the book to be the incidents and discussion of death in the*

*(Continued on page 4 )*

INTERVIEWER: **James Anderson** is a writer living and working in Aspen, CO.
PHOTOGRAPHER: **Gary Isaacs** lives in Denver, CO. 

## Ted Conover (Continued from page 3)

*high country. Particularly the climbing death of physicist Heinz Pagels and, later, the three skiers caught in the avalanche and the continuing search for the body of the young woman. In the case of Pagels, it came right on the heels of your Alive Tribe weekend, which brought to mind their philosophy that there are no accidents. And there were questions about whether this was accidental or deliberate.*

**TC:** It is a provocative philosophy that there are no accidents. And yet it's a brutal one because it blames people who deserve no blame. In this case my friend saw what appeared to be an accident—Heinz Pagels slipping off the face of a cliff—then evidence emerged from his writings showing that he'd imagined that scenario many times and in a somewhat positive-sounding way. It's eerie, and it deserves thought.

**TBR:** *Then there was the search and recovery in the spring of the body of the nurse who was buried with her dog in the avalanche. That whole thing was horrifying and surrealistic. The first time you go out you are sure you will be the one to find the body. Then you don't. On the next search two other men go out and find her a few inches under the surface of the retreating snowpack, buried next to her dog. That whole section was haunting. Throughout the book you refer to Aspen as a kind of Shangri-la myth, where people live forever. With the death in the high country chapter you seem to be introducing death to Shangri-la.*

**TC:** Exactly. You're shown the dark side of all the apparently life-affirming forays into the wilderness, the willingness to seek adventure, and the desire to stretch one's limits. There's a dark side to all of that which is not summed up by a brief notice in the paper that three people died in an avalanche. Whenever I read something like that I think, God, the things that headlines don't say. The stories behind three people dying in an avalanche . . . I could have made a book out of that alone. The mystical tone of that chapter, I think, comes from the rarefied environment of the high country, of not having trees around, of the imminent danger of death. And also from this idea of chance—the avalanche is up there constantly; what are the chances you'll be caught in it? Something about it evokes mystical questions of when your number is up and how long you can take these risks and still cheat death. All that fascinates me.

**TBR:** *You also point out that this is how people die up here. They don't tend to die of illness, or less often than in a normal population. In Aspen, which sometimes seems to be the headquarters for the cult of the body, people are in terrific shape. They work out to look good and to have fun. Even if their day is physically demanding, afterward they will go and work out. Then they go out and attempt to cheat death. That's the paradox.*

**TC:** Yes. And that's a major concern of the novel I'm writing, if we care to talk about that. The novel is about questions of risk—of how much risk is necessary for an exciting and rewarding life, and how much represents something pathological. I think I'm especially interested in this because during the research for my first two books, I several times found myself in situations saying, "If I get out of this alive, it's the last chance I'm going to take." Particularly when I was arrested with 16 Mexicans on the border by the Mexican judicial police, who wanted to be bribed to let us go. They beat up a number of the guys I was with.

**TBR:** *They tortured them, didn't they?*

**TC:** Yes, they tortured the leader of the group. It was terrifying. And this was all before they realized I was there!

**TBR:** *A journalist, a writer.*

**TC:** Exactly. A witness to this brutality. I mean, I thought, you know . . . I might die here. I promised myself at that moment that if I ever got out of it I would go back to Denver, get married, settle down.

**TBR:** *Foxhole conversion, I think it's called.*

**TC:** And yet, you get home and that's not what you want to do at all. You want to go out and do it again. In the language of the New Age, I suppose you could call it an addiction, though I like to think of it as something more glorious than that. It's not like you can wean yourself from the need to take risks. If you do, life becomes dull and, from my point of view, hardly worth living. But on the other side of it, you can be so risk-friendly as to be suicidal. So is that a desire for life or a desire for death?

**TBR:** *Getting back to* Whiteout, *but connecting that with the novel and risk, the risk in the Aspen book seemed much more an emotional risk, a risk to your psyche, to your own sense of who Ted Conover is.*

**TC:** All my projects have been like that in a way. To succeed in writing what I would consider to be a book worth reading about hoboes, you have to get to know hoboes. To get to know them, you have to spend time with them instead of people more like you . . . or me, I should say. It changes you. It changes your outlook. The company you keep affects who you are and how you think. As a writer you try to keep one foot out of it and one foot in, be an observer *and* a participant. But it's not always easy. In particular, in the case of Aspen, it was harder than ever to keep from going native. It's so appealing here, and my acceptance by the town seemed so unconditional. With hoboes—or especially, Mexicans—I don't look like them, I don't talk like them. There is a distance there that is in a way a life-preserver. I knew I wasn't going to become an illegal alien. But it seemed entirely within the realm of possibility that I could become an Aspenite, and happily so.

When I came to Aspen I kept my apartment in Denver because I planned to return to it when I was done. But when I did return, it seemed like somebody else's apartment in many ways. It wasn't quite my place anymore. And I think, strange as it may seem, that Aspen changed me more than the other books. Because there was much less distance between me and my subject, it changed me in a more profound way. In retrospect, it was difficult to write *Whiteout* because it was no longer a matter of having a subject apart from me and my experiences. I was writing about how I myself had been changed and affected by the whole thing.

**TBR:** *When I first read the subtitle,* Lost in Aspen, *I actually read that as "The Lost in Aspen." But the "lost" actually refers to you, doesn't it?*

**TC:** That's certainly one way to read it, yes. I think "whiteout" has a connotation of a loss of moral bearing. But the book is both about me and Aspen. A town can lose its way, too.

**TBR:** *You move backward and forward in time. At first that seemed jarring to me as a reader. But as I progressed through the book, I found it added to the sense of being caught up in Aspen, constantly comparing who you really were to who you were at the moment. For instance, you introduce an event or person very early on in the book, and then later you come back to it and you've changed in the period between. Sometimes the change is not the sort that endears Ted Conover to the reader, but it smacks of accuracy and honesty. Eventually it helped me as a reader identify with Ted Conover.*

**TC:** I hope it helps. I've taken a couple of liberties with chronology in order to better tell the story. The fact is my time here did not lend itself to a straight-line chronological description as with my other books. It seemed more interesting to have some chapters that were more thematic than chronological. For example, the chapter on John Denver includes episodes from several points in my time here. It made sense to place them together rather than in the discrete points where they actually happened.

**TBR:** *When you talk in the book about the "Aspen Idea" and the Golden Age, you speak primarily about the ongoing discussions about when it ended rather than what it was. I think that, depending upon whom you're talking to, you can get just as many versions of what the Golden Age was as when it ended.*

**TC:** Or if it's ended. You could arrive in Aspen today and find a place unlike any other that seems like a hundred percent improvement over wherever you came from. I think one reason for Aspen's notoriously fractious politics, and the constant discussion of the ruination of the town, what's good or bad here, is that people who've come to Aspen, whether they're the more recent yuppie generation or a previous generation, are people who believe in the possibility of designing their lives. This is a big theme in the New Age, that you control your life, that you're responsible. You come to a new town like Aspen, which is still being made in many ways, and feel you can have a hand in its making.

Aspen seems to have always attracted people who wanted a way to live different than the ordinary way. And they bring with them their own ideas about what that way should be. And these ideas more and more conflict with one another.

NUCLEAR WINTER

This is the brownstone the company built.
This is the company man, living
in the brownstone, holding on for life.
The neighbors say it's always been this way.
Your death begins the day you start asking why.
You get so serious about these things. Lately
you've been staring out the window, believing
everything.
They think you're on to something, you know.
This is how rumors begin. Rumors, legends,
the lives of martyrs. This is how the truth
grows out of proportion to itself. Already
the neighbors have chiseled their profiles
of the man in the brownstone. It gets
harder and harder to do as the light fades.
And these days the light fades quickly, silently.
With the dark comes the cold: ice on my geraniums,
ice on everything. I keep changing personal
pronouns. I don't know who the speaker is anymore.
I lose track of things.
I've taken the last of the long walks. The way
I figure it, the view is always the same:
the sky beyond the window is no better
than the one above the street. Soon there will be
rumors about me, legends will grow out of nothing.
This is war. The neighbors say it's always been
this way. Your lover could be on either side.
I want to say I fell in love with the enemy.
I want to believe I fell in love with the enemy.
There must be an easier way of saying this.

**Dionisio D. Martinez**
TAMPA, FL

**TBR:** *But there is some real irony here. You write about the young woman who came here 20 or so years ago and fell in love with a particular meadow. She got into outdoor guiding and outfitting and eventually bought the meadow. All that time she had been dreaming of a small cottage. But when she finally begins to build, the cottage turns into a mansion: She rationalizes that she and her husband can't really waste the land by building a small house. When she first got into outfitting, she reasoned that it was okay because she could teach people about the environment. Then came the time to realize the dream of the cottage in the beautiful meadow and in came the D-8 cats and she felt very uncomfortable about it all.*

**TC:** This is the sort of way in which we are all complicit in the ruination of Aspen, if you want to look at it that way. The irony is that to participate in Aspen in any way at all—simply to own land that appreciates over time to 5, or 10, or 20 times its original value, and then sell it at a profit—seems to be taking advantage of Aspen, profiting through being here. And anyone who is able to make a living, or who has found someone they love, has taken advantage of Walter Paepcke's dream to some extent. But there was never a point when that wasn't going on. Walter Paepcke promoted Aspen partly as a way of finding a place where he could hang out with all his friends. I mean, everyone brings an agenda that takes advantage of the preexisting conditions here.

I think there's a local idea that Aspen at its best is not something that can be sold or bartered, or ought not to be, that that is a denigration or corruption of some idea of Aspen. It's an illusory split between some perfect, idyllic Aspen and the crass, commercial Aspen. I think they've always been wrapped up in each other, and one has needed the other to survive.

**TBR:** *But in the book you point out that people come here and build multimillion-dollar houses that are vacant 50 weeks of the year.*

**TC:** Yes—let's face it, there are questions of degree in all of this. There are outrageous degrees of exploitation and that strikes me as one of the worst.

**TBR:** *You mention that you have often lived in apartments that were once parts of mansions, and that you can envision a time, after the wealthy have moved on, when Aspen's mansions have been divided up and turned into apartments or condominiums for "greater numbers of poorer people." In the book you remember gazing at the marble mantles of these apartments and wondering, "Who used to live here?"*

**TC:** There is something about the grandeur and extremes of these houses that just puts me in an apocalyptic frame of mind. That, coupled with the idea that resort towns live and die on their popularity, got me to thinking that there might be something you don't want to count on here in the very long term. You have to start looking at these large houses in terms of how quickly they would run down if no one could afford to heat them, keep all those pipes warm. I can easily imagine a day when Aspen is a ghost town. There's one 10 miles away, Ashcroft. It's a natural progression, it seems to me. And yet, such heresy to imagine these mansions turned into tenements!

**TBR:** *You were saying earlier that it's been over four years since you actually began the book, including the two years in Aspen and the year and a half writing it. You're probably now just beginning to gain some perspective on the book. What do you think, considering what you started out to do and what you ended up doing, is the greatest accomplishment of the book?*

**TC:** I'd like to think I succeeded in conveying some coherent vision of Aspen, of its problems and the problem it represents in American culture as a whole, and of its manifold appeals. I've tried to write a book that asks and answers the questions: What is Aspen? Who is Aspen for? What purposes does it serve? Is that good or bad? The book isn't, as you know, a tract or an argument, but I believe there is a political message.

**TBR:** *Providing a forum for discussion?*

**TC:** Political as to what is appropriate to the commonweal, to what's good for our future and what is not. Obviously, I think a lot of people's views on immigration from Mexico are very harmful to the way we're moving forward as North Americans. And Aspen's growing significance as an elite enclave, a place where the superrich can retreat to pursue private dreams, oblivious to the rest of us—that worries me, too. □

# Cleaned Out

ANNIE ERNAUX
Translated by CAROL SANDERS
*Dalkey Archive*, $19.95 cloth, ISBN 0-916583-65-1;
$9.95 paper, ISBN 0 0-916583-70-8

Annie Ernaux's novel *Cleaned Out* is more than a powerful evocation of the class system in France in the 1950s and of one woman's struggle to move up in the class hierarchy and forget her past. It is also a novel that serves as a haunting contribution, both in subject matter and literary form, to the project of the culturally disenfranchised speaking in their own voice.

The novel is an extended interior monologue in which 20-year-old Denise Lesur looks back at her childhood hoping to exorcise her demons and to gain some insight into the woman she has become, a woman who, despite her extraordinary academic achievements, has still not learned to love or even respect herself. Despite the fact that this daughter of a small-town grocer and café owner has succeeded in fighting the odds that face a woman member of the working class in gaining the ranks of France's academic elite, her successes are not enough to assuage the ever-present doubt she feels about her self-worth. However much she achieves, it remains the case that:

> *Everything still needs to be done. How can I ever get through enough exams to make up for the skeletons in the family closet, for the crazy laughter of the drunks, for the vulgar manners and language of the oaf who used to be me? All the education and exams in the world won't be enough to cover up the Lesur girl of five years, six months ago. I'll always despise her.*

Achieving the obliteration of her class heritage proves a Sisyphean task.

Her desire to understand and make peace with herself is given urgency by the fact that she is not sure she will survive the back-street abortion she has just endured. This uncertainty provides a powerful frame for the reflections on her past that make up the bulk of the novel. It also provides a fitting backdrop for its more general philosophical concern: The lives of those who allow their values to be determined for them are just as uncertain as Denise Lesur's.

As a young child Lesur believes herself to lead a privileged existence. Being the only child of a grocer/cafe proprietor gives her unlimited access to cream cakes and succulent herrings. Everything seems edible to the girl. Even her charity visits with her mother to the poor and sick are seen through a devouring (and deliciously humorous) eye: "So I felt pleased . . . pleased with the leg with the gaping hole, like a toffee peeping out of its wrapper." "Rajol's aged mother has lost her thumb . . . a chewed stump of a thumb, green

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REVIEWER: **Honi Haber** teaches philosophy and women's studies at the University of Colorado in Denver.