

[HARDCOVER: US]

Some people change. Others just get wasted

'The Alcoholic' creates a rich portrait of the lows and highs of a man who bears only a 'coincidental resemblance' to the author

BY GEORGE GENE GUSTINES
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

If ending up in a station wagon with a pudgy, dwarflike hag doesn't make you want to quit drinking, what will? That is the kind of question, along with wondering how often a man can sink and rebound, that is raised by *The Alcoholic*, an engaging graphic novel written by Jonathan Ames and illustrated by Dean Haspiel.

The book chronicles the misadventures of Jonathan A., a New York writer who the back cover says bears only a "coincidental resemblance" to the author. Jonathan longs for emotional connection and often fills the void with copious amounts of booze. It begins in August 2001, when Jonathan finds himself — after a bender — in Asbury Park, New Jersey, with this diminutive "conquest" in a vehicle crammed with pets and belongings that seems to double as her home. She's in the mood for one-night love, but all he can think is: How did I get here?

The answer begins in 1979, when Jonathan, a high school sophomore, discovered the magical effects of beer: "I didn't care about the taste. I loved the way it made me feel. For the first time in my life, I felt cool. I had always thought I was ugly, but not that night."

After that initial experience, Jonathan gets drunk every weekend for two years, with his best friend, Sal. But it's not all fun, games and beer. One page captures the highs and lows: drinking lazily by a pond and hitting keg parties, juxtaposed with vomiting in the woods and blacking out in bed.

It should be noted, for the faint of heart or easily offended, that *The Alcoholic* is unflinching in its depiction of sexual situations and drug use. Some are comical, like Jonathan's first attempts at intimacy (however fleeting), while others are disturbing, as when he wakes up in a garbage can, naked, after a cocaine-fueled night with a gay drug dealer.

An evening with a bottle of Southern Comfort and skin magazines leads to a sexual encounter with Sal that will echo throughout their lives. The morning after, neither is quite ready to discuss what happened. "It'll be better with girls," Sal eventually says, and Jonathan quickly agrees.

The scene is a testament to the superb work of Haspiel, who conveys, through the characters' body language, their anguish and true feelings. The accompanying caption — "I didn't know if what he said was true or not, but I pretended to agree with him. I was ashamed that I had liked it" — seems almost unnecessary.

But only almost. Throughout the book, the synthesis of words and images creates a rich portrait of Jonathan: from a whimsical, imagined photo-booth strip that shows the thinning of his hair from 1991 to 2001 to a stirring sequence in which Jonathan mourns his parents, who died in a car accident in the late 1980s. His thoughts seesaw from "You didn't love them enough" to "imagining their horrible pain right at the end."

Haspiel uses a split-panel view to show the writer at a bar with a cocktail and at home with a beer, his head down and his shoulders drooped. You can see and feel his despair.

Fortunately, Jonathan's Great-Aunt Sadie, who lives in Queens, is in his corner. She suggests he travel to Paris, where she herself met a painter after her first marriage dissolved. (Haspiel deftly shifts from pen and ink to watercolors for panels that capture portraits of her from that time.) Sadie is a voice of reason and the provider of tough love.

In early 2000 Jonathan meets a girl, whom the author calls Manhattan, after the borough where she resides. The relationship goes well for nine months, until Manhattan moves to San Francisco. Like many naive couples before them, they promise to try a long-distance

Publication Notes



THE ALCOHOLIC
BY JONATHAN AMES
136 PAGES
VERTIGO

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relationship, but within a week she decides she needs a fresh start. Jonathan is crestfallen.

"You have to put a veneer over your heart," Sadie says. "If I let myself feel all the pain of my life, I'd be dead a long time ago."

Three months later Jonathan is still pining. (Sadie's sage counsel? "She's letting you know how she feels — she's not in love with you. Get over it!") Even after Manhattan moves to Seattle, he remains obsessed. In August 2001 she returns to New York. But when Jonathan goes to visit, bouquet of flowers in hand, he finds her with a new boyfriend.

"I ducked into the first available door so as not to be seen," he recalls. Unluckily for him, that first door is the entrance to a bar, where he weakens and has his first drink since his parents' death in the 1980s. Eventually, he ends up at that watering hole in Asbury Park, where he meets the lusty crone from the novel's opening. But even finding himself in that awkward sexual situation is not enough to deter Jonathan, who goes on another drinking spree and ends up with irritable bowel syndrome, still longing for Manhattan.

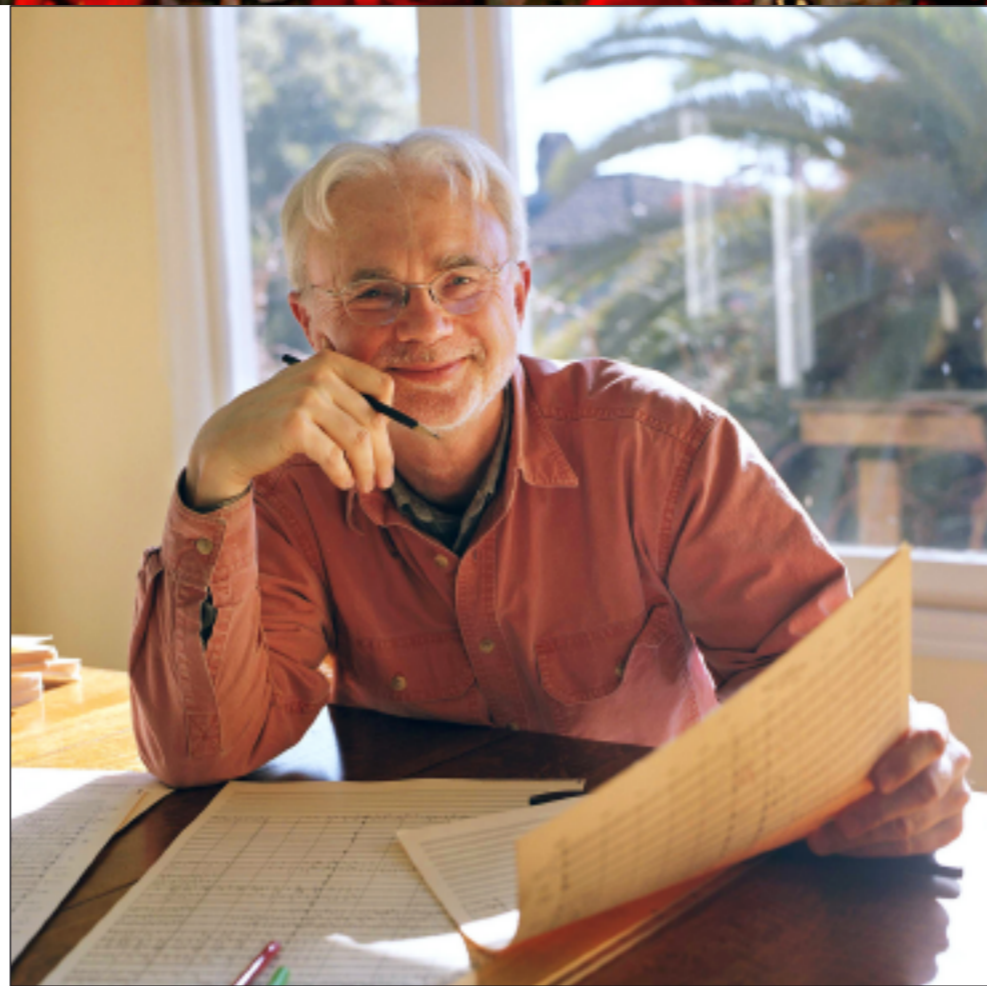
"Even though she's making my stomach explode, I still want to marry her," he tells Sadie.

She responds: "You can marry her if you want to wear a diaper the rest of your life! I love you but I'm hanging up!"

The next few weeks are a blur of book readings, sad news about Sal and of course Sept. 11. Jonathan's drug use escalates to a point that makes his old days of pornography and Southern Comfort seem quaint. A two-day binge of heroin has terrible consequences when Sadie is unable to reach Jonathan after she has a serious fall. When he finally gets to the hospital, she has these pearls of wisdom for Jonathan: "Nobody gets everything they want."

Jonathan is struck by the realizations that he no longer loves Manhattan and that he is unable to control himself around alcohol. Sadie's advice becomes his mantra. He declares, on the penultimate page, "I will never drink again." It's a well-written scene of epiphany. And it makes the last page, with the writer standing uncertainly in front of a bar, all the more sadly powerful.

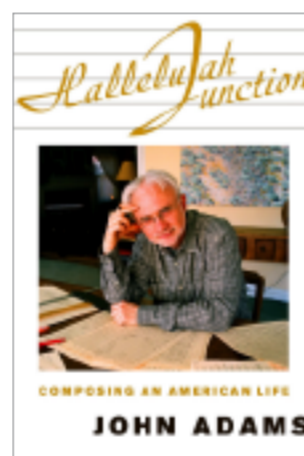
SUNDAY PROFILE



Atomic anomie

How do you compose for a post-Sept. 11 age? John Adams reveals how Bush's America, new technology and LSD have influenced him

BY GUY DAMMANN
THE GUARDIAN, NEW YORK



John Adams is working on a new piece, but he can't describe it, he says, because it's not going well. "Starting is always hell. Right now, I'm the most unpleasant person to be around: grumpy, uncommunicative, selfish. I have a vague idea of what I want it to be, but it's just not working out. Worst of all, my wife won't listen any more."

Hearing Adams admit to self-doubt is something of a surprise. Now 61, the composer cemented his international reputation more than 20 years ago with *Nixon in China*, his opera about the former US president's extraordinary meetings with Mao Zedong (毛澤東). Next week, *Dr Atomic*, his 2005 opera about the testing of the first atomic bomb, receives its New York premiere at the Metropolitan Opera. This month also sees the publication of Adams' autobiography, *Hallelujah Junction*.

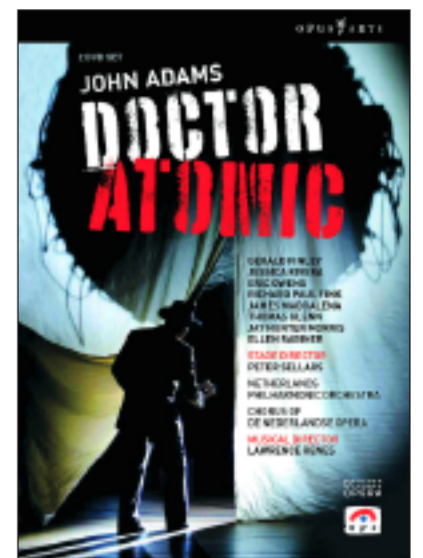
In music and in life, Adams chose a difficult route. From his early experimental compositions for homemade synthesizer to the minimalism of *Grand Pianola Music* (1982), from the chromatic *Chamber Symphony* (1994) to the Orientalism of his most recent opera, *A Flowering Tree* (2006), he has yet to settle into any kind of comfort zone. He arrived at Harvard in 1966 to study music, but knew he wanted to compose and abandoned his studies for a factory job in San Francisco. What was he running from? "I came of age," he says, "when the operative model for a composer was a pseudo-scientist. If you read the early essays of [Pierre] Boulez and Milton Babbitt, you'd get the impression music is all about finding the correct formula to suppress all individuality and emotion."

But then, this was the 1960s; the tide of counterculture was rising fast, and while composers such as Babbitt and Boulez were busy theorizing, the rest of the country was discovering the Beatles and John Coltrane. And LSD. Did Adams take acid? Yes, he says. Did it change the way he composed?

"It can certainly amplify and alter one's perceptions," he says. "The experience was powerful and amazing, and certainly changed the way I thought about things at the time. On the few occasions I was high, I did have these very powerful flashes of understanding about musical structure, and also about the usual holy-holy stuff. Although I wouldn't say LSD changed the way I compose music, the culture of seeking mind-expanding experiences is something we miss now more than ever. The mindset of [US President] George [W.] Bush's America is more closed than ever before. We're all hunkered down, living in the shadow of our fears, most of them imaginary."

It's not hard to guess Adams' politics. "We're on the cusp of what could be real, reinvigorating change," he says of the presidential election. "Or of sliding further into the repressive, reactionary, mind-numbing fear." He believes that what he calls "contemporary serious music" has a role to play in changing mindsets; exactly what kind of a role became clear to him after Sept. 11. He was in London at the time, rehearsing for a film version of *The Death of Klinghoffer*, his controversial opera about the 1985 hijacking of a cruise ship by the Palestine Liberation Front.

He had also planned to attend a performance of one of his racier forays into minimalism, *Short Ride in a Fast Machine* (1986), at the



Clockwise from top left: American composer John Adams; the DVD box art for Adams' 2005 opera *Doctor Atomic*; the cover art for Adams' *Hallelujah Junction: Composing an American Life*; a scene during a dress rehearsal for *Doctor Atomic*.

Last Night of the Proms, but the program was changed in the wake of the attacks. Adams' sparse, stately *Tromba Lontana* was performed instead, alongside Beethoven's rousing Ninth Symphony.

"The resort to Beethoven, both in London and all over the world, made many of us painfully aware of a distressing reality," he says. "Despite having created arguably the most vibrant musical culture of any country over the past half-century or so, there didn't seem to be any American piece that could answer the country's emotional needs at that time."

The New York Philharmonic picked Adams as the man to plug the gap, and commissioned him to write a commemorative work for the first anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks. Adams remains unhappy with the resulting work — a meditative choral piece, *On the Transmigration of Souls*. He feels the Republican administration manipulated the memory of the attacks, to create what he calls an "orgy of narcissism and collective victimization."

Nor is he happy about the state of contemporary music. "We're in danger of an overflow of extremely mediocre music," he says, "partly because composing has become dangerously easy. Everyone can carry around software programs on a laptop and compose a new piece in a single evening. But the trouble is, of course, that the software dictates the parameters of what you can do, how you can think."

So will there be no more Beethoven's Ninth Symphonies or Mozart C Minor Masses? "I'll certainly never be able to reach that level," he says. "The great works of the past come about as a perfect collision of good fortune. You get a technology that just happens to have peaked at that time and a creative intelligence of just the right kind to exploit it. I'm not sure the Symphony Orchestra is going to see another Mahler, another Beethoven."

Adams pauses, as if to reflect on whether he has just talked himself out of a job, then resumes. "But anyway, who the hell am I to talk like that? When I think of literature, everyone's always said there'll never be another Shakespeare, another George Eliot. But literature never ground to a halt. People go on writing truly great plays and novels. Maybe that's what I'm doing, without even realizing it."

[HARDCOVER: US]

Pillow talk with George W. Bush

'American Wife' is a thinly veiled story of Laura Bush that devotes considerable time to the first couple's sex life

BY STEPHANIE MERRITT
THE GUARDIAN, LONDON

Two mysteries hover over Curtis Sittenfeld's timely third novel, *American Wife*, a fictional memoir by a 21st-century first lady that was rushed out in the US to coincide with the Republican National Congress. The first is how, in our litigious age, she ever managed to get what is a barely disguised portrait of Laura Bush past her publisher's legal department. The second is how she could have stomachached spending quite so much time imagining Laura and Dubya having sex.

Actually, the sex is not so mysterious. Sittenfeld's novel is not so much a *West Wing*-style expose as a sympathetic and nuanced portrait of an intelligent woman who has ended up implicated in possibly the worst US presidency in history. Alice Blackwell, Sittenfeld's Laura alter-ego, is likable and moral; the challenge for a novelist is to explain how this woman could have fallen for a man like Charlie Blackwell (George W. right down to his "flaring nostrils") and stayed with him. A heavy emphasis on the couple's enduring physical

attraction becomes necessary in this context; even so, there are some scenes you'll find hard to scrub from your mind.

Alice repeatedly asks herself these same questions in a narrative bracketed by scenes in the presidential bedroom on a day when she has done something unprecedented in her marriage: publicly expressed an opinion that comes from her heart and contradicts the party line. "Did I jeopardize my husband's presidency today? Did I do something I should have done years ago?" she wonders, lying awake at night. "Or perhaps I did both and that's the problem — that I lead a life in opposition to itself."

It's easy to see why Laura Bush would make a fascinating subject for Sittenfeld, a novelist interested less in external drama than in her characters' interior lives, as she demonstrated in her best-selling debut *Prep*. Laura Bush has offered little of herself to the media, appearing in public as a supportive wife. One piece of knowledge we do have is that her life was colored by early tragedy: in her teens, she caused a road

Publication Notes



AMERICAN WIFE
BY CURTIS SITTENFELD
558 PAGES
DOUBLEDAY

accident that resulted in the death of one of her classmates, whom she may or may not have been dating.

Sittenfeld makes this incident the defining moment of Alice's life; every choice she makes is ultimately motivated by guilt and loss, including the humiliating sexual relationship she begins with the dead boy's brother after his death, as if by abasing herself she might atone for what she has done. This results in a pregnancy that Alice's practical, worldly and secretly lesbian grandmother helps her to end. More than 40 years later, the feminist doctor who performed the abortion attempts to blackmail Alice into publicly opposing her husband's nomination of a conservative Supreme Court judge who threatens to overturn *Roe vs Wade*.

This present-day drama, in which Alice jets between time zones attempting to stall the threatened exposure while also confronting a protester against her husband's catastrophic war, is the least persuasive part of the novel. The real triumph is the vast expanse of Alice's life in which nothing very dramatic happens, just a series of small compromises by which she accommodates her principles to their opposites.

Alice's greatest failing is not that she is able to deceive herself about Charlie, but that she is painfully aware that she often chooses to do so to maintain the status quo. Counting down until the end of her husband's second term, she finds herself torn between the sense that she should have done more to curb his excesses and the desire to protest that she only ever signed up to be his wife. Confessing that she voted for his Democratic opponent in the presidential election, she adds: "During the periods when I've been the most frustrated by our lives, or by what is happening in this country, I've looked outside at the cars and pedestrians our motorcades pass and I've thought, 'All I did is marry him. You are the ones who gave him power.'"

Sittenfeld has created a provocative picture of the complex relationship between public and private life. It is a testament to her art as a novelist that the reader never loses a sense of affection for Alice, even while wishing her quiet integrity could have been more forceful.