

CAN POETRY SAVE THE EARTH? | A review by Matthew W. Miller

“I think it is in the digressions that some of the greatest discoveries are made.” Anyone who has listened to John Felstiner ’54 lecture on poetry or literary translation at Stanford University has probably heard him say this, usually on the heels of some wonderful and seemingly off-topic aside he has drawn from his lifelong study and love of poetry. In *Can Poetry Save the Earth? A Field Guide to Nature Poems*, published by Yale University Press, Felstiner celebrates the lyric poem and clearly demonstrates his commitment to the environment by his exploration of the natural world through verse.

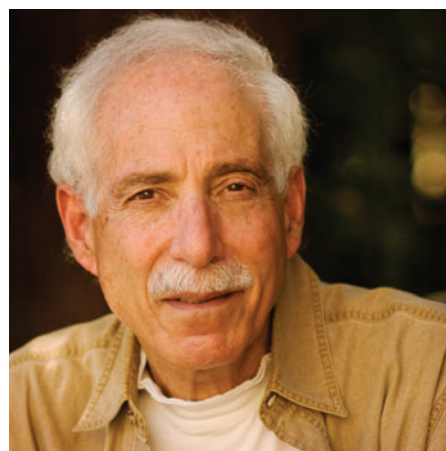


Like Felstiner’s lectures, the book is wonderfully discursive as it leaps back and forth between centuries, cultures and continents to make connections between humanity’s primal relationship with both nature and poetry. Yet, the digressions remain lucid and show that a poem is ever in conversation with other poems. And while abounding with quotes from the poets and their poems, there is no sense that Felstiner is attempting to peacock his many years of study. The reader feels as if he is listening in on an exuberant and articulate talk by the author.

Can Poetry Save the Earth? is not merely a study of nature poems. It is a call for activism. Felstiner wonders if such poetry can play a role in saving our environment. In his preface, he concedes that we are at a time when vast social, political and economic action is needed to trigger positive change, and he questions whether poetry has a place in triggering such change. Yet, he makes clear: “Response starts with individuals, it’s individual persons that poems are spoken by and spoken to. One by one, the will to act may rise within us. Because we are what the beauty and force of poems reach toward, we’ve a chance to recognize and lighten our footprint in a world where all of nature matters vitally.”

In 40 short and insightful chapters, Felstiner hopes to “awaken us, poem by poem, to urban, suburban, or rural surroundings, east and west, at home or on the road,” so that “first consciousness then conscience” stirs within us, prompting us to action. Felstiner examines the influence of nature on poetry and, indeed, of poetry on nature and environmental awareness, from the story of Adam to today. Beginning with poetry’s biblical roots, Felstiner moves from the earliest incantations of English nature poems to the Romantic poets, like William Blake, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and William Wordsworth; then across the Atlantic, to Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson; and on into artistic commerce between modern poets such as Pablo Neruda, William Carlos Williams, Marianne Moore and Gary Snyder.

Can Poetry Save the Earth? is not poetry viewed through the often stiff and ever-fracturing lens of academic theory. It is a joyful and celebratory review that expects readers to be, if not immensely well-read, at least interested in reading immensely well. The reader will gain insight and new appreciation for familiar works, and the inspiration to seek out the less familiar poems and poets.



John Felstiner ’54 explores the relationship between poetry and environmental awareness in his latest book.

For his written works and literary scholarship, Felstiner has been awarded in his career the University of Iowa’s Truman Capote Award for Literary Criticism, the Modern Language Association’s biennial Lois Roth Award for Translation of a Literary Work, the American Translators Association’s biennial award for German translation, PEN West’s prize for literary translation, the Goethe-Institut’s Helen and Kurt Wolff Translator’s Prize, and the British Society of Authors’ Schlegel-Tieck Prize. Those familiar with Felstiner’s work will no doubt feel that *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* stands as an equal alongside his *Translating Neruda: The Way to Macchu Picchu* and *Paul Celan: Poet, Survivor, Jew*; but there is something more in this latest book—a quality that is personal and immediate. The reader not only senses the pleasure Felstiner derives from the poems but also the underlying risk—that something, indeed the earth itself, could be imperiled if we ignore the truth and beauty of the poets’ words.

The question Felstiner poses in the book’s title is never fully answered within the text, nor was it intended

to be. Felstiner is hopeful, rather, that these poems will kindle individual action and a feeling of responsibility toward the environment. One could argue that nature poetry has saved the earth already in the sense of the word “save” meaning “to keep and store up.” These poems store the earth in granaries of verse, allowing us to see in new light the gifts we have been given and the many we have squandered.

Poet W.H. Auden wrote that “poetry makes nothing happen” but that it can be “a way of happening.” We make the world as the world makes us, just as we make the poetry that makes us. The works discussed in *Can Poetry Save the Earth?* remind us of our capacity for beauty, and for action in the name of beauty. Felstiner, by providing his expert insight and revealing the connections between these lyric works, provides us with the stimulation we need in order to change.

By themselves, these poems will make nothing happen to save the earth. But given to us, thrust upon our consciousness and conscience in a book like this, perhaps these poems will rouse us to action. In that regard, then, these poems can be a way of happening to save the earth. But, as Felstiner shows, the onus is ever upon us.

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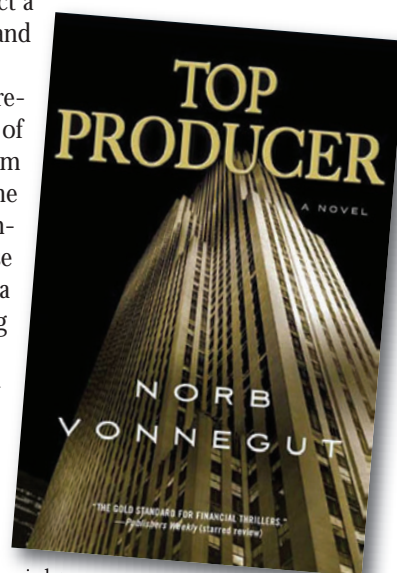
DIVINE COMEDY OR GREEK TRAGEDY? | A review by Jenny Toolin McAuliffe '76

This first novel by Norb Vonnegut '76—a humorous and engaging thriller set in the fictional prestigious Wall Street firm of Sachs, Kidder and Carnegie—was released in September having garnered impressive pre-release reviews and recommendations, including a coveted gold star from *Publishers Weekly*. It details the gradual unraveling of a clever Ponzi scheme that, not surprisingly, devastates its trusting investors and innocent beneficiaries. Sound familiar? The book was actually written pre-Madoff. Above all, *Top Producer* provides us with a perceptive and witty grounding in what was rotten in Wall Street just prior to its recent implosion. It draws heavily on Vonnegut's own experiences as a banker and investment adviser for major Wall Street firms and uses personalities and situations he observed and stories catalogued through the years to concoct a compelling detective story written in a style of half-smirk, half-outrage with language and metaphors for the not-so-sensitive.

The story revolves around Grover O'Rourke, a well-rewarded but admittedly self-preserving “top producer.” He is a good ol' Charleston boy who, in the rough and tumble of the financial world, instinctively knows when to turn on the Southern accent and charm and when to downplay it. Grover displays a necessary savvy and useful disregard of the rules when it suits him. He has both a conscientious dislike yet a happily rewarded complicity with the banal evils that can and, all too often, do occur behind the walls of these formidable institutions and some of their breakaway upstarts. But Grover is basically a good guy with a big heart and a reflective side. In all, the perfect background for getting to the bottom of an insidious financial crime.

As in the *Divine Comedy*—emphasis on comedy, not divinity—Grover is a sympathetic Virgil who guides us safely, knowledgably and with a sense of humor through the descending circles of Wall Street hell. The reader accompanies him through the gates into a world of unbridled avarice, ambition and pleasure-seeking; and, at times, we are tempted indeed to abandon hope for his overachieving, overrewarded, ethically challenged Ivy Leaguers who operate immorally in an amoral financial system. We emerge ultimately, however, into a kind of purgatory where occasionally someone does the right thing. Grover, now Dante, is guided at critical junctures by his Beatrice: Evelyn, his much-loved and recently deceased wife who, while living, dispensed advice and espoused principles he continues to find helpful along the way.

In *Inferno*, which reveals which circle of hell each sin merits and thus which eternal punishment the sinner





Norb Vonnegut '76
exposes the seamy
side of Wall Street in
his gripping first
novel, *Top
Producer*.

will suffer, fraud upon the innocent and trusting surpasses violence in infamy and merits a more hideous and painful punishment. In *Top Producer*, the punishment inflicted on our Ponzi schemer, witnessed by Grover and a host of others, is plenty gruesome and does fare rather badly against a mere prison sentence for murder. Composed in a vivid and effective cinematic style (the book has movie written all over it) with a nice use of sharks, the particular punishment inflicted just may change the New England Aquarium for you forever. The climactic scene of comeuppance, appropriately, transpires in a restaurant named the “Red Flame.”

Finally, like Dante, Vonnegut introduces us to the vernacular. The language of Wall Street is *cockneyesque*, made up of a preponderance of four-letter words—as Vonnegut wryly observes, Wall Street is “one of the few places on earth where a severe case of Tourette’s would go unnoticed”—as well as enigmatic linguistic shortcuts unintelligible to the rest of the English-speaking world such as “marking the close,” “steenth” or “column six.” In addition to a primer on the pervasive amorality of Wall Street, Vonnegut’s book is an excellent primer for those unfamiliar with financial terminology, financial instruments or the various market players. The book provides clear and digestible explanations of, for example, 13(d), derivatives, and hedge funds; gives interesting and informative backgrounds on both Ponzi and Fibonacci; and underscores the

universal frustration with commas mysteriously replacing decimals in one’s HP 12c which, as the author explains, is the calculator of choice for virtually all in the financial world. I learned you could get Bloomberg, which he defines, at LaGuardia. Vonnegut even takes time to explain what “shashlik” is.

Beyond the *Divine Comedy*, it also has the hallmarks of an effective Greek tragedy: amorality gradually seeping into the polity, suffering owing to moral blindness, excessive hubris, bacchanalia, revenge of the three Furies (sharks), etc. Indeed, the Greek tragedy analogy is better but *not* as in Euripides. Rather, Vonnegut shows us that the Wall Street goings-on were, and still are, Greek but more in the vein of one big, honkin’ frat party. The party got a little out of hand recently and the tragedy is that we’re all suffering a massive financial hang-over. Grover’s world of high finance is one of machismo; sophomoric humor; pubescent sexual fascination and innuendo; pranks; re-hashing of embarrassing college stories; bodily-function humor, which, like The Three Stooges, remains elusive to most women; the usual demeaning characterizations of women, particularly those posing a competitive threat; standard gay bashing (although in a progressive vein we do learn that being gay in some firms is increasingly chic); and BSDs, a finance term for men flaunting oversized appendages, real or illusory, and who are generally unable to deliver on their promises. In this world, bosses, as Grover observes, prefer the pay-any-price-on-the-company-tab, Cohiba smoking “cabernet school of people management.” As Grover notes: “It is too bad Ponce de Leon never found Wall Street in his quest for eternal youth. Few people in our industry ever matured past adolescence.”

Finally, the book makes clear that Grover’s Wall Street operates on the favor of the old boy/old girl network, but, contrary to the original fraternal pledge of fealty, the reality is that everyone has an agenda: “[I]t’s all about survival. Friends become enemies, enemies friends...our genealogical roots date back to Brutus.” Sharks again.

I mentioned to the author when I saw him that I liked the shark/Wall Street metaphor. His response? “Yeah, I thought people would make the assumption of an intentional metaphor. To be honest, I put it there because I was visiting the New England Aquarium one day and just thought, ‘That’d be a nasty way to die.’...I may have been mad at somebody at the time,” he said with an impish grin. And guess what? The Red Flame really is coincidentally the name of the local joint in the city near his office frequented by many a financial type. His amused face told me to relax and just enjoy the story. And *Top Producer* is a first-rate story told with humor. It has suspense, villains, a hold-on-to-your-seat chase scene, and is ever so topical. So, don’t worry about Wall Street and the tragedy of the human condition. I’ve done that for you. Just sit back, relax and enjoy Vonnegut’s first thriller as a fun airplane, poolside or bedside read. Then wait for the movie.

Oh, and don’t get me wrong. Some of my best friends work on Wall Street. ●

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