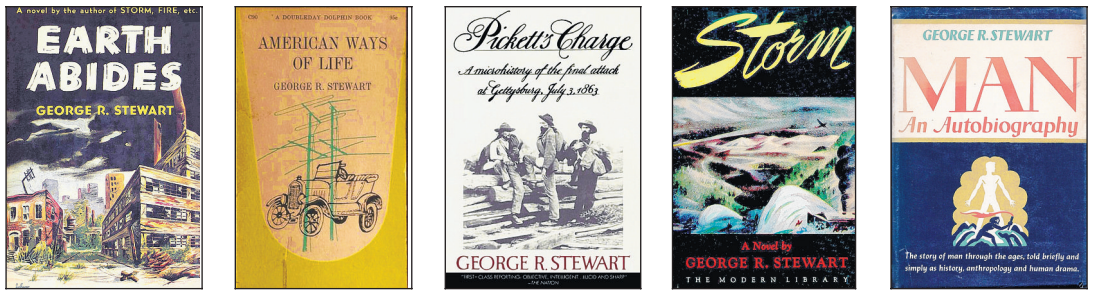


George R. Stewart: Unrestrained by literary borders

BY **PATRICK T. REARDON**

A conversation with a writer is, almost always, interesting and insightful. During a long career as a reporter for the Tribune, I was paid to talk with many, including Robert Caro, Sandra Cisneros, Richard Russo, Haki Madhubuti, Jane Smiley and Gay Talese.

Someone I wish I could include on that list is George R. Stewart, a writer who refused to let literary boundaries get in the way of his curiosity and story-telling verve.

Stewart died in 1980 at the age of 85, and it was around that time that I discovered his history of the ill-fated Donner Party, "Ordeal by Hunger." This group of 87 pioneer men, women and children got stuck in the High Sierra by snowstorms in the winter of 1846-47. Many died; some survived through cannibalism.

George R. Stewart

PHOTO FROM THE ANNA EVENSON-STEWART FAMILY PHOTO COLLECTION

The book, originally published in 1936, is noteworthy for Stewart's direct, clear and resolute writing about the horrors of that winter, such as this reference to one escape effort:

The men of the relief party encouraged the stragglers, but they soon saw that Tommy Reed simply could not make it. And there was no one to carry him. He struggled on for two miles, a truly heroic distance for a three-year-old, and then gave out.

Some years later, I found "Earth Abides," one of the first of the post-Hiroshima novels to look at what the world might be like after some worldwide catastrophe. In the case of this 1949 novel, it's a deadly plague that kills off everyone except a lucky few, including Isherwood Williams. In an all-but-abandoned New York City, he meets Milt and Ann Abrams.

The evening passed pleasantly enough. They played cards by candlelight — three-handed bridge. They drank liqueurs .... It was kind of make-believe. You pretended there was a world outside the windows.

The author of this much-lauded sci-fi novel was George R. Stewart, but it was years later that I realized he was the same guy who wrote "Ordeal by Hunger."

Then, during a visit to the Gettysburg battlefield, I found in the bookstore another George R. Stewart book, "Pickett's Charge: A Microhistory of the Final Attack at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863," published in 1959. Like the other two books, it was a lively and intelligent piece of writing.

By this point, I began to think that I wanted to find other George R. Stewart books.

One was his 1941 novel "Storm," which features as its central character a single January tempest that rises over the Pacific, thunders in to hit San Francisco and then moves off into the Midwest, sending climate reverberations all across the globe.

Fascinating on many levels, the book portrays the nuts and bolts of a still-early stage in the science of forecasting when, in the absence of computers, weather predictors had to rely to some extent on seat-of-the-pants judgments. It's a subtle and affecting book, detailing the fragility of human life and plans in the face of unrestrained (and unrestrainable) weather.

Stewart took a similar approach in a 1948 novel "Fire" about a raging forest fire in the Sierra Nevada, and he wrote other novels and books about literature. That fit, since for half a century he was an English professor at the University of California, Berkeley.

But he also wrote social history — "American Ways of Life" (1954), "Man: An Autobiography" (1946) and "U.S. 40: Cross Section of the United States of America" (1953) — and four groundbreaking books about names. Two are, if you can believe it, well-told stories about place names: "Names on the Land: A Historical Account of Place Naming in the United States" (1945) and "Names on the Globe" (1975). The other two are reference books, both rich in anecdote and color: "A Concise Dictionary of American Place-Names" (1970) and "American Given Names" (1979).

The titles may sound dull, but the books are consistently eye-opening, such as this snippet from "Names on the Land":

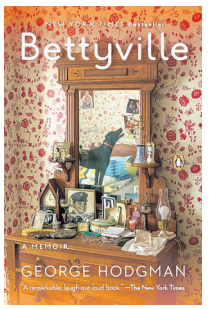
Not all animal-names were for animals. A settler named Fox might leave his name upon a hill or stream, and Baer could easily shift to Bear. Where a few Indians lingered after the rest of the tribe had moved westward, the place often became Indian Creek, but one of the Indians might be called Red Bird, or Buffalo, and his name survive after he was forgotten.

What a multi-faceted body of work! And, yet, it was Stewart's literary versatility, his omnivorous intellect and his emphasis on linking human stories with stories of the land (a tendency found in all of his books) that combined to keep him in the shadows. He was never a star in any single bookish arena and is pretty much forgotten today.

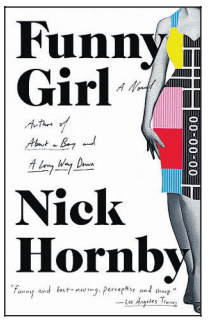
That's too bad because, boy, these books are rich and meaty.

And, boy, if I'd had the chance, I'd have had a delightful time talking with Stewart.

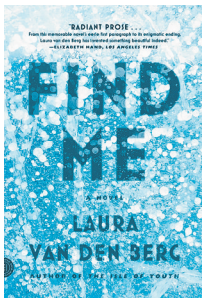
Patrick T. Reardon covered the literary scene during a 32-year career at the Chicago Tribune.



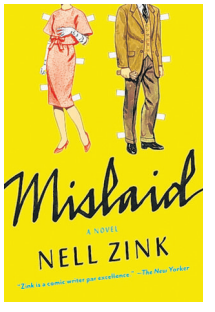
Bettyville: A Memoir
By George Hodgman, Penguin, 279 pages, $17
Hodgman returns to his hometown of Paris, Mo., to become his mother's caretaker. In doing so, Hodgman reflects on his upbringing, family life, loving memories and the unresolved conflict that exists between him and his mother: the fact that she has never fully accepted that he is gay.



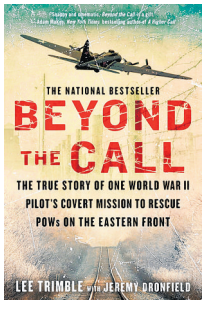
Funny Girl: A Novel
By Nick Hornby, Riverhead, 454 pages, $16
Barbara Parker may have been crowned Miss Blackpool, but she dreams of more, wishing to become the British equivalent of Lucille Ball. Barbara transforms herself into Sophie Straw, moves to 1960s London — where she encounters a colorful cast of characters — and lands the lead role in a sitcom.



Find Me: A Novel
By Laura van den Berg, FSG Originals, 280 pages, $15
Joy, depressed and addicted to cough syrup, is immune to a widespread illness that begins with memory loss. Her immunity gains her admittance to a hospital in rural Kansas, where she bonds with other patients before traveling to Florida in the hopes of finding her birth mother and confronting her troubled past.



Mislaid: A Novel
By Nell Zink, Ecco, 244 pages, $14.99
Peggy falls under the spell of her poetry professor, resulting in an unplanned pregnancy, marriage and second child. When their daughter Karen is 3, Peggy runs off with her daughter, adopts an African-American persona and moves into a housing project. When Karen and her brother Byrdie encounter each other years later, they must navigate their difficult past.



Beyond the Call
By Lee Trimble with Jeremy Dronfield, Berkley Caliber, 323 pages, $17
Trimble details a covert rescue mission undertaken at the end of World War II to rescue Allied POWs from camps in Poland as the Red Army advanced toward Germany. Trimble looks at how his father, Capt. Robert Trimble, was tasked with the mission and the steps he took to ensure the safety of his passengers.

— Jeremy Mikula