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EAST BAY EXPRESS

Arts & Entertainment

Tuesday, June 27, 2006

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Book Briefs for the Month of June

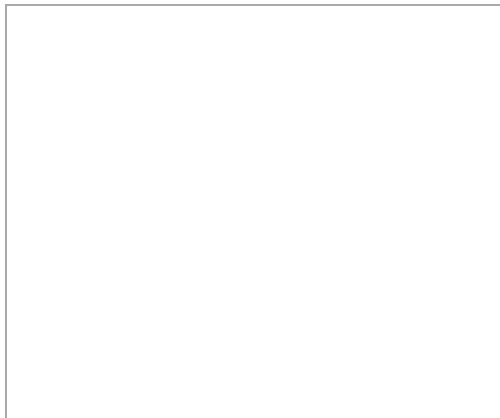
This month, our reviewers wrangle with Wild West shootouts, early American gay life, and watermelon jokes, and dropping dead.

By John Freeman , Kim Hedges , Matt King , D. Scot Miller , Jason Shamai and Rachel Swan
Article Published May 31, 2006

Hokum

Edited by Paul Beatty
Bloomsbury, \$16.95

Against a black backdrop, a thin slice of watermelon eaten nearly down to the rind conjures a sinister pink smile on the cover of this African-American humor anthology. Like its contents, the book's cover is both hilarious and haunting. When compiling a collection that is equal parts Afro-surrealist agitprop and talking-book primer, Beatty mined a compendium of the last century's most influential black writers, thinkers, and artists, himself included. From the pathos of Hilton Als to the surprisingly profound musings of Mike Tyson, many of these pieces are funny in spite of themselves. Excerpts from Sam Greenlee's *The Spook Who Sat by the Door* and Fran Ross' forgotten jewel, *Oreo*, mix with short stories from Henry Dumas and Darius James and poems from Bob Kaufmann, Harryette Mullin, and more, inspiring the reader to unearth these writers' other, out-of-print treasures. Wary of inside jokes, some readers might be reluctant to dive into the concoction of hip-hop lyrics, speeches, and quotes with which Beatty rounds out the anthology, but since before Brer Rabbit, oral humor has been the occasional vehicle for extreme, radical black thought. Beatty's selections give *Hokum*, as Jean-Michel Basquiat might say, teeth. As a literary reference tool, it's unmatched. — **D. Scot Miller**



Entertainment Details

Who / What:

Wole Soyinka
Oakley Hall
William Benemann
Jordan Fisher Smith
Gloria Lenhart
Paul Beatty

Planet Widow

By Gloria Lenhart
Seal, \$14.95

One Saturday morning, 42-year-old East Bayite Lenhart suddenly became a widow and single mother of two young sons. As she sat in her home office catching up on paperwork, her husband literally dropped dead on the sidewalk a few blocks away. This is Lenhart's no-nonsense, very readable account of the next year or so. In the wake of her massive loss came a plethora of practicalities for her to deal with: a dizzying financial situation (he had always handled the bills); a strained, sticky relationship with the family of her husband's ex-wife; her increasingly withdrawn youngest son; the weirdness of returning to work after such an event; and, of course, the earnest yet unidentifiable people who came up to her in such public places as the neighborhood supermarket to offer their condolences: After one such incident, Lenhart started shopping at a store ten miles away. But amidst all the pain and bewilderment, a dry, indomitable sense of humor complements the absurdities of life on "Planet Widow." For example, Lenhart is in no rush to pick out a headstone for her husband, but her mother-in-law is. "It is becoming clear," she writes, "that there will be no peace in this

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world until her son is resting comfortably under a slab of granite." Lenhart closes the book with some direct, summarized advice on preparing for and coping with death, and recommendations for further reading both in print and online. — **Kim Hedges**

Nature Noir

By Jordan Fisher Smith
Mariner, \$13.95

We think of park rangers as overgrown Boy Scouts, exemplary do-gooders. They're adept at tying granny knots. They splint broken bones and start fires by rubbing sticks together. Rookie author Smith acknowledges these stereotypes in his memoir about the fourteen years he spent patrolling the American River. Early on, he admits to starting his job as a 22-year-old muffin with the same "freshness and single-mindedness" that beset 19th-century gold prospectors and frontier settlers — too sunbeamy and well-adjusted to be a good writer, you'd assume. But all that would change once he learned the whys and wherefores of park rangers. Evidently, he spent the bulk of his career arresting nitwit tree poachers, investigating domestic abuse cases, and buttressing against a federally subsidized dam. You'll shudder reading hardboiled descriptions of what Smith encountered in those California canyons: whiskey-addled miners, human corpses mauled by wild animals, shacks made from portable toilets. Yet what makes *Nature Noir* so compelling isn't its way of exposing the profession's unpretty underside. Nor does Smith's genius lie in his penchant for mixing sordid personal narratives with equally sordid history lessons about post-Gold Rush population changes, cougar-hunting legislation, or dam construction. The best part of this book is Smith's prose itself: vivid and acute. —

Rachel Swan

Male-Male Intimacy in Early America

By William Benemann
Haworth, \$39.95

If you were around during our nation's wonder years, and you were a dude, and you liked other dudes, life sucked for you. Actually, most of us knew this already. What you might *not* have known, and what this UC Berkeley archivist has sweated over tons of primary sources to show you, are the various ways in which it sucked and, more interestingly, how that suckitude affected the way early Americans communicated. And not just the men who loved men (you're not allowed to call them gay): Disapproving doctors, lawmakers, and chroniclers with a mind to preserving the public's innocence of "unnatural acts" became masters of semantic contortion. Subtitled "Beyond Romantic Friendships," this book is as much about the art of circumlocution as it is about the Greek art itself, and that's what makes Benemann's engaging history so impressive. It's no easy thing to research male-male intimacy in an era when sailors discovered bunking together were brought up on "certain charges." The first-rate detective work, teasing out the substance in implication and exposing the cover-ups, is exciting to witness and fun to root for. In our own era, with its glut of names and classifications, it's an eye-opener to learn how queer men navigated their sexual and emotional urges in a time when "queer men" didn't exist. — **Jason Shamai**

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