



Louis Agassiz, ca. 1890. Unidentified photographer. Charles Scribner's Sons Records, Archives of American Art. »

the arbitrary SWAPPER

will this week swap *A wooden end-table, at least one foot square for A red rug which is nice but sheds immensely* TO MAKE THIS SWAP, OR TO PROPOSE YOUR OWN, SWAPPER@THEEXILE.MATINIC.US

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TRUTH BE TOLD



« Stephen Parrish, ca. 1929. Unidentified photographer. Archives of American Art.

FICTION, LIKE MARY POPPINS'S CARPETBAG, contains impossibly large truths within small lies. It is an article of wide agreement that fiction is a useful purveyor of truths we would probably fail to name if they were not couched in some elegant chronicle concerning people who are cannily like us—but still not us. Definition of fiction as a creative vehicle for truth is, then, a reasonable first assertion in a consideration of its purpose.

Fiction must be true. It must display our social monstrosities with a bitter alarmism that harnesses disgust and hurls it toward action. It must record our quirks in the service of confirming shared humanity through the silent conspiracy between writer and reader. It must describe for us the frozen brutality of toothpaste on the bathroom mirror so well that we can smell the fluoride.

Though fiction must be true, it needn't always be real. Some kinds of fiction, arguably the best kinds, must tamper verisimilitude by a shade or two. Within the context of a wittier, prettier almost-reality, these kinds of fiction can disguise, convey, and create truth. By writing life better than it is, the author does us a distinct service. The presentation of a fictional universe with a coherent and compelling aesthetic challenges us to create a world in its image. It innovates as it entertains.

Writers of fiction should of course continue to ponder the materiality of our immediate human condition in terms of the brutality of toothpaste, the agony of adolescence, the impermanence of love, and the rest of the gamut of very real subjects. But they should not shrink back from the task of imagining worlds close enough to ours that they might be tried on by a young generation or two.

So let us by all means continue to open novels to contemplate the truths of our real relationships and rationalizations. But let us also occasionally open them as though they were catalogues from which we might order a different reality, bearing in mind that our fiction, like our politics, must always be strident. ■

THE GIRL WHO READS SENSATION STORY PAPERS.
"Till your eyes become red, and your nose it turns blue,
You will go late to bed with romance in your head,
And some more you'll take up and read yourself dead."
She died of a love sick newspaper story.
You die with each darning that lores, false or true,
Like the drops that pour down a rain-water-pout,
How romantic you look as your tears spill about,
In sticky, and awfully sensation stories,
How charming the girl who endlessly lores!

« "The Girl Who Reads Sensation Story Papers," 1891. Princeton Rare Books Collection.



required. ■
of their aesthetic
bit, as the dicta
and frowned a
laughed haltingly
Africa." They both
starving children in
Eat up. There are
of view?" "Dunno.
"From what point
should write it."
ing to ask a black lady
he was mostly try-
he?" "Probably. But
ist a racist." "Was
Midwestern tour-
subway called a
can guy on the
trovetry. A Jama-
"Oh, a racial con-
And she answered,
notebook today?"
"What went into the
one point he asked,
like Russian dolls. At
jokes nested ironies
as they did. All of their
motion of their thin wrists
in sauce, appreciating the
honey wine and scoop lamb
he noticed. They sat to sip
while they walked ten blocks,
feather earrings blew across her cheeks,
and went out for Ethiopian. Her peacock
and down, they dressed up
Yegeb Alcha. Sun

ions. ■
being annoyed, and, after, Julian told us about how much he hated
area would have kept them from burning. We laughed to keep from
onions in Frances's. Will said that if we had used his, the larger
We melted the margarine in my frying pan, and burnt the
with Will's mother in grade school.
rented from a woman who we did not yet know was friends
in the front seat as we headed back to the cottage we had
tourist map, was not at all convenient. Julian was still sitting
enough, since the store, located on a road not shown on our
Convenience (this is how it was spelled; and it was accurate
Much later, we bought margarine and onions at Othon
ment.
knowing offered cheap assault against the habits of nourish-
oddy short. It should come as no surprise that the habits of
seat since her legs are extraordinarily long, and Julian's are
tions), Julian prevailed. We all knew that Frances deserved the
being more nourishing than food (even when they are bad direc-
seats. Julian and Frances both wanted the front seat, but, directions
tion—for a tepid drink of water at the state rest area and a quarrel over
indicates a point no longer close to home but not yet approximating the destina-
We stopped halfway—not really halfway, just the traveller's halfway which
of various sizes. One each.
box of matches and an E-sharp harmonic. We all brought along frying pans
as a sort of offering against leaving anything behind indeliberately. I took a
granola bars inside, and Will deliberately left behind the inflatable mattress
offering navigational help. Frances took the box of raisins that actually had
association more interested in dead ends that lead to souvenir shops than in
Julian took the map which we did not yet know was printed by a tourist
Cold days give the traveler a proper sense of humility.
I have tried traveling on warm days and it always ends up in too much levity.
door obscures the east horizon, so I am not too sure. At the very least it was cold.
nally got up the resolve to leave for Oron Glen. But the apartment block next
The Fry-Pan Confederacy. It seemed like early in the morning when we fi-



« James E. Taylor, "Group of non-native men on board boat, the 'Helena'; Group of non-native men outside brush arbor and frame structures nearby; Mountains in distance." Undated, from the Smithsonian Institute National Anthropological Archives.

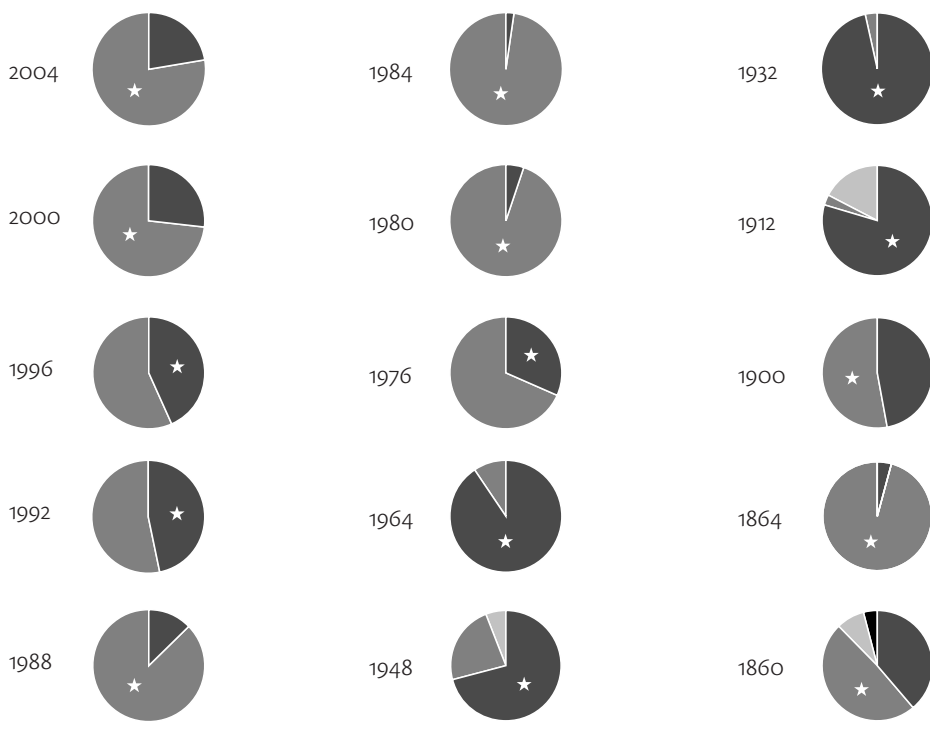
The lay of the land

REPUBLICANS TAKE PERVERSE GLEE in showing off maps of the 2000 and 2004 presidential elections with vast swathes of America plastered in the redness of their electoral victories. This is, of course, a nearly-useless view of the outcome of an election, and some clever designers have produced electoral maps in which states are proportionately scaled according to their population.

Still, the image of a red America bounded by two blue baffles on either side occupies a significant place in the American imagination. We know that acres don't vote. But something still rings true about the physical size of the American electoral regions, in much the same way that the splotches of red on maps of the British Empire did a better job of confirming the British hegemon than any other description of political and ethnocultural power.

So what if acres *did* vote? This series of graphs asks that question. It takes the winner-takes-all system of the electoral college and revalues it according to area rather than population. Under the real system, Vermont and Wyoming carry equal weight. Under this system, Wyoming is ten times weightier.

The lighter gray represents the Republicans; the darker is the Democrats. Lightest gray represents the Dixiecrats (1948), the Progressives (1912), or the Constitutional Union (1860). Black indicates the Northern Democrats (1860). A white star indicates the victor of the real election.



overbearing. ■
 on the way to see it. The overbite was soon
 answered wrong. Aidan crashed the Vespa
 duck three years before that, but Pat had
 There was no duck. There had been a
 na see it."
 "To bury the duck. But don't yet, I wan-
 "Because I'm nuts or to bury the duck?"
 day off."
 "Go tell Rita you need the rest of the
 it."
 "You can't. I'm getting it and burying
 "I wanna see it."
 "Beak down, tail up."
 body floating in the river."
 "So you are right now looking at its
 its body floated back up."
 der for an unnaturally long time, and then
 there are any in the river—and it stayed un-
 was going to catch a fish—but I don't think
 minute, then it dove under the water like it
 but it didn't budge. It just hung out for a
 away. The alpha duck quacked back at it,
 behind while the rest of the duck herd flew
 "It was an old gray duck and it stayed
 or did it jump?"
 "The shelter sucks. Do ducks have wrists
 shelter's a nice place."
 "No, in the river. Why the shelter? The
 "In the shelter?"
 "I just saw a duck commit suicide."
 "What?"
 this."
 "Ok. You're never going to believe
 "Kind of."
 "Oh, um, hi. Do you have a minute?"
 "Hi."
 Aidan the call. He picked up:

I walked down to the river to sit and
 eat my lunch. When I was finished, I gave
 found single at thirty.
 said goodbye to Rita, a lovely receptionist
 found loitering by the public library, and
 up with Murphy, a charming retriever mix
 to wash some dogs. Around noon I finished
 also an overbite. He drove off and I went in
 reckoning had come, as he had a Vespa but
 animals before Tuesday was. A moment of
 Francis of Assisi! Animal Shelter on Thurs-
 day, which was always my day for helping
 Aidan DROPPED ME OFF in front of the St.

ASSISI