Unidentified photograoher. Charles Scribner's ouis Aggasiz, ca. 1890

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

5 NOVEMBER 2008

Gallery, Archives of Stephen Parrish, ca

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.

required. of their aesthetic and frowned

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

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 trying 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 Convenence (this is how it was spelled; and it was accurate Much later, we bought margarine and onions at Othon

knowing offered cheap assault against the habits of nourishoddly 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 direcseats. 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 harmonica. 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 Othon Glen. But the apartment block next Ine try-Pan Confederacy. It seemed like early in the morning when we fi-

And some morn you'll wake up and find yourse And the verdict will be of the coroner's jury-Your will go late to bed with ron

THE GIRL WHO READS SEUSATION STORY PAPERS.

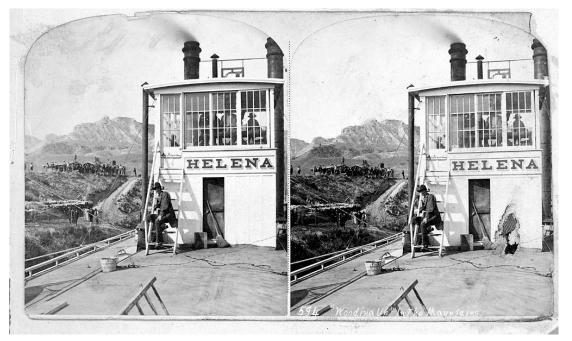
bit, as the dicta haltingly laughed starving children in Africa." They both Africa." Eat up. There are of view?" "Dunno. From what point should write it." for directions." "You ing to ask a black lady he was mostly tryhe?" "Probably. But ist a racist." "Was Midwestern toursubway called a can guy on the troversy. A Jamai-"Oh, a racial con-And she answered, notebook today?" "What went into the one point he asked, like Kussian 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; teather earrings blew across her cheeks

and went out for Ethiopian. Her peacock

Yegeb Alcha. Sun down, they dressed up



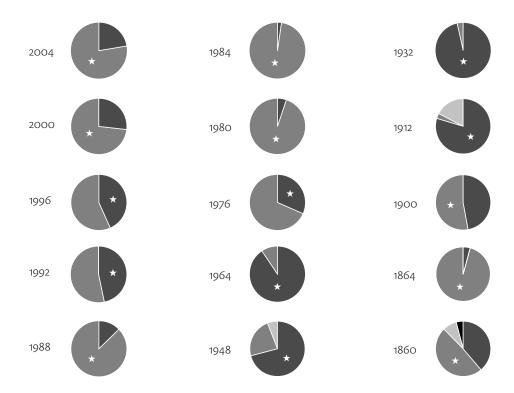
## The lay of the land

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 nearlyuseless 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.



« 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 Anthropologi-

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

"To bury the duck. But don't yet, I wan-"Because I'm nuts or to bury the duck?"

"Go tell Rita you need the rest of the

"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 unwas 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."

"Ok. You're never going to believe

"Oh, um, hi. Do you have a minute?"

Aidan the call. He picked up:

eat my lunch. When I was finished, I gave

I walked down to the river to sit and

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 day, which was always my day for helping Francis of Assisi Animal Shelter on Ihurs-AIDAN DROPPED ME OFF in front of the St.

**ISISS**A