

CONFESSIONS OF AN AUTOGRAPH HOUND

Published in the *Brown Alumni Monthly*, February 1982

Last spring I stopped by to have a glass of wine with the Latin-American novelist Carlos Fuentes. To be truthful: We were not in Mexico, he didn't know me, nor had he even known that I would be in the same room with him. And frankly it wasn't stimulating conversation about the nature of fictionalizing that I was seeking.

Fuentes had come to Brown to deliver a lecture. That done, with both panting undergraduates and fascinated faculty clearly stunned by the combination of show and erudition that he had brought with him that afternoon, he was then invited later that evening to hold forth with a few guests at Prof. Arnold and Ann Weinstein's residence on George Street, facing the College Green. I was there to meet him. I was there really to get his autograph.

In fact, I have chased many a writer at Brown since I was a junior fifteen years ago, and this most recent episode somehow led me to a reconsideration of my experiences as an autograph hound. How had I begun? Why? What did this stalking say about me? And what did it say about Brown, where of course the practice—or obsession—had commenced and been stimulated?

I must say that many of the guests at the Weinstains' seemed to be after something. One colleague brought a satchel of his own books and dumped them onto the piano stool and then began signing them for Señor Fuentes. Another, standing to my right while I plucked a strawberry out of a bowl and ruminated on my approach, was determined to reassure Mr. Fuentes that everything he had said in his lecture was true. And without fail there was the colleague whose shoes seemed to lift and fall in tandem with our guest lecturer, so that wherever Mr. Fuentes moved, Professor Synchro-phanth was no farther from him than ninety-nine is from a hundred.

Ah, what a humbling experience is autograph seeking, I determined that rainy spring evening, especially if you yourself are a writer. How much self-diminition can one whose *raison d'être* is to write subject oneself to? But it seemed to me that it was all right to be following around an esteemed author in his fifties in anticipation of that sudden moment when a break in conversation would allow me to glide forward, chasséing with my right foot, and thrust forward my book. Writers need to practice more restraint of ego, need to understand that we are servants of man, not mankind's perpetual stage-center performers. We are to observe, tipping around from corner to corner, tilting our heads to overhear, squinting our eyes to see, and to present an image of life that is both delightful and disturbing. And so our responsibility to this image ought necessarily to diminish our propensity toward presenting ourselves as the center of attraction, rather than presenting the art itself as the attraction. This matter considered, I felt better about my predilection as I jockeyed for position.

Now Fuentes moved to a group of four; spirited interchange ensued. Then somebody had him one-on-one. Next he had a strawberry; then some cheese. Another set formed around him, people began to leave, then Arnold was going to the coat room, then Professor Cook was saying good-bye, then everybody was saying good-bye and through a dream of movement that had them turning and moving like wind-up dolls. I ran to a table, grabbed my book, and, explaining to Mr. Fuentes that I had just bought *Terra Nostra* in Seattle, watched him, in his trench coat, scribble:

“To Barry, who went to the Pacific to find this Mediterranean”

All right! I hustled out of there, and within a few minutes I was home in the living room by myself, looking at the inscription and realizing something about a book autograph: that it is a tantalizing, cursive symbol of mythical presence; that it represents a private, singular message between writer and reader; and that it was a sweeping individual symbol of identity. In other words, some strange attraction to the message, some fascination with the personal communicative medium between people had also to be at the bottom of my preoccupation with the author’s autograph.

Contemplating further that evening, I resolved also that the special circumstances that Brown had always encouraged—and especially so in the last ten years—might serve as another explanation for my penchant for the writer’s penning. It wasn’t simply mid-life crisis, professional burnout, or lack of familial ties that had led me to go after Mr. Fuentes and others before him. It was in some large degree the fact that Brown was always attracting the best writers in the world to its campus, and for a writer-to-be of twenty-one when I was struck with this prepossession—the attraction toward them was more than magnetic. Brown had always flooded me with my idols, and what could I do but paddle after them with my tongue hanging out, grateful for the opportunity to see, hear, even touch them as they walked on water. Yes, it was Brown University that started me on this path.

I said I started as a junior, but it was during my senior year when I finally built up enough courage to run after the big guys. I learned that John Cheever was coming to Brown to read, so I got a free-lance assignment from the then-proud *Brown Daily Herald*, called his daughter, Susan (whom I still haven’t met), at Pembroke, and asked her for advice on getting an interview with her father. “Call him at the Biltmore,” she said.

I did. He told me to come to his room the next morning at 10.

I was there promptly—no c.p. time for me. He opened the door and stood there smiling, and then we were shaking hands as Wright and Sartre must have in Paris decades earlier; and next he was taking off my raincoat for me as I stood in the awkwardness of that pose: my arms straight out, pointing behind me, and I leaning, twisting (would my arm get stuck in the lining?), and then we were seated after he had offered me bourbon. And finally we were talking about his novels. He answered all of my questions including the silly ones, and it was as if we were traveling on a train and had settled in for a conversationally invigorating spell.

Well, I only had two paperback copies—*The Wapshot Chronicle* and *The Wapshot Scandal*—and I had hitched these in the base of my left hand as the novelist and I shook hands good-bye. Suddenly, John Cheever took my copies from me and dashed off inscriptions, then handed the books back to me. I left in a giddy mess, having spent several hours (okay, one hour, twenty-seven minutes) with this major novelist and now having his inscriptions, which read, if I can recall exactly:

“To Barry Beckham in memory of an unforgettable experience”

He wrote that to me! I told myself on the elevator. In the other copy he had tossed cursively:

*To Barry Beckham
With my best wishes
John Cheever*

Now I could not be stopped in the chase for that chastening moment when the writer transfers directly to you the signature, the sweeping individual symbol of identity and mythical presence, the unending message that remains between the writer and you—all this represented by the autograph. When Nelson Algren, the Chicago novelist who recently died, had finished his talk in Carmichael (his most memorable line: “When you write, write; when you make love, make it”), I was right behind Prof. Park Honan when he went up to shake his friend’s, the writer’s, hand. I stood looking at the blackboard of Carmichael Hall while my attention was actually on the chit-chat between Algren and Honan. And then, finding my elbow almost in his jacket pocket, Professor Honan pivoted so that the three of us formed a semi-circle, and he said, “I’d like you to meet a writer from Brown, Barry Beckham.” Nelson Algren shook my hand. He smiled. He was wearing fine Western boots just like a writer; and pants too, I think. A moment of nothingness passed as each of us stood speechless, sucking air through our teeth, and then I fumbled through my jacket pocket for my paperback of Algren’s *The Man with the Golden Arm*. I asked him to sign it. Professor Honan smiled mightily. Algren dashed off:

*To Barry Beckham
Best wishes,
Nelson Algren*

Could spring be far behind? Was there a limit to the magnitude of encounters that my obsession for the graph of auto-biology might lead me to? No.

Eventually I became bolder than Hannibal streaking across the Alps. Playwright Edward Albee, basking in *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf* fame, in three-piece, chalk-striped suit, was in Gardner House for a reception after his talk (No, I hadn’t gone to his talk. It was the signature I wanted!), and again yours truly was free-lancing for the strumpet of truth, the *Brown Daily Herald*. Albee’s eyes were intensely bright and bored

through me, particularly after I, having done the research every interviewer should do about his potential subject, asked him about his being an adopted child. Albee's handsome traveling companion stretched his head out from his neck while Albee himself looked like the professor who had been reminded by a student that a salient point in the lecture had been left out. Then we launched into a more literary discussion: He said something about the theatre of the absurd. Finally, as we all picked up our belongings to prepare to leave, I thrust paperbacks of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and the combined *Zoo Story* and *The American Dream* in front of him, and he gave me a stingy,

for Barry Beckham
Edward Albee

Well, I was not daunted in the least. Look, some people aren't into long autographs. Wasn't it Thomas Wolfe who would agonize for long moments, book in hand, autograph seeker in suspense until finally scribbling, *Sincerely, Thomas Wolfe?*

And patience did pay off, for as the spring of my senior year did come, my roommate announced to me that he would be meeting a guest lecturer at the airport and his name was ... LeRoi Jones (now called Amiri Baraka). This was the sixties of the black arts movement that focused on the dominance of unadulterated black art forms and a conscious eschewing of white Western ideas as influences in black dance, music, literature, and other art expressions. No name in the country was better known as an advocate for this cultural nationalism than Baraka's; his plays *Dutchman* and *The Toilet* had become major stirrers off Broadway, and he had recently moved from Greenwich Village in a huff of fiery dynamism to Harlem to manage a black arts academy.

Consider that Baraka arrived safely, that my roommate met him at the airport, that I went along with the small group of faculty and students who ate dinner with Jones (the *BDH* had this time assigned another journalist who was promptly dismissed by Baraka after the reporter had asked a question suggesting that once again the Brown admission office had admitted a perfect nerd), and that some mediumistic impulse led me after dinner to invite some faculty and Baraka to our room in Hope College, where of course from our doorway you could see right there to the left, on the desk in front of my bed, a copy of Baraka's novel *The System of Dante's Hell*. Professors Hawkes, Honig, and Krause of the English department, along with Baraka's traveling companion and my roommate and I, sat, chatting, drinking beer, and listening to music in our dormitory room.

Then I caught Baraka in a moment between conversations and I used the technique developed over a series of encounters since my junior year. I told him how much I had enjoyed the chapter called "The Screamers," then put the book in front of his stomach and asked for his autograph. He wrote:

For Barry
Good Luck
Good eyes
Good Seeing

Leroi 1965

There are few signatures which I value higher, few writers in my estimation who have produced a comparable body of outstanding creative work, and therefore few experiences that have the impact of that evening when *black militant* Amiri Baraka sat in my dormitory room and sipped beer out of the same can with *white* novelist-professor John Hawkes.

With the benefit of those encounters, I stalked Manhattan's landscape after graduation from Brown with a furious vigil: Nikki Giovanni wrote, *with black love*; David Henderson entered something about *picking up the chairs*; Toni Morrison, in her first novel, was succinctly sweet. Then four years later (1970), I was back at Brown teaching, and the flood of fictionists and poets descending upon College Hill—a flood which continues to this very day—was for me a heavenly recess. What a surfeit of opportunities existed as I pushed ahead of undergraduates to implore Ralph Ellison, Robert Coover, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, James Alan McPherson, Derek Walcott, Chinua Achebe, Sterling Brown, Robert Hayden, Gwendolyn Brooks ...

They came and came to Brown, especially in the last two decades, because Brown has been a university where creative writing in both the undergraduate and graduate curricula has flourished, thanks to President Barnaby Keeney's hiring of poet Edwin Honig (who alas, retires this year), who in turn offered more Brown faculty positions to writers than the law allows. And no wonder therefore that when student contact with major literary voices is measured, our campus remains one of the key centers in the country. It was precisely that stimulating availability that propelled me along the course that I have been describing, and equally important, is what finally is one of the central attractions of the contemporary Brown landscape. It is a comfortable place for writers aged eighteen to eighty.

But how did I miss Archibald MacLeish?