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Nuclear Fiction

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BY PETER NICHOLS

NUCLEAR FICTION



And the time of death is every moment

Four Quartets—T.S. Eliot



Hiroshima, John Hersey's classic work of literary journalism about the dropping of an atomic bomb on that city, details the suffering and survival of six of the city's inhabitants, including Toshiko Sasaki, a clerk in the personnel office of the East Asia Tin Works. She was less than a mile from the man-made sun that blossomed in an eye blink above the city in 1945. Just before the building came down on her, a bookcase behind her desk poured the factory's library, like a breaking wave, over the 20-year-old clerk. "There, in the tin factory," Hersey writes, "in the first moments of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books." Ms. Sasaki was knocked unconscious and her leg was badly gashed and broken, but her life was saved by a load of books. Hiroshima was destroyed by them.

The scientists, engineers, technicians and bureaucrats—the brains behind the Manhattan Project—were the products of books. The main players who conceived and built the first atomic bomb were trained or held appointments at some of the nation's leading research universities. Stories of how these people acted and the way events unfolded were examined at the University of Pennsylvania last spring by a dozen undergraduates in an honors seminar called *Nuclear Fictions*. The course took a literary approach to the subject matter, using a range of genres—memoir, biography, essay, novel, poetry, play, government document, film and comic book—to probe how understanding gets “constructed” and history gets “represented and re-presented.”

at combat in modern war. *Nuclear Fictions* plumbs a subject near, if not dear, to Traister's heart.

“There are good reasons not to take this course,” he counseled those who showed up for the opening session, darkening first-day twitters by laying out the effects of a thermonuclear blast in New York City, about 100 miles away. “They have a fairly amusing destructive radius,” he noted without smiling. Into the ensuing silence, he injected the prediction that “this generation of students” would likely experience the use of these weapons—“at a distance, if you're lucky; close by, if you're not.” During a break, one student conversed with another about a choice he needed to make between *Nuclear Fictions* and a course on the Spanish Inquisition. He didn't return.



All this reading makes for a remarkably comprehensive survey, but for Professor Daniel Traister '63 the course stems from more than mere intellectual interest. “It arises out of something personal,” he said.

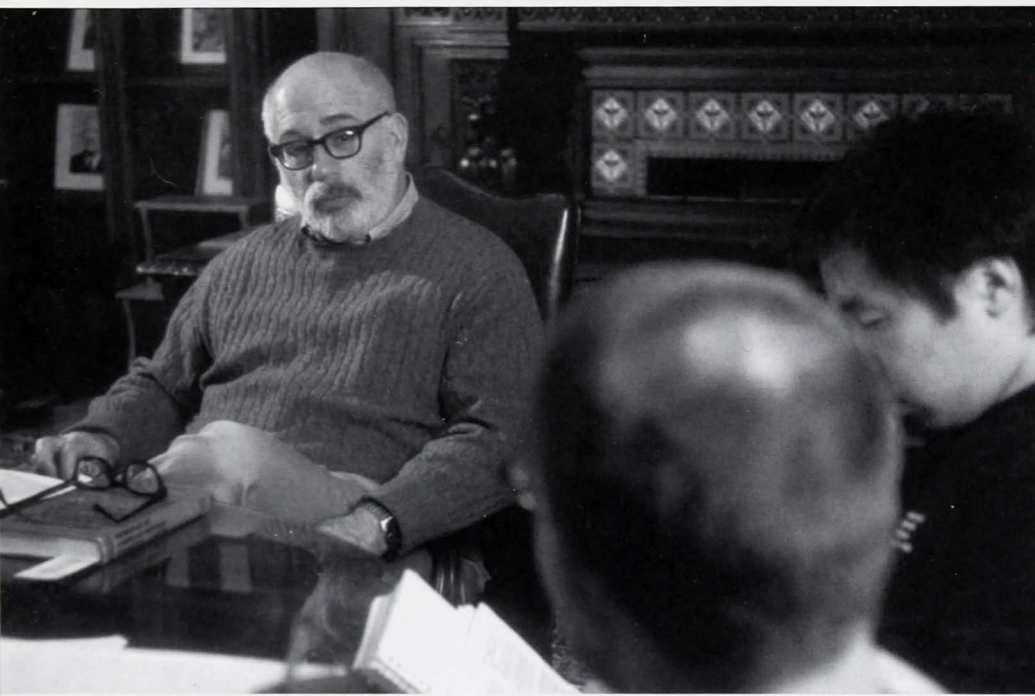
Traister is curator of the Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Penn. When he's not fielding reference questions on antiquarian materials or acquiring them, he's busy, as the English-language literature bibliographer, beefing up the general collection with new and old publications. With a doctorate in Renaissance English literature, he has written articles in scholarly and professional publications on literature, bibliography, history, rare book librarianship and library collection development.

Besides holding a job in Penn's library, Traister teaches courses almost every semester on traditional academic topics that have included everything from Shakespeare to westerns to a literary look

Young Danny Traister was the kind of kid who, as a third grader, discussed the foreign policy of Eisenhower and Dulles with his friends on the way to play stickball in their Bronx neighborhood. His mother was a “non-serious but card-carrying Communist,” and his father believed “all Communists were horses' asses of one vintage or another.” Together they created a “clichéd Jewish middle-class New York household,” and their “mixed marriage” often convulsed it with the passions of political argument. And in those years, there was politics aplenty.

A child veteran of the Cold War and keenly attuned to its normalized lunacy, Traister grew up in an apartment complex with an anti-aircraft battery positioned along the Jerome Park Reservoir, just across the street from his building. In his dreams, chunky-looking Buck Rogers missiles descended in slow motion through ineffectual cannon fire. From his apartment's north-facing windows, he watched them

“There are just so many pressure points in the world, and the technology is too widespread—the secrets simply aren’t secret, and fissile material has seeped out of the old Soviet Union. Somewhere, sometime, some schmuck is going to use it again.”



Daniel Traister '63 listens to students at the University of Pennsylvania, where Traister teaches a course about literature related to the atomic bomb.

coming down over Van Cortland Park from a transpolar trajectory. “I couldn’t tell you how those dreams ended,” he said recently. “I don’t remember them ending, but you didn’t have to be very bright to dope out that the chance of at least one bomb getting through to take you out was reasonably high.” In his child’s mind, the missiles were aimed not only at New York City but directly at him. “They didn’t even need to have very good aim,” he added. “We grew up knowing this.”

In P.S. 95, around the outbreak of the Korean Conflict, school authorities distributed dog tags to the pupils. The principal had one of the older children, a survivor of Allied bombing raids on Germany, testify to the virtues of wearing the peculiar adornment. The tags, the boy told them, would help parents identify their smashed corpses amid the smoking city ruins. He had seen this done. “It scared the living pee out of me,” Traister exclaimed. “Psychologically, I think this was an extremely witty thing to do with second graders. . . . It’s the sort of thing you retain over the years.”

The Doomsday Clock on the cover of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* was the chronometer by which he told the time. Not long after the first hydrogen bomb was tested, the year he turned 11, the publication’s timekeepers advanced the hands to two minutes before midnight. Traister remembers: “You were conscious of that clock because in New York you knew you were living in a bull’s-eye.”

At Colby, Traister remembers, he turned to the south and scanned the horizon for mushroom clouds every time a blast went off at a construction site on I-95. “I figured I’d miss New York,

but Boston I knew I’d see,” he said. Early on, he’d become friends with Diane Scrafton ’61, who’d come to Colby from the Staten Island section of the bull’s-eye. “I happened to tell her about this folly [of mistaking construction for Armageddon] one day when we were talking, and she looked at me and said, ‘I haven’t met anybody else who does that, but I do it too.’ . . . We both laughed nervously because we knew this was silly, but we also knew that it wasn’t quite silly.”

Although Colby wasn’t entirely isolated from the social upheaval of the ’60s, Traister recollects a widely felt sense that the campus was out of the nuclear crosshairs. Political science professor Marvin Weinbaum was away in one of the big East Coast cities when the Cuban missile crisis hit. “I remember when he got back, he was mobbed by students who all wanted to know what it was like to be near a bull’s-eye. . . . It hadn’t occurred to us that Limestone [Loring Air Force Base] was within nuclear distance of Waterville. We always saw this in terms of city destruction rather than military destruction. We weren’t particularly sophisticated.”

The anxiety of a life lived looking down the barrel of a nuclear weapon is not an experience Traister believes is unique. “It gives you a certain amount of pause,” he said, “but it doesn’t give everyone the same kind of pause. I suspect there are far more scars on people my age or thereabouts than we ever think about.” In the early ’90s he delivered a paper in Lawrence, Kan., and had occasion to mention that he’d grown up in the bull’s-eye. “This guy came back at me and said, ‘New York! Gimme a break!’ He said he came from North Dakota and *that* was the real bull’s-eye. He said, ‘We’re where the missile silos are. You’re going to be the dessert, but we’re the main course.’”

Traister still retains his childhood compulsion for doodling mushroom clouds on everything, except now the figurative doodling consists of reading almost everything related to war and atomic weaponry and teaching courses like *Nuclear Fictions*. Drawing lessons from that personal reading project is like trying to pocket a mushroom cloud. “I don’t know,” he said of Hiroshima. “A lot of innocent people suffered. Dropping the bomb falls under the rubric of ‘crimes against humanity,’ but it isn’t just that. As prosecutors of war, the Japanese were not nice people.”

By the time the bomb was ready, Hitler, who was the intended target, had already been defeated, and the U.S. was locked in a savage endgame war with Japan. The immediate crisis, the exigencies of war, made the bomb an irresistible alternative to what was expected to be a bitter and costly invasion of Japan. It also had the added benefit of impressing the Soviet Union in the cold—possibly hot—war that everyone could see coming.

Little Boy exploded above Hiroshima with a force equivalent to 12,500 tons of TNT. Almost half the people within a mile of the blast were killed outright. Many who lived called out for death. Altogether about 140,000 people, 54 percent of the city's population, died by the end of 1945—200,000 if you count the bomb-related dying that continued over the next five years.

Paul Fussell, in his essay "Thank God for the Atomic Bomb," writes that "real war experience tend[s] to complicate attitudes about the most cruel ending of that most cruel war." As a young lieutenant leading an infantry platoon, Fussell was slated to take part in the invasion of the Japanese mainland despite being partly disabled by injuries received in the war with Germany. "I was simultaneously horrified about the bombing of Hiroshima and forever happy because the event saved my life," he writes. In his "soldier's view," the annihilation of Hiroshima was "sadistic and humanitarian, horrible and welcome."

"If I understand him correctly," Traister said, "it is the essence of tragedy. Nothing you can do is going to be good, so you do something and hope you can live with the evil that you've done. In tragedy, sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn't work." The balance of good and evil that issued from the deed is not easily calculated, and volumes have been written sharply contesting the point. "I don't know what the answer is," he continued. "I doubt that there is one—or, let me put it this way: I doubt that there is *only* one—and I think differently about it myself on different days."

One of his main goals in teaching Nuclear Fictions is to help undergraduates become better thinkers and better readers. "I don't want students to walk out as carbon copies of my opinions," he said, "and I don't care if they have no clue of what I think a book [we are studying] means. I am far happier if I succeed in complicating their easy responses and moralistic views. This I do, or try to do, in the belief that they'll be better readers—and thinkers—the more able they are imaginatively to absorb the validity of points of view they do not share."

Traister often reads long excerpts to the class from related but unassigned books. On the whole, he'd recommend about a dozen per three-hour session, complete with title, author and biographical squib, publication date and subsequent editions, an account of political repercussions following the book's release and a critical review.

"He strikes me as a weird, highly intelligent man," one of his students offered. A senior in the

class called him "the most erudite man I have ever met." A Penn English instructor quipped, "He's one of the few people around here who's probably as smart as he thinks he is."

Traister's devotion to books is in part an appreciation for the value of reading and ideas, but it's also a covetous affection for the objects themselves. He lives in a Philadelphia suburb with his wife, Barbara Howard Traister '65, four cats and a three-legged pit bull puppy named Bruno, rescued from a New York animal shelter's death row. Their home is submerged beneath an incoming tide of books, despite use of an annex as the main library. "We've got art in our closets that we can't put up," laments Barbara Traister, an English professor and department chair at Lehigh University.

"I wouldn't mind living forever," Traister brooded over his piles of books. "I'm curious about so much that forever wouldn't be long enough." He's looking down the barrel again, reflecting on his death-haunted life. "The world is filled with ways that encourage you to leave it—sometimes in an unwanted hurry. I do what I can, fairly confident that an exception is not going to be made in my case."

Bringing forth Little Boy let loose the nightmare shadow that Traister sensed stalking the Bronx of his youth. The Cold War that followed Hiroshima's destruction was a caricature of peace, paid for by commanders and crews in bombers, missile silos, submarines and command-and-control bunkers who were trained and poised at every moment to hurl a thousand suns.

Traister believes undergraduates are not old enough to feel the weight of this history, and he teaches in part to place something of that burden upon them. "To be honest," remarked a sophomore history major enrolled in Nuclear Fictions, "I never really under-

stood what the big deal about the Cold War was and why everybody was so happy when the Berlin Wall came down. It just seemed like a big rock-and-roll event."

"All of this is ancient history to them," said Traister. The Cold War held in check the instruments of destruction wielded by the superpowers. That "balance" was lost when the Soviet Union collapsed. "I'd like students who take my course to be a smidgeon more thoughtful about these kinds of issues because they remain with us [in the form of nuclear terrorism]. There are just so many pressure points in the world, and the technology is too widespread—the secrets simply aren't secret, and fissile material has seeped out of the old Soviet Union. Somewhere, sometime, some schmuck is going to use it again."

Atomic Reading

Asked for a list of suggested reading about the atomic bomb, Daniel Traister '63 submitted a list of more than 50 works with detailed annotations. Here's an abridged version; the full list, with comments, is available online (www.colby.edu/colby.mag).

John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (Knopf, 1946).

Richard Rhodes, *The Making of the Atomic Bomb* (Simon & Schuster, 1986) and *Dark Sun: The Making of the Hydrogen Bomb* (Simon and Schuster, 1995).

Paul S. Boyer, *By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age* (1985; reprinted, University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

General Leslie A. Groves, *Now It Can Be Told: The Story of the Manhattan Project* (Harper and Row, 1962).

General Kenneth D. Nichols, *The Road to Trinity* (William Morrow, 1987).

Daniel Kevles, *The Physicists: The History of a Scientific Community in Modern America* (1977; reprinted, Harvard University Press, 1995).

Laura Fermi, *Atoms in the Family: My Life with Enrico Fermi* (1954; reprinted, University of Chicago Press, 1994).

Emilio Segrave, *Enrico Fermi: Physicist* (University of Chicago Press, 1970).

Masuji Ibuse, *Black Rain* (Kodansha, 1969).