SIMPLE THINGS

Oregon Humanities magazine’s summer ’09 issue provokes much thought on the matter of things, possessions, or, as the editors call it, “stuff.” The issue is stuffed with stuff on stuff, including a delightful essay “in praise of materials and materialists” by Charles Goodrich. It zooms from Goodrich’s home workshop to Mount Olympus and “the blue-collar god” Hephaestus. “The true materialist,” writes Goodrich, “wants to know the biography of an object, where it came from, how it was made, what it wants to do in the world.” The issue’s other articles contain much thoughtful agonizing about the banality of personal possessions.

But who doesn’t feel privileged and yet embarrassed to have so many things? Expensive, cheap, beloved, forgotten, and, above all, plentiful things? Portland writer John Holloran shrewdly diagnoses the condition as one of disenchantment. “Cell phones used to seem miraculous, if obscenely expensive to use. Now they’re so cheap and ubiquitous, so unremarkable, so taken for granted, that there are recycling bins for them; they are easily tossed aside, disposable. How does an otherwise extraordinary object transform itself into something so disappointingly ordinary?”

Holloran compares his own disenchantment to Buzz Lightyear’s in the movie Toy Story. Buzz thinks he is a real superhero. This false consciousness is, however, threatened when the toy sheriff explains that he cannot fly and that his wrist-mounted lasers do not, in fact, shoot futuristic laser beams. Poor Buzz soon finds himself in a toy store confronted by a “vast shelf of Buzz Lightyear action figures, all of whom cling to a mass delusion of sorts, believing the advertising copy, thinking the words printed on their boxes translate into real working features.”

Other articles veer from the delightful habit of collecting to the woeful destructiveness of hoarding. Convenience and consumerism also come under the literary microscope. One need not be on the verge of camping out at Walden Pond to find the various treatments sympathetic. The issue is a welcome reminder of how easy it is to mistake the promise of an object for the promise of fulfillment.

Of course, there is a class of things which deliver on their promises. Who, for instance, doubts the worth of a good magazine?

CHASTE BEOWULF

From Making Sense: Constructing Meaning in Early English, a selection of papers on Anglo-Saxon and other medieval texts edited by Antoinette diPaolo Feay and Kevin Kieran and published by the Toronto-based Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies. In the following excerpt, scholar Roberta Frank, a member of the International Advisory Panel for the Dictionary of Old English, starts her essay with lighthearted acknowledgment of the lack of earthy language in the English tongue’s greatest epic tale. The Beowulf poet, she goes on to show, valued understatement more than has been heretofore acknowledged. Antoinette diPaolo Feay has received NEH support for work on the Dictionary of Old English.

Don’t blame the Dictionary of Old English if a certain four-letter word—the one that turned the flower named after Leonard Fuchs into a “fuchsia”—is not among the 3,016 headwords in the new electronic fascicle. Still, its absence is bad news for the Toronto team: dirty words win friends and ward off customer complaints. What can an editor do when the basic English obscenities are missing from the corpus on which her dictionary is

Two images from Public Art in the Bronx, an NEH-supported website launched by the Lehman College Art Gallery (www.lehman.edu/publicart) that features an eclectic array of over one hundred works found in the borough’s public places. This painted steel sculpture by Michael Browne and Stuart Smith rests a hare’s breadth from the cross-country finish line at Van Cortlandt Park. Opposite, sound and sense are at play during recess for kids attending PS 23 in the Bronx, thanks to Bil and Mary Buchen’s ingenious installations that make physics fun.
Within the culture of the Berin Empire, which thrived from the fifteenth through the nineteenth century in what is now southern Nigeria, only the oba, or sacred monarch, had the authority to take human life. When the oba chose to grant this authority to one of his warriors, he signaled his permission by giving the delegate a brass head ornament, like the leopard head pictured above, which is housed at the Allen Memorial Art Museum at Oberlin College, the recipient of an NEH preservation and access grant to improve its art and artifact storage facilities.

This nineteenth-century ceramic Snake Jug, right, was designed by brothers Cornwall and Wallace Kirkpatrick, the founders of Anna Pottery in Anna, IL. By combining the form of a traditional whisky container (the “little brown jug”) with a vividly wrought motif of snakes and devils, the brothers created a powerful yet whimsical work of temperance propaganda. At the Krannert Art Museum at the University of Illinois, Urbana, has received NEH funding to improve storage of its artifact and object collection.

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Based? Should she advertise that the new fascicle contains more than a dozen polite words for the act of fornication alone? (It is hard, as the framers of the U.S. Congress Clean Airways Act recently discovered, to promote chasteness without naming its opposite.) Or should she tease her readers, as Angus McIntosh did in his 1960 essay entitled “A Four-Letter Word in ‘Lady Chatterley’s Lover’.” (It begins: “In Lady Chatterley’s Lover, I have noted 293 instances of the verb know.”) But Beowulf is so innocent of country matters that even the common four-letter f-word field “field,” with more than 375 occurrences in Old English, is missing. The revelation that the most frequent four-letter f-word in Beowulf is fela “many, much,” is not the stuff that publicists’ dreams are made of.


GO WEST, YOUNG TRICKSTER

From Coyote Country: Fictions of the Canadian West, wherein Duke research professor in Canadian studies Arnold E. Davidson sketches the chameleonlike exploits of two rare souls, one American, the other British, who cut out for the territory, shedding one identity while successfully assuming another. Professor Davidson was a recipient of an NEH fellowship for college teachers.

Early in the twentieth century a young “colored” man from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, went west to Southern Alberta and reinvented himself as Buffalo Child Long Lance, a chief of the Blackfoot. In that capacity he returned to the United States and gained considerable renown, associating with the rich and famous in Hollywood and New York, producing and starring in one of the first movies to treat Natives seriously, writing and speaking on behalf of Native causes. It is an odd success and hard to evaluate. His achievement is undeniable but so is his fraud. His fraud is also understandable, especially when we consider that he was of mixed white, Native, and perhaps black ancestry, yet, for him, what signified mostly in the United States of his time was black. His family denied being part Negro but was officially deemed colored. He himself departed from West Point (where he had been admitted as a full-blooded Cherokee) when an army investigation threatened to expose his passing. In this context the Freudian implications of the name he assumed are particularly suggestive. “Long Lance” is a definite claiming of a potency that America preferred to deny black men. Yet natives early recognized that Long Lance could not really act or speak for them, for he simply did not know their ways. Disputing a false definition of the “Negro,” he falsely inscribed himself as a Native, as simply another (although preferred) “Other.” It is tempting to go west and play Indian. Numerous people have done so and most without the impetus of racism.

Archibald Stansfeld Belaney, for example, although born and raised in Hastings, England, could come to Canada to become Grey Owl, ostensibly a half- Apache adopted by the Ojibway and taught by them the ways of the woods.

On two book tours back in England, in braids, buckskin, and wampum belt, he could pass as Canada’s most famous Indian. In that false guise he also became one of Canada’s more popular writers and greatest conservationists, two successes that went together. After Grey Owl, encouraged by Anahareo, his Iroquois “wife” (Belaney was legally married to someone else), adopted two orphaned beaver kittens, he gave up trapping to work on beaver conservation in western Canada and to write movingly about these little people in books such as his Pilgrims of the Wild (1935). He thereby fostered environmental consciousness to the degree that, “in the pantheon” of nature writers, one recent commentator has claimed, “Grey Owl belongs with Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, Aldo Leopold, and Rachel Carson.” A very real accomplishment for a fake Indian.