

book, which ten years ago led to appearances on the *Today Show*, *Oprah*, CNN and *Fresh Air*. When she read from her book, Lucy barely tolerated the cancer survivors in the audience who would try to one-up her account of suffering or give their reports “from the suffering sweepstakes.” She hated the phrase “survival of the human spirit.” *Autobiography of a Face*, an unsentimental, tough work of art, transcends cancer in favor of something more—a quest for truth and beauty. (KS)

***The Cuckoo***

by Peter Streckfus

Introduction by Louise Glück

Yale University Press, 2004, 80 pp., \$25 (cloth), \$13 (paper)

The 2003 Yale Series of Younger Poets winner, *The Cuckoo*, by Peter Streckfus, is the choice of Louise Glück, judge of last year’s contest. The book jacket heralds the collection as “daring,” alluding to Streckfus’s willingness to fuse traditional narrative and lyric modes with more experimental techniques. Although Glück’s choice may initially surprise readers, marking as it does a departure from the style generally favored by one of the most prestigious prizes in American poetry, closer examination of *The Cuckoo* yields an explanation.

One of Streckfus’s central motifs is the journey, or quest. The emphasis on archetypes and myth is also central in much of Glück’s own writing. In particular, Streckfus works with the story of the Buddhist monk Hsüan-tsang and his fifteen-year journey to India and back. Two of the longer poems engage Anthony

Yu’s translation of the sixteenth-century novel *The Journey to the West*, a fictional account of the monk’s travels. Indeed, *The Cuckoo*’s final long poem, “Organum,” is wholly composed of language from the novel and Francis Parkman’s *The Oregon Trail*. This meshing of different journeys on different continents privileges the metaphor of the journey over any specific trip and is echoed in other poems throughout the collection, such as “The English,” which alludes to the story of Robinson Crusoe.

The first poem in the collection “teaches” readers how to read the rest of the poems, in many ways. “The English” consists of a brief, imagined dialogue between Crusoe and Friday.

Crusoe: A bee.

Friday: Bee?

C: Aye, a bee.

F: Bee . . .

C: Aye.

later . . .

C: City.

F: Cee Dee

C: City.

Here, two speakers apparently miscommunicate, resulting in a nonsensical exchange. And yet, from the start, Streckfus argues strongly for the sense of such nonsense. As Glück says in her introduction, “the case for nonsense is not the same as the case against meaning. It belongs, in literature, to the holy fool.” Friday gleans from Crusoe’s few words the English alphabet itself, the fundamentals of another language. And Crusoe fails to see Friday’s brilliance, correcting his pronunciation

instead of seeing what Friday is actually doing. The poem suggests one of the strengths of *The Cuckoo*: there is an authenticity to Streckfus's vision that elevates such language play above the level of gimmick. The poem also illustrates the poet's interest in combining the historical and the imaginary.

Despite Glück's praise that "the quotidian, the social, impinge very little" in this book, I can't help but long for the balancing virtues of the everyday. Streckfus's appropriations of original sources are deftly handled, yet the project he has set for himself often prohibits him from exploring the social implications of their original contexts. But these are small complaints in the face of all the book accomplishes. *The Cuckoo* is a deserving recipient of the prize. Perhaps it will open the door for experimental writing to enjoy a more mainstream poetry audience. As Streckfus says, "You are in the boat my little skipperoo, my kitzie koodle. . . . Come on now, you have no choice. Trust me." It is hard not to. (RD)

### *Eats, Shoots & Leaves*

by Lynne Truss

Gotham (Penguin), 2004, 209 pp., \$17.50

*Eats, Shoots & Leaves*, by Lynne Truss, is a slight book. This is perhaps unsurprising for a book whose subject is punctuation. And while it became a best-seller in Britain before crossing the pond to us, it is unlikely to cause any great punctuation reformation; the evolution of the apostrophe into a mark of pluralism, the ascendance of *it's* over *its*, and so

forth, will likely continue unabated, despite Truss's book.

Nevertheless, the book will hold many pleasures for lovers of language. Readers, writers, teachers and others will find themselves amused and at times instructed by Truss, a former editor and confessed stickler. She has done a sizable amount of research, and the book is peppered with fascinating tidbits from the history of printing and punctuation. (Did you know that the apostrophe didn't arrive on the English beat until the 16th century and was not originally used for possessives?) She spices the book as well with anecdotes and arguments on the subject from various literary lights: G. B. Shaw, for example, upset with T. E. Lawrence's abuse of the colon, wrote to him, "Confound you and your book: you are no more to be trusted with a pen than a child with a torpedo."

What really sustains the book, however, is Truss's lucidity and wit. When she applies herself to the actual usage of punctuation, she states her case well, and always with good humor. The humor is frequently directed against the yahoos who are corrupting the language through punctuation abuse, but the engaging Truss is perfectly willing to also poke fun at her own obsessions. The lucid explanations are to be found everywhere—though at times the tidbits seem like gratuitous filler, and the humorous anecdotes begin to make one think this book should be shelved in the bookstore with Dave Barry rather than Diana Hacker.

At their best, Truss's pedagogy and humor sometimes combine with