

books

The Essay

# Their Back Pages

## Also by this Author: Remember when Martin Amis was writing about Space Invaders?

by Paul Collins

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"Surprised?"

The opening sentence of Caleb Carr's novel *Casing the Promised Land* is an apt one. The reader is surprised—or bewildered, anyway—to find Carr's name on a book that uses Springsteen's "Thunder Road" lyrics for its title and epigraph. By the time you reach a 20-minute guitar jam in its first chapter—punctuated by yells of "All-fucking-right!"—you're already a long, long way from *The Alienist*. Fourteen years away, to be precise. *Casing the Promised Land* is Carr's forgotten first novel, a rock and roll bildungsroman guaranteed to send his fans clutching for their Maalox bottles. Of the book's two Amazon reviews, one is simply titled "What?!?!?!?!?" The other is a withering two-star rating allegedly sent in by . . . Carr himself. "Do yourself a favor and read ANYTHING else I've written . . ." the writer pleads. "Forgive the follies of youth."



**Deighton: If you think his profiteroles are exciting, check out his books.**  
photo: Staci Schwartz

Ah, but the little-known book by a well-known author is an old and charmingly dishonorable tradition. Nathaniel Hawthorne tried to track down and burn every copy of his first novel, *Fanshawe* (1828); his own wife didn't learn of its existence until after he died. Long before *Leaves of Grass*, Walt Whitman earned a quick \$125 by pounding out a temperance novel, *Franklin Evans: Or, The Inebriate* (1842). Naturally, he fortified himself with hooch while writing his tale of a country boy corrupted by the city and the demon dram. Marketed under the catchy ad slogan "FRIENDS OF TEMPERANCE, AHOY!," it sold well, though few copies were deemed worth saving. "I doubt if there is a copy in existence . . ." an elderly Whitman muttered to his biographer. "In three days of constant work I finished the book. Finished the book? Finished myself. It was damned rot—rot of the worst sort—not insincere, but rot nevertheless: it was not the business for me to be up to."

But just what *is* the business for a young writer to be up to? You have no way of knowing what your later career is *supposed* to be. The Good Gray Poet would not write such a book, but hard-up Brooklyn printing apprentice Walter Whitman certainly would. And who knows what different career might have awaited Whitman the moralizing novelist? All missteps begin as a *step*: whether in the right direction or not, there is no telling until later.

Of all the wild shots of literary history, it's hard to beat Martin Amis. Seriously, *it is hard to beat Martin Amis* . . . at Defender. "If you ever see a Defender which bears the initials MLA in the All-Time Greatest column of its Hall of Fame—well, that's me, pal. I earned it," Amis boasts in his utterly unlikely 1982 book *Invasion of the Space Invaders: An Addict's Guide to Battle Tactics, Big Scores and the Best Machines*.

What? Surely not *that* Martin Amis. Ah, but it is that one: Copies now command up to \$400 from rare-book dealers. *Invasion* is a strangely

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transfixing work, and completely endearing in its utter dorkiness. Commencing with an account of how his addiction to arcade games began in a French railway station in 1979—"The only trouble is, they take up all my time and all my money. And I can't seem to find any girlfriends"—Amis is soon lecturing on the fine points of Superzapper Rechargers ("Welcome, O Tempest. . . . You and I have a rendezvous"), Power Pills ("I have seen bloodstains on the Pac Man joystick"), and less favored games ("Whoever devised Gorf ought to be condemned to play the hateful thing for all eternity").

Halfway into his all-star geek-out, Amis jokes that "When this book is done, I intend to start work on a cult bestseller entitled *Zen and the Art of Playing Asteroids*." Coming in a book titled *Invasion of the Space Invaders*, perhaps that *isn't* a joke. But Amis's paean to—Big Scores! The Best Machines! Pow Pow Zap!—is not something, one gathers, that he will ever allow to be reissued. The British critic Nicholas Lezard reported in *The Guardian* that when he suggested that *Invasion* was one of Amis's best books, he was met by an authorial glare with "perhaps more pity in it than contempt."

Other unexpected books, though, stay cheerfully in print after their authors have passed on to fame. My wife used *Backache: What Exercises Work* for years before noticing one of its co-authors: Dava Sobel. Seems that long before *Longitude*, Sobel was penning sentences like "Keeping the knee bent, pull your left leg back and toward your buttocks as far as you comfortably can." Not to be outdone, Annie Proulx authored household guides through the early 1980s, bearing stirring titles like *Great Grapes* and *Plan and Make Your Own Fences and Gates, Walkways, Walls and Drives*. In fact, Proulx's *Cider: Making, Using & Enjoying Sweet & Hard Cider* is in its third edition, and I highly recommend it—not least because she includes a schematic for building a still in your kitchen. Yet there is something unaccountably odd about picking up a Pulitzer Prize-winning novelist and reading that you'll be "PLANNING and PLANTING your very own home orchard for the freshest batch of cider ever!"

But who is to say whether Amis and Proulx might not be just as happy if he'd become editor of *GamePro* magazine and she was a beloved columnist at *Better Homes and Gardens*? In these books one gets a glimpse of the might-have-been, of parallel lives not lived out. You can laugh at the campy cover of *Len Deighton's Action Cook Book* (1965)—the bestselling spy novelist smirking like a low-rent Bond, stirring spaghetti while wearing a gun holster—but here's the thing. It is not a good cookbook. It is a *shockingly* good cookbook: I can attest that thanks to his "action strips" of cooking instructions in comic-strip form, you and Len can create a fine chicken paprika. How can this be? Hidden within his explanation of dessert trifle is the spymaster's top secret: Deighton was an assistant pastry chef before he turned his attention to pistol silencers and femmes fatales.

There was probably a time when the notion of Len Deighton the Spy Novelist seemed more fanciful than Len Deighton the Chef. I suppose the only fair reading such books can get is when they are new and bought by unbiased readers—or by readers with no awareness of the writer's other work at all. A reader, in other words, still in short pants. That, at least, could explain the existence of a *children's picture book* by Graham Greene. *The Little Horse Bus* (1952) is his tale of how kindly London grocer Mr. Potter gets run out of business by a big nasty chain. "It was a horrible shop with a horrible name," Greene reports, adding that its villainous owner is "too ugly to draw." Joined by a sad-sack assistant ("Tim sniffed a lot. He was not hygienic") and his woefully bony horse Brandy, the valiant Mr. Potter soldiers on. He fails, of course—this *is* a Graham Greene book—yet a happy ending comes after Brandy foils a gang of dastardly thieves. But that's not before they first destroy her

hooves with broken glass, causing her to drag horrid bloody hoofprints across the page . . . because, er, it *is* a Graham Greene book.

Greene published three more picture books, and they were even reprinted in the 1970s. I'd wager they'll get rediscovered again someday. They're pretty good books. Actually, the writers of *Casing the Promised Land*, *Invasion of the Space Invaders*, and *Fanshawe* were all perfectly decent writers already. But they are not the Carr, the Amis, or the Hawthorne we *think* we know, not the writers that they *want* us to know. Their scorned vintages hide a curious and different bouquet. But as Annie Proulx advises for examining secondhand cider barrels: "Don't be shy. Put your nose right up to the bung hole."

Words to live by, dear reader.

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*Paul Collins's new book is The Trouble With Tom: The Strange Afterlife and Times of Thomas Paine (Bloomsbury USA).*

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