The Writer's Almanac®

THE BALLAST

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Literary and Historical Notes for Tuesday, July 17, 2007

CRUISE NORWAY 2007

***VARIETY* RAN A FAMOUS COVER STORY HEADLINE ON THIS DAY IN 1935**, "Sticks Nix Hick Pix," which meant that rural Americans didn't like movies about rural America.

It was on this day in 1938 that **A PILOT NAMED DOUGLAS CORRIGAN ASKED PERMISSION FROM THE CIVIL AVIATION AUTHORITY TO FLY FROM NEW YORK CITY TO IRELAND**. They denied his request, on the grounds that his plane was in poor condition. He seemed to accept the ruling, but when he took off for California, he banked sharply to the east and headed over the ocean. He landed in Ireland, and complained of a faulty compass. No one believed his excuse, and he lost his pilot's license, but he was greeted as a hero back in New York when over a million people came out for a ticker-tape parade honoring "Wrong Way" Corrigan.

It's the birthday of **PETER SCHICKELE**, born in Ames, Iowa (1935). He has written and arranged music for classical, jazz, folk, and rock groups, and for television and radio. He is probably best known as P.D.Q. Bach, the fictitious son of Johann Sebastian Bach. He invented the character while studying at Juilliard, and writes satirical music under that name. P.D.Q. Bach's original operas include *Hansel and Gretel* and *Ted and Alice* (1990), and *The Abduction of Figaro* (1984).

It's the birthday of American mystery writer **ERLE STANLEY GARDNER**, born in Malden, Massachusetts (1889). He wrote over eighty mystery novels featuring the brilliant lawyer, Perry Mason. He was the best-selling American author of all time. He sold over 200 million copies of his books, and at the peak of his success sold about 26,000 books a day. Gardner was kicked out of Valparaiso University after getting into a fistfight in his first semester. He went to work as a typist in a law office in California, and read so much of what he typed that he decided to take the bar exam, which he passed — at age 22 — without having taken any classes. Gardner went to work for a corporate law firm in Oxnard, California, where he defended poor Chinese and Mexican immigrants. He worked in law for twenty-two years, and often wrote on the side, becoming a popular contributor to *Black Mask Magazine*. They liked stories with Oriental heroes and villains, so he came up with many adventures of Soo Hoo Duck, King of Chinatown. He sent mysteries and western stories to pulp magazines at an incredible rate, and hired a team of secretaries to take down his dictations. At one point he was producing 66,000 words a week for the pulps. Soon, he settled into writing his Perry Mason novels, one at a time, giving them titles like *The Case of the Amorous Aunt* (1963) and *The Case of the Fabulous Fake* (1969). Erle Gardner said, "I write to make money, and I write to give the reader sheer fun."

Fairy Tale
by Ron Padgett

The little elf is dressed in a floppy cap
and he has a big rosy nose and flaring white eyebrows
with short legs and a jaunty step, though sometimes
he glides across an invisible pond with a bonfire glow on his cheeks:
it is northern Europe in the nineteenth century and people
are strolling around Copenhagen in the late afternoon,
mostly townspeople on their way somewhere,
perhaps to an early collation of smoked fish, rye bread, and cheese,
washed down with a dark beer: ha ha, I have eaten this excellent meal
and now I will smoke a little bit and sit back and stare down
at the golden gleam of my watch fob against the coarse dark wool of my vest,
and I will smile with a hideous contentment, because I am an evil man,
and tonight I will do something evil in this city!

"Fairy Tale," by Ron Padgett, from *You Never Know* © Coffee House Press. Reprinted with permission.

INSIDE PASSAGES by Holly Harden

When we pulled up against the rubber tires on the pier of Alesund around 8 a.m. Monday, I happened to be standing out on the deck where I was greeted by a large sign on a grey building. The sign read, "Velkommen til Alesund." I'm not sure of the direct translation, but I've always understood "Welcome" as "It is well for you to come here."

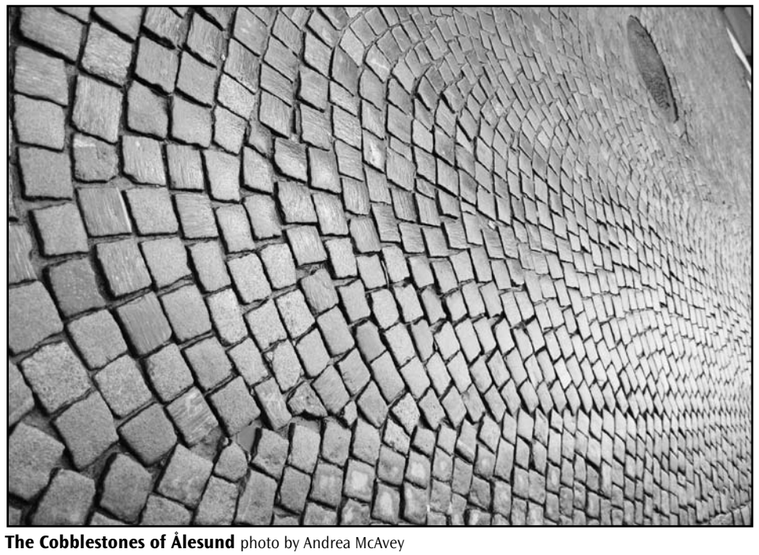
I like that. Gives off a kind of cozy feeling, paring away the layers of unfamiliarity and hesitation I tend to feel in a new place. I am welcome here. What a fine thought.

I've often wondered what it must be like to live your life in a town where cruise ships pull up and unload daily. I imagine not all the townspeople like it. I know that was the case in Alaska, where I met people with mixed feelings about it all. Sure, cruise ships bring in money, they said, but they bring in crowds, too, and the ship itself, which is huge and clumsy and blocks the horizon. I think about what would happen if a big old cruise ship appeared on Lake Wobegon and pulled up to a dock and unloaded bunches of people. The Side Track Tap would fill up fast, and the Chatterbox Cafe would run out of pie. The farmers selling corn and vegetables from their pickups would have to go home and re-load, or pack it up for the day and there would be trash collection and restroom issues. Things would get loud for a while on Main Street, and then it would all disappear. For an hour or so, until the next ship came along.

I don't know that I'd go for the idea. I rather like the quiet of my small town, and I'd have an issue with anything blocking my view of the sunset. Call me ungracious; call me a crab. I'd want privacy, and I'd want peace. But I imagine there are those who would love it. They'd polish up the handrails at the Lutheran church and get new tablecloths at the café and paint new lines on the football field and maybe invest in one of those fancy streetsweepers. Someone might buy the old abandoned bank and start up a bakery specializing in Swedish pastries and homemade lingonberry jam. The townsfolk would be warm and inviting and give out directions and say "Hello" to the tourists as they pass on through. Much like the people of Flåm and Ålesund and, I imagine, every place we'll stop along the way. "Velkommen" they say, in big bold letters. Come on down, come on in, stay with us awhile. It is well you have come.

I AM WELCOME HERE. WHAT A FINE THOUGHT.

Holly Harden is a writer from Minnesota who is leading a workshop during the cruise. She often falls asleep while writing.



The Cobblestones of Ålesund photo by Andrea McAvey

Field Notes

Cold-Water Coral Reefs
by Nancy Bazilchuk

Some of Norway's most impressive coastal scenery actually lies underwater, in the form of cold-water coral reefs. The highly diverse reefs are dominated by Lophelia pertusa, a stony coral that has been recorded at depths of 39 meters in the Trondheim fjord and at over 3000 meters in the North Atlantic. Lophelia doesn't need algae and light for survival, unlike its tropical reef relatives, and can grow to heights of 35 meters – that's roughly 115 feet. Researchers have documented as many as 750 species on a single Norwegian reef, with at least 100 reefs known along the coast. While cold-water corals occur around the globe, their distribution and role in marine ecosystems are poorly understood, although fish harvest near the reefs is typically quite good. In fact, in the early 1990s Norwegian fishermen pressured the government to study the reefs with the ultimate goal of protecting them from damage caused by bottom trawling. That led Norway in 1999 to become the first country in the world to protect its cold-water reefs by banning trawling in the vicinity of major reefs. However, most of Norway's reefs have been discovered only in the past decade. For example, the Røst reef, which covers an area about the size of Manhattan and is the world's largest known cold-water reef, was only discovered in 2002 and given protected status in 2003. In 2005, the government funded a 5-year, $35-million dollar project to map a 130 000-km2 area along the Lofoten Islands and in the Barents Sea. The region to be mapped is rich in fish (it contains the Røst reef) but is also underlain by large oil and gas reserves, making it important to locate reefs in need of protection.

The Kleptoplastic Slugs of Trondheimsfjord
by Rick Strimbeck

Despite their unbecoming name, sea slugs (Opisthobranchs) are among the most beautiful, bizarre, and downright interesting denizens of the Norwegian coast and oceans worldwide. Like land slugs, they are shell-less gastropods, but many species are brightly – no, outrageously – colored, with a pair of tentacles by their mouths and elaborate arrays of flat or fingerlike or feathery outgrowths on their bodies. Because they lack a hard shell, their soft bodies might be a juicy snack for marine predators, but they have evolved a variety of defense strategies ranging from simple camouflage to stolen weapons. Some sea slugs eat sponges that produce toxic chemicals to keep their own predators at bay. The sea slugs are not only immune to the sponge toxins, but accumulate them in their own bodies so that they, too, become toxic to predators. Other sea slugs feed on sea anemones or other animals with nematocysts or stinging cells. They digest everything but the stinging cells, which move through special extensions of their gut into the projections on their back, ready to sting approaching predators. In these species with "hot" defenses, the bright colors serve as a warning to potential predators. Another group, the kleptoplastic (plastid-stealing) Sarcoglossans, including the leaf-like Elysia viridis in Trondheimsfjord, suck the insides out of algal cells and digest most of the cell as food, while putting the algae's photosynthetic chloroplasts to work in their own cells. They can live for months on solar energy without having to feed at all, and the chloroplasts give them the same green or brown color as their algal prey, so they blend right in. This is even more remarkable than appropriating chemicals or cells, because chloroplasts are usually dependent on genes in the algal cell nucleus for normal maintenance, and the sea slugs have somehow bypassed this requirement.

We've taken to calling the APHC naturalists "The Rock Stars" 'cuz their turn-outs are so good. If you haven't caught one of their lectures, check it out. Check HAL schedule for times and locations.

Passenger Notes

Mystery/Thriller

The Veendam set sail
On time, without a hitch;
Cock-sure of its course,
Confident in its niche.

From Copenhagen,
North by northwest,
To the coast of Norway
(After a Lifeboat test).

I confess I was spellbound
As I watched out the rear window
The birds whirling around
While I quickly felt vertigo.

Passengers aplenty—
Like Mr. and Mrs. Smith;
Or the para diners
Encased with a fifth.

The foreign correspondent
From the Czech Republic;
And the family plottings
How to do a rope trick.

The crew's in a frenzy
To serve all our needs,
Making travel animals,
Selling Topaz and beads.

Mr. Keillor is notorious
For his wit and red shoes;
He's the man who knew;
Too much pride and you lose.

The trouble with GHarry
(and this is a suspicion),
he gets sabotaged easily
by a song's new rendition.

Crime on a ship
Is not very likely,
But there did lie Rebecca
Beneath the dark sea.

To suspect murder now
Would be indiscreet;
But to catch a thief at it!
Now, that is a feat!

Careful, don't get the wrong man.
If you do spot him or her,
Just dial "Main Desk"
For murder, theft or other.

But don't be blackmailed —
There's no secret panel.
Just look behind torn curtains.
Stay in the ship's channel.

So here's the mystery/thriller,
(It's really a breeze),
Just count Hitchcock films.
They're found in this piece.

Don't psy! Cholaborate!
Marnie heads are better than one.
No saboteur can stop you.
Just do it — have fun!

— *The lodger, Nicole Haugh*
(The author found 32 films in this piece.
If you find more, stop by the Info Desk)

Got Notes? Drop 'em at the HAL front desk—4:00 p.m., no later. Please.

The Book Nook by Marcia Pankake

World War II Heroism

We Die Alone

written by David Howarth
N.Y.: Macmillan, 1955

At dawn March 29, 1943, a boat carrying explosives, weapons, radio transmitters, arctic gear and food, and eight Norwegian fishermen and four Norwegian guerillas landed near Ribbenesoy near Norway's arctic coast. They planned to hide, to train the locals in sabotage, and to attack the German military airfield at Bardufoss. But disaster hit. Betrayed, attacked by the Nazis, boats and material destroyed, only one man, Jan Baalsrud, escaped. Wounded, swimming through icy waters, hiding from the Germans, clambering over snowy mountains, helped by Norwegians, even surviving being buried in the snow, he finally made it to Sweden on June 1. In late July, Norwegians commemorate Baalsrud's bravery and those who helped him with the Baalsrud-marsjen, a nine-day hike from the coast of Troms to Sweden. This exciting book brings to life the dusty displays in Oslo's Resistance Museum, the Hjemmefrontmuseet.

Marcia Pankake is a retired librarian and long time editor of Prairie Home publications. The first book club meeting was a great success. The next one is on immigration. Reading packets are available for overnight lending at the Info Desk.

Things Overheard

"**Did anybody attend Catholic mass? I heard only one guy showed up."**
—Scott Westphal, Lutheran pastor

"I fell asleep last night eating a cheeseburger. I was holding it and when it landed in my lap I woke up."
— some guy eating melon

"Oh, I hurt all over."
—going up the stairs

"I saw a bird. A brown bird. What kind was it?"
—to one of the naturalists

Viking News by Christina von Nolcken

Viking Longships

Viking raiders depended on their lethally fast-moving ships. These seem to have been fully developed by the end of the eighth century C. E. They were normally made of overlapping oak planking shaved very thin, and bound with iron rivets (so much oak was used for shipbuilding in the Viking Age that Norway's supplies were depleted for centuries). At first the ships were propelled only with oars, but by the Viking Age shipwrights were adding keels, which made possible the use of sails. Sails measured some 484 to 1076 square feet and were woven out of coarse wool and then waxed or oiled. The rudder was attached to the starboard side. Although the sails meant that the ships were now effective on the open sea, their remarkably shallow draft meant that they could still be rowed far up rivers; it also meant they could easily transport horses, a point recently confirmed by experimental archaeology. Each ship could carry some 40-50 fighting men; a warship found near Roskilde in Denmark was 118 feet long and capable of carrying at least 100 warriors. Small wonder that the gift of a fast ship guaranteed even Eric Bloodaxe's friendship. We will be seeing a ceremonial version of such a ship in Oslo. You may also have seen the copy of the Gokstad ship that sailed to Chicago for the 1893 Columbian Exposition.

For an excellent account of Viking shipbuilding, see R. Chartrand et. al., *The Vikings: Voyagers of Discovery and Plunder* (Oxford and New York: Osprey Publishing, 2006).

Christina von Nolcken is the PHC Norway Cruise Viking expert. She's collected an anthology of Viking texts now available for overnight lending at the Information Desk in the lobby.

A Prairie Home Companion

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Quantities are limited.

You Really Ought to Know

If you're one of those people who prefers the road less taken, tune in to Channel 38 in your cabins where you'll find Rich MacDonald sharing what he knows about hiking in Geirangerfjord, hosted by HAL staffer, Leslie.

APHC Camera Club

Calling all shutterbugs!

Drop off your digital photo cards to the APHC Info desk in the lobby before 4:30 p.m. each day and we just might add them to a slide show. Digital images only, please, in RAW or JPG formats.

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