



# Offbeat / Quirky

an anthology

Edited by Eckhard Gerdes

Journal of Experimental Fiction 73



Offbeat/Quirky Books



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## Introduction by the Editor

A few years have passed since the last anthology issue of the *Journal of Experimental Fiction* was published, and of course, much has happened in the interim.

The origins of JEF go all the way back to 1986, when I published my own little chapbook of experimental fiction called *Projections* in conjunction with *NO* magazine, a delightful little press in Chicago. From that experience, I came up with the idea of starting my own press, and using the name Depth Charge Publishing, published two paperbacks, my novel *Ring in a River* in 1994, and a novel by Arthur Winfield Knight called *The Darkness Starts up Where You Stand* in 1995. But the name *Journal of Experimental Fiction* wasn't used until the anthology *Belighted Fiction* was published in 2001.

Including the proto-JEF titles, the book you are now holding is the 57<sup>th</sup> book we have published. Many of the writers we have published in our anthologies have gone on to great acclaim in their careers, and we couldn't be prouder to have noticed their talent so early. Daniel Borzutzky, for example, was just awarded the National Book Award for Poetry, and he appeared in the *Belighted Fiction* anthology and in other issues of *JEF*, as did the wonder-inducing story writer Amina Memory Cain. And they are by no means alone.

From editing these anthologies, I have met some of the most interesting writers of our era, many of whom have gone on to publish books with *JEF*. Meeting so many great writers, whether in person or via correspondence, has been one of the great joys of my life. And even though *JEF* is by no means a great money-making operation, the rewards I get from doing this work are immense indeed!

I am very happy to introduce the following authors to *JEF*'s readership. Let me introduce them, in quite Midwestern fashion, in the order of their first names. Many of them, are, of course, already familiar to most of you and are well established in the realm of innovative writing. But you will also find some very fresh and interesting voices here that you may not have heard before. I hope you enjoy the width and breadth of the visions that are collected here.

This anthology is also a step in a new direction for us. I have wondered for a while now if the monicker *Journal of Experimental Fiction*, albeit accurate, wasn't perhaps a trifle academic. Not that I have any problems with academics. I teach college English classes myself, and have taught creative writing at universities before. But I don't want to give readers the sense that we are part of an insular community that only feeds off of academe.

Indeed, much of academe ignores our efforts entirely. And many, many of our writers are just “regular folks,” not academics at all. So I have decided to start an imprint of JEF Books called *Offbeat/Quirky Books* to signify that what matters above all to me and to JEF’s readership is not the achievement of academic credentials in order to acquire some sort of scholarly validity. What matters, purely and simply, is the quality of the work. The writers you will find here have unique voices and will challenge what you think writers can do with fiction. And the innovations herein are not all cerebral calculations based on theory, but many are those that come from instinct and heart.

That some hearts are offbeat is fascinating, and perhaps a little dangerous, but why should we all beat in unison? That some instincts result in quirkiness is more than eccentricity for eccentricity’s sake. It is the claiming of the individual in a sea of conformity.

I have said this before, but it bears repeating: I tell my students and anyone else who is forced to or cares to listen that I believe firmly that the measure of great work is if the creator can look at the work when it is complete and say to herself or himself, “Only I, of all people on the face of this planet, could have written this work.” If the creator can say that honestly, then she or he has added something to the sumtotal of human knowledge, and for that we should always be deeply grateful.

Eckhard Gerdes

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## Denis Emorine

*Death at Half-Mast*

(La mort en berne)

Novel

Taken from Chapter One

Translated from the French by Michael Todd Steffen

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How did their story really begin? He couldn't say. Those near him knew Dominique as an animated yet cautious man. He could get uppity. He could overstep himself in heated debates with friends. High on the list of things he loved, he loved to write. Truth be told, beyond writing little else mattered to him. Now in his fifties, to his great satisfaction he lived, as it were, by his plume. Without looking back, Dominique Valarcher left his job as a university librarian at the Sorbonne, where his wife Laetitia taught French literature and Latin. His books were translated across Europe and in the United States. The writer sometimes had the impression he was better known abroad, which didn't bother him. Though France had recently woken him. He was invited to conferences. He had been granted writing residencies. *Nobody is a prophet at home*, the well-known proverb had applied to him, until these recent years. Dominique Valarcher had taken this late success in his own country with a somewhat affected detachment and a certain satisfaction. Editors in America and Romania offered to publish his collections of poems and his plays in bilingual editions. The writer had never even asked for this attention. Recently he had been invited to Benson College at New York University, an all-female college that touted itself for preparing women to lead the world. Valarcher wasn't persuaded that studying French or reading his books would particularly prepare them for the task though he was flattered that prestigious and highly selective institute of learning had paid him this homage. He relished the idea of speaking in English with the young students also but the

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American professor, Jim Cole, had warned him: speaking English was forbidden in foreign language and culture classes. The rule was taken seriously. And in this establishment where the best of the best were recruited to teach, they didn't mess around with the rules.

## **Don Skiles**

### Beautiful Shirts

At that time, I didn't have a shirt to my name. The ass was out of both pair of pants I had. . .like Huck Finn's father, whose hat was "like a jint of stove pipe. . .such a hat for a man like me to wear, one of the richest men. . ."

Men today – some men – wear knitted Peruvian peasant caps.

Shirt off his back, he would give you. There was a woman, young, a long time ago, living in a rented house with a hand-built stone fireplace. She wore men's shirts, too big for her (she was petite), they came down to the middle of her thighs.

British shirts. They are expensive; bespoke shirts. Half a dozen at a go. Finest Egyptian cotton. No gentleman wears a silk shirt. Same with silk sheets. The same.

Tuck it in, or leave it out?

Barrel cuff? French?

Top button undone?

Button-down collar? Or wide?

Full-cut, traditional, or slim fit?

There was a time. When men wore paisley patterned shirts, and some wore faded denim shirts with embroidered collars and cuffs, embroidered by their girl friends. Those were beautiful. (It was before tattoos.)

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And that's what Daisy Buchanan said to Gatsby, isn't it? As he threw armfuls of shirts onto the bed, a kaleidoscope of colors, autumn leaves falling, that green light glowing at the end of the dock.

"They're such beautiful shirts," Daisy said, crying.

A shirt should break expectations

Wearing an old shirt, faded into faded, at a small scarred desk, with a glass of amber whiskey, a cup of dark coffee, and a leaky window looking out on fog, close.

*Dolly out*, and up.

*Roll credits. Lights up.*

Fucking beautiful.



## **Eckhard Gerdes and Peter Cherches**

### Portrait of a Tobacconist

Friendly Tobacco. That's the name of his shop. Friendly Tobacco. Emil Friendly is a tobacconist. Your friendly neighborhood tobacconist.

A drug pusher, right? That's what you're thinking, a drug pusher. A nicotine candy man, as it were. Emil Friendly does sell candy too, and breath mints, but tobacco is his stock in trade.

Calling the tobacconist, the main character of this feuilleton, Friendly, that's a joke, right?

No, friends, it's no joke. Emil Friendly is an honorable man plying an old and honorable trade, honorable since women were women and cigars were smokes. There was a time when a tobacconist had to know the difference between Latakia and Perique, Virginia and Burley, Yenedje and toasted Cavenish. How many of you, dear readers, can tell the difference between Yenedje and toasted Cavenish? Emil Friendly can. He can also spot a Peterson at twenty paces. The tobacconist's eye, the tobacconist's nose.

Tobacconist, a quaint yet stately word, so much more elegant than "smoke shop proprietor."

Feuilleton? Can you think of a better term?

Emil Friendly, though always chatty and cordial with his patrons, is something of a loner when not at the shop. So, actually, though his customers consider Emil friendly, he's really something of a...well, misanthrope isn't the word, he doesn't dislike humanity, really, he just lacks interest in his fellow man. We need a term something like "agnostic."

Look over there, to the left. Do you see that house? A two-story yellow brick number in the North Shore suburbs of Chicago. There's a nice yard in front, and an even nicer yard in back (you'll have to trust me). The front lawn (yes, I know I said yard) is decorated with rows of perennial flowers accented by new patterns of annuals every year. This year the last frost happened early, so the flowers are particularly stunning. Of course, the ajugas are beginning to overtake the jack-in-the-pulpits, and the squirrels keep

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decapitating the sunflowers, but those are the tortures suffered by many gardeners. Emil Friendly often considers poisoning the squirrels, but he can never bring himself to do so.

Ajuga, jack-in-the-pulpit, Yenedje, Latakia, Friendly Tobacco.

Emil had once traveled all the way to Turkey to meet the great Meerschaum pipe artist Ismet Bekler, the Muhammad Ali of pipe carving, so dedicated is he to his trade and its traditions. Some may think me a pariah, but I belong to an ancient and noble profession, Emil tells himself. Still, people are going to think the worst of him, so he buries himself in his gardening to forget his worldly woes.

In his affluent, lily-white suburban community, Emil Friendly is the sole Communist. Even Democrats are harder to find than a needle in the haystack of this overwhelmingly Republican enclave. At "community outreach" meetings, he continually irritates his neighbors by suggesting that the inhabitants of this town, village, hamlet, call it what you will, pool their resources in order to benefit the community as a whole.

Now, Emil doesn't think of himself as a Communist, a "commie," even if his neighbors do. He claims to be an "independent." Of course, that really means next to nothing, as "independent" is a catch-all that has included virulent racists like George Wallace, wacky billionaires like Ross Perot, "soft" Republicans like John Anderson, and petulant consumer advocates like Ralph Nader.

Emil Friendly is an independent tobacconist whose passion is gardening.

An honorable tobacconist. Emil would never sell tobacco products to anyone underage. Why, he'd card anyone who looked a day under 30. And on top of that, he wouldn't even sell to anyone who coughed when asking for cigarettes.

"Excuse me <cough>, <cough> <cough>, a pack of Pell Mell please."

"Pall Mall? No, buddy," Emil would say, "I can't sell to you. You've had enough. Now go home and sleep it off."

Emil Friendly may not care much for people, but he cares about them, as he cares about tobacco and his garden, though gardening he very much cares for.

One Sunday afternoon, a roving philosopher turns up as Emil is tending his peonies and nasturtia. "Neighbor," the philosopher says, "there is a concatenation of all events in this best of possible worlds."

"Whatever," Emil replies. "But let me take care of my garden."