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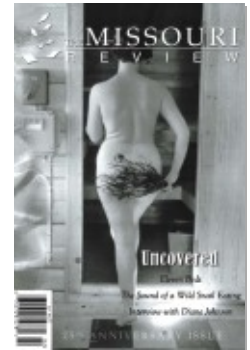
*The Whore's Child* (review)

Jonathan Liebson

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who cosponsored the state's death penalty bill, and ends with scenes from recent profiles of movie mogul Harvey Weinstein, director Wes Anderson and famed jeweler Yves Piaget. We're there as the assemblyman serenades his constituents at a spaghetti fund-raiser, when Weinstein accepts a medal at the French Consulate (then punts the evening's festivities to attend a screening of *Chocolat*) and when Piaget hosts a dinner party for guests bejeweled in everything *but* Piaget. In between we meet, among others, John Huston and Humphrey Bogart discussing communism over lunch; Bill Clinton confessing his ignorance of the trifecta at a book signing in George Plimpton's Manhattan apartment; Pee Wee Russell being presented to the Argentine Ambassador at the first Newport Jazz Festival; well-heeled ladies letting their hair down at a San Diego spa; and Jerry Stiller squirming his way through a Friar's Club Roast.

"If I find it interesting to write," Ross explains with trademark succinctness, "I naturally assume the reader will find it interesting to read." And we do. With equal parts humor and compassion, Ross shows us famous people doing ordinary things (Herbert Hoover at seventy-five, walking New York City, amused at his own anonymity), ordinary people doing ordinary things (Indiana high school seniors oblivious to the marvels of New York) and ordinary people doing extraordinary things (a new grade school principal comforting teachers and parents in the first days after September 11). And she has a delicious knack for capturing in words the sparks that fly when strange bedfellows kiss: Benny Goodman and Yehudi Menuhin, Norman Mailer

and Mohammed Ali, Ernest Hemingway and Marlene Dietrich. These pieces are some of the most colorful and reflect what feels like Ross's own giddiness at finding herself present at such surprising pairings.

Some critics (and even a few editors) have characterized Ross's work as "fly-on-the-wall" reporting, a term that Ross disavows. "Any editor," she bristles, "instructing a reporter to be a fly—on or off the wall—is misguided." Her technique, she explains, is grounded in being "simultaneously detached yet empathetic," a skill she attributes as much to gift as to craft. Using her talents for detailed scene and revelatory dialogue, Ross tells her stories with the vividness of film, drawing us into her subjects' lives as participants rather than eavesdroppers. The end result is journalism that celebrates life, truth-telling void of cruelty or phoniness and a new generation of journalistic storytellers whose own work promises to preserve the legacy of a remarkable woman. (PU)

*The Whore's Child*  
by Richard Russo  
Knopf, 2002, 272 pp., \$24

In "The Farther You Go," the third story in Richard Russo's new collection, the father offers a fitting remark for what troubles the rest of the characters. The term is "failure of imagination," and Hank, a prostate-cancer survivor, first uses it to describe his wife's inadequacy. After surgery she's bought him a riding lawn mower that ends up making the chore more painful to his recovering body. This is one of the many "failures" he points out, including the refusal of his daughter

to visit him in the hospital. "It wasn't that she couldn't imagine me with cancer," he explains. "She couldn't imagine me with a dick. That I am a man has somehow escaped her, which is why she doesn't think twice about bending over in front of me in her peasant blouse."

Russo's style, typically straightforward and easygoing, doesn't seek to shock his readers any more than it attempts to cover up for his characters. He allows them to speak naturally in their own voices, and it's because he puts such trust in his characters that we do too. We feel rewarded by their humor and intelligence, and we're able to forgive them when their judgments seem too harsh. Following up *Empire Falls*, which won this year's Pulitzer Prize, Russo continues to show his keen sense of relationships. He draws attention to the subtleties that drive people apart and the extreme conditions that sometimes, despite their best wishes, force people back together.

In this, Russo's sixth book but first story collection, the small-town characters pay a terrible cost for what they're unable to imagine. We notice this in "Joy Ride," the story of a twelve-year-old boy whose mother whisks him away from Maine—and from his father—to head for a new life on the opposite coast. The mother's great failure is that she doesn't anticipate the potential danger to an attractive woman of sleeping in roadside motels and eating in truck stops, accompanied only by her son. In Texas, when the risk catches up to her, her son describes the helpless look on her face as she stares "into the dark desert beyond the parking lot, as if at some betrayal she could not name,

whose existence she had not suspected."

Sometimes, out of some lingering pain, Russo's characters try to reinvent their lives. This phenomenon is shown most vividly in the title story itself. Enrolled in a fiction-writing class, Sister Ursula offers nonfictional accounts of her life growing up in a Belgian convent, where she was referred to as the "whore's child." In the chapters she presents, what sustains her young character is the romantic portrayal of her father, a man who's all but absent from her life. She can't help elevating him to a savior's status, and if this exaggeration seems understandable, it nevertheless exceeds the truth about the real man so far that it taints her book.

Denial proves a powerful force in the stories in this collection. Together, they demonstrate how our everyday illusions both sustain and derail us. Beyond their blind spots, however, what unites Russo's characters is a common cause to fill the holes in their lives. It's a struggle perhaps best typified by the young boy in the final story, "The Mysteries of Linwood Hart." Linwood, forever curious and attentive, tries to find the cause and effect in every circumstance surrounding him. The most significant, and most puzzling of these is when his father packs a suitcase and moves out one day. Hard though he searches, Lin cannot nail down the set of events leading up to that moment. Ultimately, this plus other failures turns out to be a good thing for him. By the end of the story Lin has realized the impossibility of tying up every loose end, and he's gratified to learn that he "was not and never

had been, nor ever would be" the world's center.

It's a mature discovery for him, and for us, as readers, it provides a wonderful moment of grace in the collection. Not only does it reflect our own uncertainties but it reminds us of the poise that's needed to tolerate them and the strength that allows us, every so often, to move beyond such vulnerability. (JL)

***Uncle Tungsten: Memories of a Chemical Boyhood***  
by Oliver Sacks  
Knopf, 2001, 337 pp., \$25

A neurologist and medical nonfiction writer for years in the United States, Oliver Sacks has written such popular books as *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* and *Awakenings*. In these he explores the medical conditions of his patients and writes of his treatment of and relationships with them, always projecting the humanity of his subjects rather than overshadowing it with a dry, clinical discourse. Now, in *Uncle Tungsten*, Sacks tackles the subject of Oliver Sacks himself and his curious boyhood in Great Britain during the 1930s and '40s. It is an endearing portrait that combines the story of Sacks's formative years with a narrative of the formative years of chemistry from its beginnings, as it broke away from alchemy, to the discovery of elements, the periodic table, atoms, the atomic bomb and finally quantum mechanics.

Surrounded by a scientific household—both parents were doctors, his brothers were in medical school and his numerous aunts and uncles were involved in chemistry or biology as well—Sacks was encouraged to be ever

curious, mixing, boiling, handling, smelling and experimenting with a variety of dangerous and sometimes explosive chemicals. Instruction and supplies often came from his Uncle Tungsten (Uncle Dave), so named for his factory that manufactured tungsten-wire filaments for light bulbs. Sacks's love of chemistry and its order sustained him throughout his shy childhood as he experienced separation from his family at Braefield school during World War II, enduring a food shortage because of rationing and an evil headmaster who whipped him; it continued to sustain him as he returned to a battered, unstable London after the war.

Sacks provides a compelling story of passion, not for another person but for experimentation, the periodic table and the *inorganic*. So how did it lead to his love for humanity and the organic, the biological—the neurology that he practices today? Sacks's own love affair with chemistry waned as adolescence and his parents' expectations that he become a doctor took over, a metamorphosis he cleverly parallels with the changes in the science of chemistry.

Ultimately, *Uncle Tungsten* is a rich memoir, an inspiring story of the insatiable yearning for knowledge. It makes us all yearn for those blissful days of youth before the "'growing up' [that] makes one forget the lyrical, mystical perceptions of childhood . . . of which Wordsworth wrote." (AH)

Reviews by: Angie Bailey, Patricia Schultheis, Jack Smith, Steve Yates, Walter Barga, Leslie Wootten, Pam Ullman, Jonathan Liebson, Amy Hummel