

THE SHORTLIST

Three New Memoirs Offer a Glimpse Into the Writer's Mind

By Michael Hainey

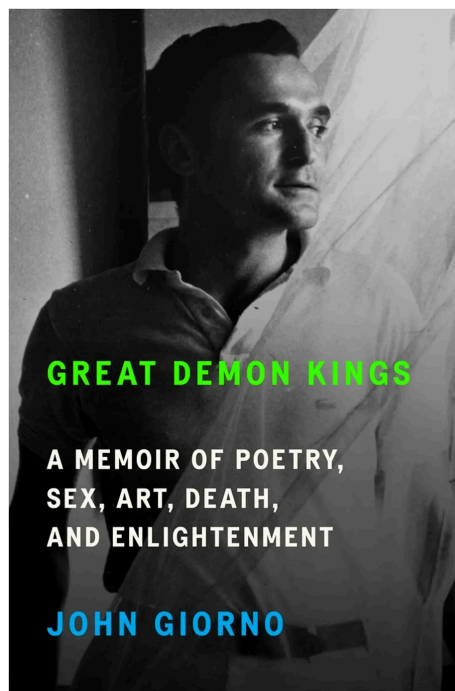
Aug. 7, 2020

GREAT DEMON KINGS

A Memoir of Poetry, Sex, Art, Death, and Enlightenment

By John Giorno

351 pp. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$28.



Long before Patti Smith came to New York City to seek the artist's life, there was Giorno. He's lesser known these days (that's what happens to poets who don't put music to their words), but his hypnotic memoir, 25 years in the making and completed a week before he died, at 82, last year, should introduce him to a new and wider audience. Not just for his influence on poetry and New York's downtown art scene from the 1950s into the 21st century, but also because his artistic life was nothing short of Zelig-esque from the get-go. In 1953, 16 and in love with the idea of being a poet, Giorno takes the train into the city to see a production of Dylan Thomas's "Under Milk Wood." During intermission, he runs into the poet himself.

Such was the magic around him. He crossed paths often with the soon-to-be-famous — at parties in scuzzy, ash-and-booze-caked lofts, East Village concerts or Upper East Side openings. By the time Giorno's barely 30, he's become (in quick succession) the lover of

Andy Warhol (Giorno starred in his six-hour film, “Sleep”), Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns. It’s through this trio that Giorno’s circle widens — I lost track of how many times Warhol introduces him as “a young poet” — and we meet a who’s who of the generation that rewired literature and art in the second half of the 20th century, from Kerouac to Carolee Schneemann.

Exasperated by Giorno’s pedantic philosophizing, Allen Ginsberg sends him to India, where Giorno finds his second act studying Buddhism. When he returns to New York in 1974, he reconnects with William Burroughs. These passages about their personal, sexual and creative collaboration are among the memoir’s most revealing, which is saying a lot for a memoir that’s already so revealing it’s borderline graphic.

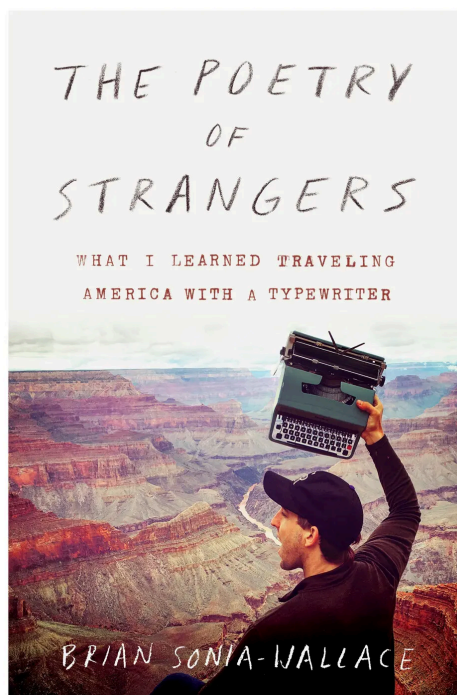
Giorno’s signature contribution to the New York arts scene provided intimacy on a different level: In 1968, with Burroughs’s help, he launched Dial-a-Poem, which allowed callers to hear verses written and read by names like John Cage and Anne Waldman. For years, stickers for the project adorned the walls of seemingly every phone booth in the city, until the internet rendered it (like so many works of originality and whimsy) obsolete. But with this book, Giorno’s ingenuity lives on. Like “Just Kids,” “Great Demon Kings” captures the energy of those heady and seminal downtown years, when new art forms were born.

THE POETRY OF STRANGERS

What I Learned Traveling America With a Typewriter

By Brian Sonia-Wallace

289 pp. Harper Perennial. Paper, \$16.99.



“Everyone thinks Americans don’t want to talk to each other,” Sonia-Wallace writes toward the end of his debut memoir. “In reality, we’re all just dying to be heard.” And so in 2012, barely out of college and facing the prospect of a crappy job market, he decides to listen. He sets up a typewriter in assorted public spaces and offers to write poems about anything strangers ask him to. His optimism and naïveté sound like a premise for a scene from “Joker,” and the reader initially cringes a bit, worried he’s going to get his folding table and typewriter smashed by barbarians.

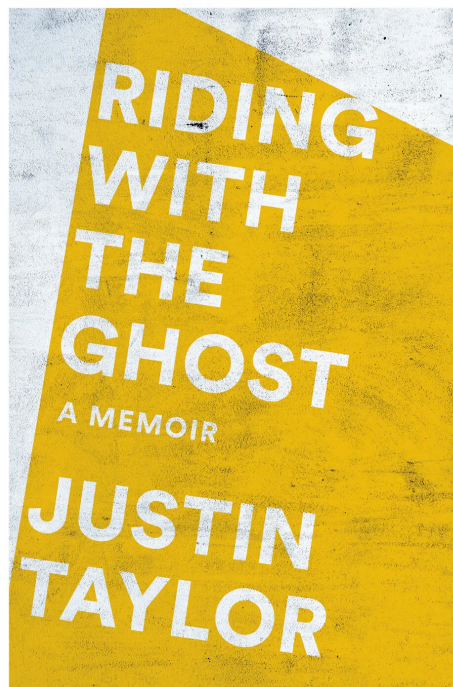
But the likable Sonia-Wallace quickly connects with people, and before long finds that his ability with words enables him to go places he never imagined — and, even more important, to pay his rent. He’s soon writing poems at corporate events for Google and other companies, serving as poet in residence on Amtrak, and the writer in residence at Minnesota’s Mall of America. It’s a shambolic tale that bounces along on the formula he has for writing verse: “something beautiful, something surprising, something familiar — and a joke, so that the work didn’t take itself too seriously.” In other words, it’s not quite Walt Whitman hearing America singing its varied anthems; rather, it’s more like a Gen-Z deep-cut of a “CBS Sunday Morning” wanderlust segment: full of optimism and wide-eyed wonder. He’s got the soul of a young searcher. As with any road trip, there are more than a few detours that you wish the author hadn’t taken; encounters with one or two folks who pull up a seat next to you at the diner and bend your ear a bit too long. But Sonia-Wallace does on the page what he does on his typewriter at all those block parties and countless other venues: He charms us. It’s a book that should give comfort to any parent whose kid utters those blood-will-run-cold words, “Mom, Dad — I want to be a poet.” Sonia-Wallace proves that not only can you make a living at it; you might even change people’s lives.

RIDING WITH THE GHOST

A Memoir

By Justin Taylor

222 pp. Random House. \$27.



To say that Taylor had a complicated, conflicted relationship with his father is an understatement. An undiagnosed manic-depressive riven by suicidal thoughts and Parkinson's, his father, Larry, died alone — four years after he decided to throw himself off the roof of a parking garage. (He survived.) Taylor's memoir is an admirable quest to answer a question that, for many children of parents who struggle against darkness, is almost unanswerable. "How do you save a drowning man who doesn't want a life preserver?" Taylor writes. "Who only seems to want company, a witness, while he sinks as slowly as he can?"

And like many of those children forced to watch a parent sink, Taylor chose to swim — in this case to try to reach the far shore of the world he dreamed of since childhood: to become a writer, to be a part of the Literary World. He jumps into deep water straight away, coming to New York, where he lands an internship at *The Nation*, then bounces about the country taking various university teaching jobs. There are stretches where Taylor leans too hard into the minutiae of academic life, and life in general — not just the size of a Brooklyn apartment, but also the total number of units in the building.

He's a profound thinker, however, comfortable struggling with the Big Questions. And at times it's not clear where he's going or wants to go: "When does a willingness to treat a complex issue with the depth and delicacy it warrants descend into Hamlet-like dithering?" Or, as he asks later, "Is this the story of a son failing a father or is it the story of a father failing a son? It's both, I think, which to me is the same as saying it's neither."

But Taylor is an intelligent writer, sure of his voice — one who's as interested in pondering questions of faith as he is parsing the lyrics of his favorite musicians, like Jason Molina. (The memoir's title is taken from a song by Molina's band, Ohia.) In his desire to know who his father was and his bid to bring his ghost some peace — what he calls a "final mercy. A son's understanding" — Taylor bravely admits "my motives are

largely selfish,” and that his search for his father is, like any good memoir, as much a search for who he is. “There is little that I’ve said about my father that I don’t see some version of in myself,” Taylor writes. It’s a story told with heart and deep self-reflection, steeped in philosophy and questions about faith.

Michael Hainey is the author of “After Visiting Friends,” and a deputy editor at Air Mail.

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