

# Virginia Reviews

**T**o keep this column going, the editors need volunteers who are willing to review books of interest by Virginia authors or concerning Virginia subjects that have been published within the last two years. Please be on the lookout for such books on your shelves and help add to our store of knowledge. If you learn of an eligible title but do not have time or resources to review or obtain it yourself, please alert us so that we may add it to our database. The following titles are just a sample of the many published items that would meet our guidelines. Please note that in most cases we are relying upon your generosity as librarians with access to a wide variety of materials (even through interlibrary loan) to submit these reviews to aid your fellow libraries and support our Virginia authors. While we hope this situation will change, review copies are not yet widely available. Those publishers wishing to expand the audience for their materials are encouraged to submit copies of current titles to increase the likelihood of reviews. Both reviewers and publishers should query the editors, Cy Dillon ([cdillon@hsc.edu](mailto:cdillon@hsc.edu)) and Lyn C. A. Gardner ([cgardner@hampton.gov](mailto:cgardner@hampton.gov)). Please help us keep this column active as a service to all Virginia libraries, library patrons, and creators.

Potential reviewers are urged to consult the new column, "Virginia Publications" (page 16), debuting with this issue, for inspiration about some of the titles published by Virginia authors. Please be aware that this is not a comprehensive survey and that it only includes those authors currently residing in Virginia, not publications with Virginia subjects. Also, feel free to do your own research and add to our reviews and/or our growing list of "Virginia Publications" by consulting

the sources enumerated in "Finding Virginia Authors," *Virginia Libraries* 55.4 (October/November/December 2009), [http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/VALib/v55\\_n4/finding.html](http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/VALib/v55_n4/finding.html).



Brashares, Ann. *My Name Is Memory*. New York: Riverhead Books, 2010. 324 pp. ISBN-13: 9781594487583 (hardcover).

Ann Brashares, author of the *Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*

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**Lucy ... struggles to realize her own past and understand how she feels drawn to someone she doesn't even know.**

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**BRASHARES REVIEW**

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series and *The Last Summer (of You & Me)*, introduces her readers to a new take on human relationships in her latest book, *My Name Is Memory*. The story again revolves around a young couple's relationship, but Brashares incorporates suspense and elements of the supernatural that deepen and intensify the story. This novel is fresh and different, yet loyal fans will still recognize Brashares's familiar writing style and engaging, personable characters who draw in the reader.

In *My Name Is Memory*, Brashares paints a love story that literally defies the boundaries of time. Daniel is a boy with the ability to remember lives past and love lost. Additionally, he can recognize the

souls of people he knew in previous lives, which is both a blessing and a curse. A lonely soul, Daniel wanders through his lives searching for the girl he called Sophia from one of his earliest memories. Though their paths collide again and again, they are wrenched apart each time. In the present, Daniel finds her again in the sleepy town of Hopewood, Virginia. Now called Lucy, she does not have his gift of memory, but she's curiously drawn to Daniel, something that she can't quite understand. As Lucy begins to piece the fragments of her previous lives together, a ghost from their past resurfaces and threatens to tear her and Daniel apart yet again.

The novel is written from the shifting perspectives of Lucy's present and Daniel's pasts. Against the background of Daniel's memory, the reader sees the demons he is constantly battling in his own mind and witnesses Lucy's innocence as she struggles to realize her own past and understand how she feels drawn to someone she doesn't even know. Brashares gives adequate time in her story for the reader to understand what each character is going through, and the characters have the space to develop on their own at first without the love story hogging the spotlight. Yet this doesn't slow the narrative down; instead, it builds up the anticipation as Lucy comes to realize how deeply connected their souls really are, and Daniel painstakingly abstains from confronting her until she is ready.

Although *My Name Is Memory* is written from the perspectives of two teenagers, it speaks to all ages about both the frailty of the human spirit and its resilience.

While the settings in the memories are widespread, the present brings the cast to central Virginia, shifting between the imaginary setting of Hopewood and the real location of Charlottesville, where Lucy attends the University of Virginia. To those familiar with Charlottesville, Brashares captures both the rural aspects at the outskirts of town and the feel of the UVA campus with its gardens and bricks aplenty.

Brashares makes a plausible case for reincarnation and the power of human bonds. She shows her growth as a writer who can express depth and emotion and still maintain a simplicity about the nature of her characters. In *Daniel*, the author captures the loneliness and burden of someone forced to remember all that he has loved and lost and reminds us of the necessity of living in the present. Deeply thought-provoking and suspenseful, this exquisite novel shows a new side to Brashares—one that breaks the boundaries of age and genre the way that her characters break the boundaries of time.

—Hayley Tompkins, *Jefferson-Madison Regional Library*



WulfTeam Productions. *Tale of Two Cities: The Circuit City Story*. Tom Wulf, director. Ashland, VA: WulfTeam Productions, 2011. UPC: 880074173127. \$49.99 (DVD).

One of my earliest childhood memories is the trip I took with my parents to Circuit City at Crossroads Mall in Roanoke, Virginia, to buy our first VHS deck in the mid-1980s. I can remember the dimly lit circular store layout and the rows of now-extinct wood-grain floor-model televisions. Nintendo games hung on blister hooks on the shelving units behind the checkout counter. My father paid somewhere in the range of \$400 for the silver-grey unit. We had it

for almost a decade. I remember teaching myself how to run my videogame systems through the audio-video inputs on the VCR, since our TV only had a coaxial input. I never knew Circuit City was at one time the largest electronics retailer in the country, let alone a Virginia-based company.

WulfTeam's documentary is a nostalgic and heartfelt look at over fifty years of not only Circuit City history, but Virginia history as well. This aptly named "Tale of Two Cities" covers two periods: (1) the com-

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## He made house calls and offered free overnight trial periods.

### WULFTEAM PRODUCTIONS REVIEW

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pany's origins in Richmond with Sam Wurtzel at the helm, continuing to its peak in the mid-1990s, and (2) its subsequent decline and ultimate collapse in 2009.

The first half of the documentary paints a quaint picture of Sam Wurtzel's humble beginnings with Wards Company, stocking only six TV sets at a time. He made house calls and offered free overnight trial periods. He even used the cardboard boxes as display stands. The documentary chronicles the store's expansion and diversification throughout the fifties, sixties, and seventies into such products as stereo equipment and white wear (refrigerators and oven ranges). Alan Wurtzel succeeded his father in the 1970s, and the company made the transition into Circuit City.

"Good to Great" (the first half) is a delight to watch. The interviews are lively, fascinating, and sometimes very personal. The editors do an excellent job of mixing in actual Circuit City commercials

and music jingles from the time period. The company was at the top of its game. It's a fairy tale at first: the documentary lacks a defined conflict (and of course the viewer is watching and waiting to understand "why Circuit City collapsed"). The call is answered soon enough by the introduction of... (evil drum roll)... Best Buy! No, the makers of the documentary do not villainize Best Buy (though some of the interviewees do), but they do point out the mogul's rise as a turning point in the decline of Circuit City. It's at this point in the mid-1990s that the second half of the documentary begins: "Great to Gone."

All the same, interviewees have different claims and reasonings behind the collapse of the company. The film itself begins to pick up pace amid these turbulent descriptions. With the exception of CarMax, none of the company's expansions seems to be working anymore. The film really transitions into something of a tragedy: the change in management training, the end of sales commissions, the discontinuation of white wear sales, the lackluster location-building and infrastructure, even the investment failure of DivX.

The second disc (bonus features) has some wonderful hidden gems. The chapter entitled "Deeper Analysis" offers perhaps the best insights into the company's collapse. The disc also includes a collection of original television commercials, an actual training video, and an interview with Sam Wurtzel himself. Finally, click on "Sales Floor Stories" for a moment of comic relief.

Ultimately, the anvil fell when the company decided to buy back and inflate the prices of its own stock and got caught in the 2007 economic panic. Reeling and unable to recover, the company closed its headquarters in 2009. The film closes with footage of the one-

year reunion of the company's closing. Hundreds of former employees gather in the Circuit City Corporate Richmond Complex to share stories and relate events over the past year. Several employees speak directly to the camera about the final day of layoffs a year prior. The company laid off 60,000 employees and affected over a quarter of a million lives, including families and nearby businesses. Reminiscent of the Enron documentary and the lives ruined in Texas nearly a decade earlier, the documentary serves as a tale of two themes: the human bridges we build between one another, and the dark side of the American Dream.

Postscript: This review was typed on an Acer computer purchased from Circuit City in 2006. The documentary was screened on a Toshiba HDTV/DVD combo purchased from Circuit City in 2007. The extended warranty is still honored.

—Joseph Yamine, *English professor and writer from Roanoke*



Cushman, Stephen. *Riffraff*. Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2011. 70 pp. ISBN 9780807137604. \$16.95 (softcover).

Cushman's collection of sixty-seven poems is a pleasure to read and reread. Saying from the first page, "Would that I could / in everything give thanks," Cushman explores a variety of ordinary situations and humble settings with an understatement that almost paradoxically lends a solemn dignity to his musings. "Beside the Point" is one example of this ability to engage the reader in the significance of the ordinary, as is "Windshake," which uses the analogy of hidden damage to a tree to lead the reader to consider concealed human suffering. Likewise, in "Home on Leave," old stone walls take the reader to reflections on work and death. Perhaps the clearest expres-

sion is in "Communion of Saints," where the speaker calls on the patron saint of average apostles.

At the same time, the poet creates a voice that is distinctly his, appealing in its casualness interspersed with cold seriousness, its simple vocabulary interrupted at unpredictable intervals with the occasional learned, even arcane word or phrase that seems fitting from a University of Virginia litera-

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CUSHMAN REVIEW

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ture professor. While he is usually plainspoken, it is clear from the title, a word that suggests insignificance but also means—according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*—"a simple, unadorned piece of verse," that he loves the richness of words and the possibilities of language. In "Winter Tactics," for example, he presents the simplest of scenes—sitting in the sun—in just a few words, but describes the sun's course across the sky by saying that the sun

outflanks and  
enfilades me  
with its fire.

The military conceit works so well because of the juxtaposition of the everyday situation and the specialized vocabulary that might well stick in the mind of an author who has written about Civil War battles.

Having a distinct, understated voice does not mean that Cushman always stays in the same emotional

key. In fact, his wit and willingness to explore everything from a street scene with hookers to a birdfeeder in bad weather to brushing teeth make it possible for the poet to show off a wide range of settings, situations, and emotions. And, while there are a number of poems that have extended passages of humor, such as "Blurbs for Thursday," which begins,

Elegantly alluring, strangely  
terrific, spell-bindingly  
smashing sequel to Wednesday,  
impossible to put down,

with twenty-two similar lines following, a quirky title does not always mean the poem is just for fun, as in "Butt-Naked Old Men," which leaves the reader in very serious territory in the end.

A master of the American idiom and of free verse as it is written in the early twenty-first century, Cushman composes poems that nevertheless tend toward form in meter and rhyme at times. He seems comfortable with this, and is especially successful in "Grape Hyacinth," where rhymes work with a humorous tone, as they do in "Smaller Dog."

Cushman writes quite frankly of sex and desire, creating scenarios where readers bump into embarrassing reminders of their own humanity; but the erotic, as in life, never completely escapes from the quotidian world, nor does it occasion a departure from his wry, quiet tone. It might appear as the scent of a woman's hair in "Lower Window for Ventilation" or a glimpse of his wife in "Excursion into Philosophy." It is his tendency to look at everything with the expectation for the value of the observation, when combined with the mature poetic voice in which he writes, that makes Cushman's *Riffraff* a book that should satisfy the poetry craving of the most discriminating readers.

—Cy Dillon, *Hampden-Sydney College*



Twain, Mark. *Autobiography of Mark Twain*. Harriet Elinor Smith, Benjamin Griffin, et al., editors. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010. ISBN-13: 9780520267190 (v. 1). \$34.95 (hardcover).

[*While Samuel Clemens was not a Virginia author, his popularity in the Old Dominion has been such that it seems entirely appropriate to record the publication of his Autobiography, Vol. 1, in "Virginia Reviews." We were pleased to receive some notes and observations on the book from Bill Whitesides, the former director of continuing education programs and state and federal aid consultant at the Library of Virginia.—Ed.*]

In the introduction of this long-awaited autobiography, Mark Twain is credited with the remark, "If one's autobiography may be called a book—in fact mine will be nearer a library." Both the length of this first volume and the variety of its contents indicate that he was hardly exaggerating. The editor, Harriet Elinor Smith, concludes her introduction:

A hundred years have now passed since Clemens's death. It certainly seems fitting that his plan for publishing the *Autobiography of Mark Twain* in its entirety should just now be recovered from his past accumulation of papers, and that the *Autobiography's* standing and value as "lit-

erature" be at last recognized. This edition, prepared by his editors (if not his heirs and assigns), relies on the eloquent evidence of historical documents to understand and carry out his wishes for this, his last major literary work. His long-standing plan

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**His long-standing plan  
to speak as truthfully as  
possible "from the grave"  
is no longer just a plan.**

TWAIN REVIEW

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Clemens was in Florence, Italy, when he dictated, over an eight-month stay, the core of his autobiography. The dictations began January 1906, and between 1906 and 1909 he and Josephine Hobby and three other typists wrote 5,000 pages of typescript. In a postscript, he wrote, "I've written a short Preface. I like the title of it: 'Spoken from the Grave.'"

The "Preliminary Manuscripts and Dictations, 1870–1905" section was written in 1870, "incomplete and without a title." It is the

earliest manuscript that might be called a draft chapter for the autobiography, which has never before been accurately published. This section includes references to the family's Tennessee lands and several articles on General U. S. Grant, as well as Clemens's travels to London, Vienna, Hawaii, and California. It also includes "Scraps from My Autobiography" (1900).

Some prominent people and their photographs appearing in the *Autobiography* include Helen Keller, Henry H. Rogers, Booker T. Washington, Joseph H. Twitchell, William Dean Howells, Dorothy and George Harvey, Richard Watson Gilder, and three pictures of Clemens in his bed reading the February 1906 issue of *Collier's Weekly*.

The appendixes include a brief chronology, family biographies, Clemens's wife Olivia and entire family "outlined and exposed," selected speeches and previous publications, bibliographical references, and an unusually complete index 223 pages in length.

Samuel Clemens suffered severe angina while in Bermuda and left for New York on April 12, 1910. He died at Stormfield, Redding, Connecticut, on April 21.

—*Bill Whitesides, former director of continuing education programs and state and federal aid consultant, the Library of Virginia* 