

# THE VOICE

## MAGAZINE

Vol 20 Iss 48 2012-12-14

### America's Instrument

*Give Me the Banjo*

### Secrets of the Library

*Between the pages*

### Winter Whoa

*That's no wonderland*

*Plus:*

*From Where I Sit  
Gregor's Bed  
and much more!*



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***The Voice  
Magazine***

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*The Voice* is published  
every Friday in HTML and  
PDF format.

For weekly email  
reminders as each issue is  
posted, fill out the  
subscription form [here](#).

*The Voice* does not share  
its subscriber list with  
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# LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

We love to hear from you! Send your questions and  
comments to [voice@voicemagazine.org](mailto:voice@voicemagazine.org), and please  
indicate if we may publish your letter.



## WINTER WONDER WHAT?

Maxie van Roye



I'm offended by holiday music.

I hate crooning singers making love to the microphone. I despise tear-jerking tunes and emotionally manipulative lyrics (I'm looking at you, "Christmas Shoes"). Worst of all, most of the holiday songs I hear are celebrating something I don't believe in.

*Winter.*

Nothing gets me more than all this winter love. Where are the songs about summer? We've got whole radio stations dedicated to pro-frost sentiment, but come June there'll be nary a melody about "Eighty degrees and life is great."

It's solely winter we sing about, but why? Snow is only a winter wonderland if you don't have to shovel it. Christmastime in the city is characterized by hazardous driving conditions, rude motorists, and lots of accidents to prove it. And while hot cocoa by the fire is a nice thought, a frosted drink and a beach chair are so much better. Bonus points if there are palm trees and a good-looking pool boy.

We're days away from the winter solstice. This is supposed to be a comforting thing--"we're now on our way to summer!"--but it doesn't quite work that way, does it? We can't be anywhere close to the warm weather if the temperature is still on its miserable downward skid toward January.

Here the weather outside is, as the song goes, frightful. And the fireplace is indeed delightful, if you have one; otherwise, jacking up the thermostat to 80 degrees gives a similar scratchy warmth. But then it's frightful again if you open the door to go buy food or take your child to school (spoiled brat; when I was a kid I walked to school both ways uphill in the snow).

Also frightful? The heating bill.

Of course I could just move to Florida and be done with winter for good. But even if I did, Florida radios would still play those silly carols with no thought of irony. Ever sat and listened to a choir singing "*Warm this time of winter*" when it's 80 degrees out? I have. It doesn't work.

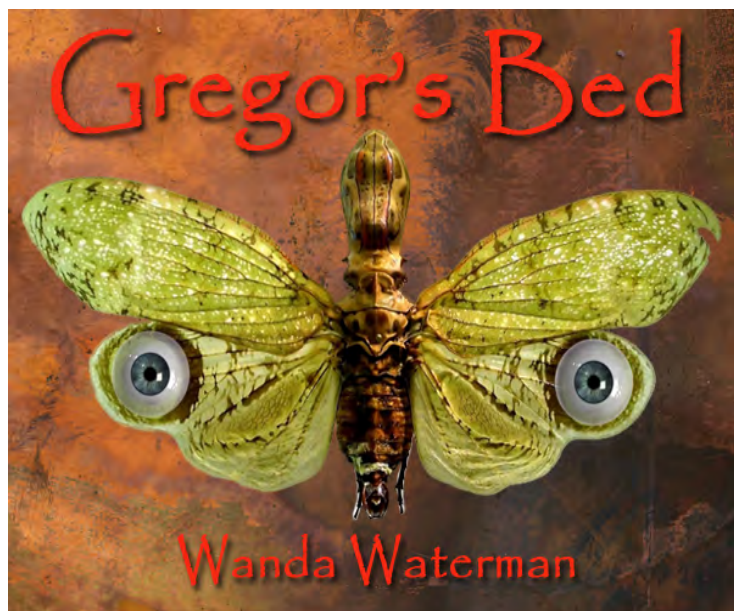
But then again, do winter songs really work in the north? As far as I'm concerned, crooning winter carols just adds insult to the injuries sustained when I slipped on the ice.

Go ahead, celebrate the holidays. Deck the halls, drink and be merry, and look at ships coming sailing in. But please, for the love of all good things, don't tell me that outside there's a winter wonderland.



## GREGOR'S BED

Wanda Waterman



## Recent Discoveries From the Realm of the Experimental and Avant-Garde

**Album:** *Song from the Uproar: the Lives and Deaths of Isabelle Eberhardt* (2012)

**Artist:** Chamber opera by Missy Mazzoli; libretto by Missy Mazzoli and Royce Vavrek

*"Every perfect life is a parable invented by God."*

Simone Weil

## The Joy and Discontent of a Holy Nomad

In 1904 a lovely young Swiss aristocrat, Isabelle Eberhardt, rents a house where she waits for her husband's return after a long absence. She's

been travelling through the Algerian desert on horseback for years—dressed as a man, helping the Algerians in their fight against French colonial rule, and writing journals, short stories, and articles. It begins to rain.

A full century later, New York composer Missy Mazzoli opens one of Isabelle's journals in a Boston bookstore and immediately embarks on a journey of intellectual obsession, devouring every one of Eberhardt's writings within weeks. Soon she finds herself trying to envisage this woman's remarkable experiences and vision as a musical work.

Mazzoli, admittedly heavily influenced by the romantics, could not have chosen a more romantic subject; Eberhardt was the illegitimate daughter of her siblings' tutor, and so suffered a kind of disenfranchisement from an early age. While visiting Algeria to try to see her half-brother, she and her mother both converted to Islam.

A film made about Isabelle (*Isabelle Eberhardt*) in 1991 implies that she dressed like a man in order to move more freely within Islamic Algeria, but Isabelle had actually begun dressing as a male from childhood to escape the suffocating strictures of 19th-century European society.

One wonders how, with those delicate features, she managed to convince anyone she was a man. But she pulled it off, and even ended up joining a secret Sufi brotherhood.

The Sufi are a mystical Islamic sect founded almost entirely on the writings of Rumi. The focus of their worship is to develop a profound awareness of the presence of God, deliberately provoking trance states and producing art and music reflecting their ecstasy.

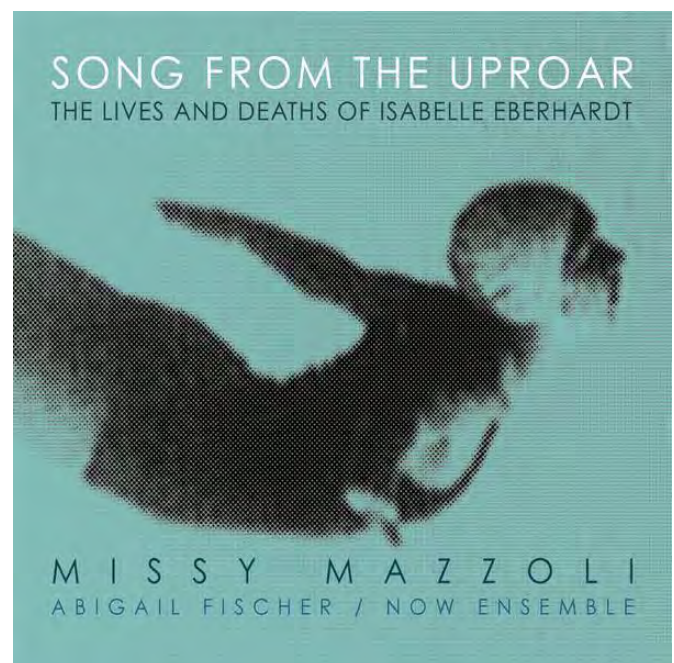
This preoccupation with the transcendent was very attractive to a young woman whose mother, father, and brother had all died within a short period. As with Edgar Allan Poe, a surfeit of firsthand experience with death exacerbated a natural sensitivity and gave impetus to an already single-minded creative effort.

Eberhardt produced a small collection of journals, essays, and short stories in her short life. Her writings are at times pedestrian and at other times profoundly vivid and insightful. Suffering often forces souls to clap shut or become bitter, but Isabelle remained very much steeped in life, as is witnessed by her political engagement and her deep romantic attachment to her Algerian husband.

Her life has great relevance to the postmodern artist who recognizes no limits but those imposed by her own inner convictions. Eberhardt turned her personal dilemma into a compassionate response to other oppressed peoples and a simultaneous search for religious and erotic ecstasy. After hearing this opera, one might say the two activities are one and the same.

The opera is one long crisis, one great crescendo that never breaks, less a story than an exploration of Eberhardt's maverick lifestyle. The music in this opera carries the great dissonance, minor sombreness, and emotive shrieking of many modern operas, keeping it from being perhaps the most apt sound to unwind to, but its quality, inventiveness, depth, variety, and intensity is phenomenal.

Mazzoli has done an amazing job of capturing the existential angst of a soul battering with all its might against the bars of its cage before finally flying free; Isabelle's husband finally arrives, but the house, made of clay, collapses in a flood shortly after their reunion, killing her and almost killing him.



Wanda also penned the poems for the artist book *They Tell My Tale to Children Now to Help Them to be Good*, a collection of meditations on fairy tales, illustrated by artist Susan Malmstrom.

## VOICE HOLIDAY SCHEDULE

The final 2012 issue of *The Voice Magazine* will be published on Thursday, December 20. We will be on break for the holidays as of December 21, 5 pm MST. *The Voice* will be back in early 2013 with our annual "Best of *The Voice*" issue, which will showcase some of our top writing from 2012. This special issue will be published January 4, 2013, and our first regular issue of the year will appear on January 11, 2013.



## UNCOMPROMISING NEGOTIATION TACTICS

Wanda Waterman

# ANTBOY IN: UNCOMPROMISING NEGOTIATION TACTICS



MAKE ME YOUR  
LEADER!

I DON'T NEED A LEADER. CAN I MAKE  
YOU MY PERSONAL BENEFACTOR?



NEVER! I MUST HAVE ABSOLUTE  
CONTROL!

ABSOLUTE CONTROL IS OVERRATED—  
TAKE IT FROM ME. CAN I MAKE YOU MY  
BIOGRAPHER?



CERTAINLY NOT! YOU MUST MAKE ME YOUR  
GRAND POOBAH!

NAW. GRAND POOBAHS COST TOO MUCH  
TO FEED.



WHY CAN'T YOU BE MORE SENSITIVE TO MY  
NEEDS, YOU PUTRID LITTLE INSECT?!

HOW ABOUT I  
MAKE YOU MY  
PERSONAL TOILET  
BOWL CLEANER?



WRITTEN BY WANDA WATERMAN



## No Promises

How is it possible that it's already mid-December? Unbelievably, there are only two more issues of *The Voice* before it's put to bed for another year. I guess it's the old "time flies when you're blah, blah, blah" phenomenon.

This year, as always, there's so much to do and so few days left to do it. It helps that our standards and expectations are quite a bit lower in 2012!

Our Christmas shopping is not done, though we've made a good dent in the wish lists. I'm being forced to do some online shopping because many of Hilary's wishes are only available there. I'm not yet sure if it's "Bah Humbug" or the greatest thing since sliced bread. The big thing this season (or maybe I'm just noticing it for the first time) is the one-day sale concept: Sears, The Bay, Lowes, Home Depot, and even Costco are doing it. I've got the emails to prove it.

The baking is not done--and won't be, because that's not my thing. I'll try to locate the Christmas cards and hand-deliver a few. Cleaning is hit-and-miss in this construction zone.

We certainly won't be hosting any get-togethers this festive season. Maybe if we play our cards right, we can take the plastic off two chairs in the living room, sit down, and survey what we have wrought with this renovation. And see what remains to be done. Yikes. I'm beginning to understand why contractors recommend that families move out during construction. Luckily I can see the prize at the end of the line. It helps that I can rationalize virtually anything, anytime, anyplace.

I'm a bit disappointed that this will be the second time in 40 years of marriage that we won't have a Christmas tree. (The other was the year I had shoulder surgery.) I love our slimline tree because it fits our small space, though I do wish it was one of those newfangled pre-lit ones. I could hang garlands and ornaments all day, but stringing the lights drives me batty. This is also the first year in forever that I haven't added to my ornament collection. They're probably asking about me in the stores!

Maybe what this proves is that all the stressing, prepping, and hand-wringing that accompanies the holiday season is self-inflicted. This year, a fine meal with family, group games, and a gift exchange with the kids will happen without the usual drama, cost, headache, and angst. I'm just not making any promises for Christmas 2013, from where I sit.

Hazel Anaka's first novel is *Lucky Dog*. Visit her [website](#) for more information or follow her on Twitter @anakawrites.





## Dirty Books

Wait—you didn't think we were going to talk about *those* kinds of dirty books, did you? Oh. Sorry to disappoint. But if you're keen for a tale involving creepy stuff like bedbugs, mould, mouse droppings, and *E. coli*, read on. They're all things that might be hiding among the pages of your favourite books.

If you're going to go looking for large collections of well-loved books, there's no better place than the local library. But if you think about it, libraries are sort of like hotels: Thousands of people use them and sit on their soft surfaces (like chairs and carpets), and their books are often privy to the same personal activities for which people use hotel rooms. Library books are read in bathrooms, in bed, at the dinner table or over coffee.

So it's no surprise that libraries are facing some unwelcome visitors: bedbugs. As *The New York Times* [reports](#), "tiny bedbugs and their eggs can hide in the spines of hardcover books." The nasty little critters don't care whether they're coming or going.

You might open a bedbug-infested book at home and have them crawl into your bed, while another library user could unwittingly load up a clean book after taking it into an infested home.

The problem isn't an epidemic, and some librarians are taking serious measures to prevent its spread—including using bedbug-sniffing tracker dogs to root the bugs out. Used-book stores can be a haven for the persistent pests as well. So before you pick up that deal on a second-hand murder mystery, you should open the pages and look for real corpses: bedbug corpses, or the tell-tale stains that show they've been there.

Bedbugs aren't the only scary things hiding in books, and a university team has done the research to prove it. Over at the Thomas Tredway Library at Augustana College, microbiology professor Dara Wegman-Geedey and several students "decided to put books, periodicals, microfilm and microfiche from the Tredway Library's collection to the test."

The fomite test, that is. A fomite is an inanimate object (like a book) that transfers pathogens "from one host to another or from a non-living reservoir to a susceptible host." The team tested for organisms that included *E. coli* and *Staphylococcus sp.* You can view the full report on this [page](#), but the short answer is that material in the library and special collections supported the growth of *E. coli* but didn't support the growth of *Staphylococcus sp.*

The news about *Staphylococcus sp.* doesn't have a happy ending, though. Library conditions didn't support the organism's growth, but they didn't kill it, either. As the report notes, "returning them to optimal conditions resulted in maximum expected growth."

If you're puzzled about how organisms like *E. coli* can end up on the pages of books, just think about the popularity of those bathroom bookstands. And then there are folks who use things like bacon and human teeth as bookmarks (the Abe Books [blog](#) has plenty of other odd examples).

Of course there are the run-of-the-mill [book problems](#) too, like mouse droppings, moisture, and mould. Thankfully, these can be a lot easier to deal with. Just grab your mask, gloves, and HEPA-filter vacuum and start on the shelves.

Hmm. Maybe I'll put this used copy of *Joy of Cooking* back on the shelf.

*S.D. Livingston is the author of several books, including the new suspense novel Kings of Providence. Visit her [website](#) for information on her writing (and for more musings on the literary world!).*

## CLICK OF THE WRIST

## Style Wise

**You've got that paper half finished, but now you're stuck, in need of a break, or just curious about your writing style. This week's links may not give you direct inspiration, but they provide a fun (if slightly procrastinating) and different take on the writing and editing process. Enjoy--but don't forget to go back to work!**

### Writer Buddy

What famous writer does your style most resemble? Stephen King? Dan Brown? This online tool "analyzes your word choice and writing style" and determines which writer's style matches yours. You might be in for a surprise!

### Level Up

Is your essay sophisticated but full of jargon? Or eminently readable, but too simplistic for a university paper? The online Writing Tester won't give you the exact answer, but it can point you in the right (write?) direction by analyzing your work and telling you the grade level and the readability score of what you've written. You'll be able to compare different edits and improve either or both scores--and hopefully up your paper's grade into the bargain.

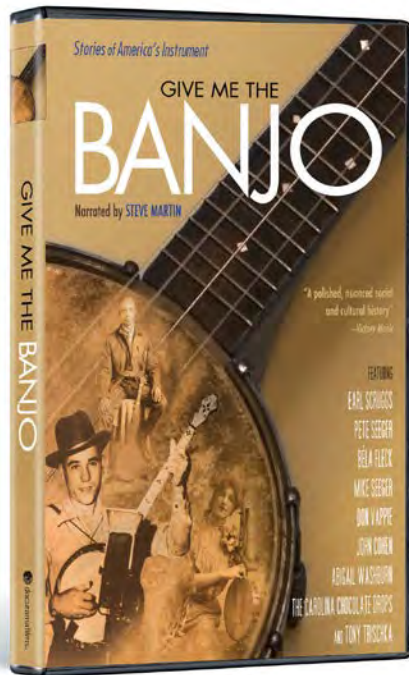
### Analyze This

If you're an English nerd--or you're desperate for a legitimate-sounding procrastination activity--be sure try out this text analysis tool. It tells you things like your average sentence length, how many syllables in your longest word, and more probably useless but infinitely entertaining stats about what you've written.



## THE MINDFUL BARD

Wanda Waterman



## Books, Music, and Film to Wake Up Your Muse and Help You Change the World

Film: *Give Me the Banjo* (2011)

Writer/Producer/Director Marc Fields

**Cast:** Narrated by Steve Martin, with appearances by Béla Fleck, Dom Flemons, Pete Seeger, Rhiannon Giddens, Alison Kraus, Taj Mahal, and many others

**Genre:** Documentary*"This machine kills fascists."*

A sticker on Woody Guthrie's guitar

*"This machine surrounds hate and forces it to surrender."*

Inscribed on Pete Seeger's banjo

**America's Instrument Is Talking. If Only We'd Listen . . .**

A brightly painted antique picture frame bearing the inscription "Minstrel Show" is wound up and set in motion. Inside, a minstrel with a black face plucks a banjo, his head bobbing jauntily back and forth as his hand strums against the strings.

While the banjo plays on, ethnomusicologist Greg Adams explains, "You can't talk about the history of the banjo without talking about racism, slavery, misogyny, appropriation, exploitation—all of the things that run counter to what we love about the banjo. We are beyond the point in our understanding of the history of this instrument of pretending that these things don't exist."

The banjo began in Africa but developed a history of its own among American slaves. It was an instrument that could absorb any musical tradition you could throw at it, and was important to the development of a whole slew of uniquely American musical forms, including Tin Pan Alley, blues, bluegrass, and Dixieland jazz.

Disdained for being an integral part of the degraded lives of American slaves, the banjo at the same time became a tool allowing African-Americans to enter mainstream culture by manifesting their pre-existing cultural aesthetic, a thing so bona fide that people of all hues couldn't help being drawn to it.

It wasn't just African-Americans who benefitted. Poor factory workers and white farm folk also found in the banjo a sturdy ladder out of cycles of poverty and back-breaking labour. Later on, during the folk revivals of the '50s and '60s, pissed-off college kids used the banjo's crude but sparkling voice in songs of solidarity and protest.



I've often said that America's greatest contribution to the world has been the music of her oppressed peoples. For some reason the injustices of the first centuries allowed the suffering ones to make lemonade out of all those lemons by developing a vibrant low culture, without which global high culture would have been ever so much the poorer.

In laying out the history of the banjo in America, Fields has given us an expansive survey of American history, a history unimaginable without this humble string instrument. The writer starts with a brilliant premise and executes it beautifully.

I was delighted to see that several of the people appearing in this documentary have also been reviewed right here on the Mindful Bard and in interviews with *The Voice*. Either this means that yours truly might have a crush on the banjo, or the banjo itself has qualities that make it the poster child for the Mindful Bard aesthetic.

*Give Me the Banjo* manifests six of the Mindful Bard's criteria for films well worth seeing: 1) it is authentic, original, and delightful; 2) it poses and admirably responds to questions that have a direct bearing on my view of existence; 3) it harmoniously unites art with social action, saving me from both seclusion in an ivory tower and slavery to someone else's political agenda; 4) it provides respite from a sick and cruel world, a respite enabling me to renew myself for a return to mindful artistic endeavour; 5) it displays an engagement with and compassionate response to suffering; and 6) it makes me appreciate that life is a complex and rare phenomenon, making living a unique opportunity.

## DID YOU KNOW?

## AU Holiday Exam Procedures



If you have undergraduate courses ending December 31, 2012, you'll want to note the University's special holiday exam procedures—and order your final examinations as soon as possible.

If your course contract date is December 31, you must submit your exam requests before the University closes for the holidays. Athabasca University will be closed from December 24, 2012, at 4:30 pm MST until January 2, 2013, 8:30 am MST. No examinations will be shipped during that period.

Exam requests received after the close of business on December 24 will be treated as Late Examination Requests, and the Late Examination Request Fee will be assessed.

However, if you submit your exam request before the holiday closure, you will have until January 15, 2013, to take your exam. This is not a course extension; all other course components, including essays, projects, and quizzes, are due by the December 31 course contract date.

For further information, check out the holiday exam policy [here](#), or contact the Information Centre at 1.800.788.9041.

## AUSU UPDATE



### AUSU e-newsletters a success

AUSU has been piloting the use of e-newsletters to contact our student body over the last year. We began by sending these newsletters to students registered on our website, and after a very positive initial response, we are now sending e-newsletters to all students currently enrolled in any AU undergrad course, as well as all students registered on our site who wish to receive email. We're looking forward to keeping in closer touch with our members, and hope in future to be able to send regular monthly e-newsletters to all members (though we'll also respect your right to unsubscribe). If there's something you'd like to see included in our newsletters, please let us know!

### Instructional model survey

Last June, AUSU learned that AU planned to move all undergraduate courses to a call centre model (like the one currently used in AU's Faculty of Business) beginning in September. We felt that this was a very major change, and was surprised that the university had not conducted consultation of AU's students or academics. AUSU drafted a survey and sent it to all our members via e-newsletter. Over 2,500 of you took the time to fill out this survey, giving us a wealth of information about what's important to AU's undergrad students. The AUSU Executive is now working to make sure that these important student perspectives are communicated to the university, and we have presented our survey results report to a number of AU community members and committees, including CUPE 3911 (the AU tutors' union) and the Board of Governors (AU's highest governing body).

### DegreeWorks now available

We've been waiting for AU to roll out their new DegreeWorks system—and it's finally available to students! If you started an AU program after September 2010, you can now use DegreeWorks to see how your courses fulfill the requirements of your program. DegreeWorks is available online anytime, and can instantly help you see which courses you still need to complete on the way to your credential. Let us know what you think of DegreeWorks, and we'll make sure we let the university know how they're doing meeting student needs.

### Get in touch with us

Have comments or questions about AUSU or anything in this column? Feel free to get in touch with AUSU President Bethany at [president@ausu.org](mailto:president@ausu.org). You can also e-mail our office at [ausu@ausu.org](mailto:ausu@ausu.org) or call 1-800-788-9041 ext. 3413. We'd love to hear from you!

*This column is provided by AUSU to facilitate communication with its members. The Voice does not write or edit this section; all content has been exclusively and directly provided by AUSU, and any questions or comments about the material should be directed to [ausu@ausu.org](mailto:ausu@ausu.org).*

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# CLASSIFIEDS

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Classifieds are free for AU students! Contact [voice@voicemagazine.org](mailto:voice@voicemagazine.org) for more information.

## THE VOICE

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*The Voice* is published every Friday in HTML and PDF format.

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