

# Saving Grace

An author and dance critic would like us to reclaim a lost virtue.

By TONI BENTLEY

“THE ART OF GRACE” ... “The Art of Grace.” It is concerning when the title of a book has a wannabe whiff. Or is it just graceless me that smells it? But the alternative, in this case, is worse, and it is as precious and highfalutin as it sounds given that the author is not Thomas Aquinas or John Ruskin. It is a phrase that promotes its author as an arbiter of grace, a lofty perch indeed from which to view us mere clumsy mortals. And so, Sarah L. Kaufman, in her first book, sets the stakes

**THE ART OF GRACE**  
**On Moving Well Through Life**  
By Sarah L. Kaufman

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perilously high, particularly since her subject is not exactly origami but grace, that fragile, exquisite, transient entity of unparalleled depth, breadth, complexity and profundity. She has taken on, perhaps to her credit, the Sisyphean task of persuading us to choose grace over ego and so revisits that epic battle where grace loses every time — though ego never wins. Such ambition! But why not? We are in can-do America, and the author, dance critic for The Washington Post for almost 20 years, has a Pulitzer Prize in her pocket.

But before we get to the text, let’s talk about me and my need for a pre-emptive mea culpa: I have spent many an hour trying to write a graceful review of this book about grace, but as you see, it is not to be — things might even get a bit ugly — as I feel the author’s gaze of self-appointed authority upon me. And if you read this book, you too might feel this piercing sensibility, this refined eye, upon your every gawky, speedy, device-centric move of body, mind and soul. And a tsunami of shame will wash over you — but if you persist (or gracelessly skip) to the closing two-page, 10-point list of grace dos to rectify your by now well-delineated deformations of body and spirit, you will be advised on how to improve your slovenly, slothful, selfish self to ameliorate what Kaufman calls “the grace gap” in our “culture of coarseness,” where “our cult of casualness” reigns free, and we have cravenly “given in to gravity.” The list includes useful tips like “Slow down and plan,” “Practice tolerance,” “Be easily pleased,” “Be generous” and, last, “Enjoy.” Get ready, get set, get graceful. Throughout Kaufman offers other essential reminders: When one is walking, “the arms shouldn’t draw attention to themselves,” and “it’s worth paying attention to crosswalks,” presuming, of course, one

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Veronika Part of American Ballet Theater performs “Swan Lake,” 2012.

has arrived there predominantly armlessly. In her posture tutorial she even goes so far as to suggest centering “your weight right over your feet.” Right over? I have long preferred the challenge of being, for the most part, behind my own feet. Are we really now this dumbed down? Yup. And now by the well-credentialed elite, what’s more.

The publisher has, helpfully, categorized this book under “self-improvement” in the time-honored American “self-help” tradition. These books, as Dr. Phil knows best, endlessly sell because they never work ... but maybe the sequel will. There is, I surmise, a kind of insidious intimacy in these books, as on Freud’s couch, between author and reader, an unspoken collusion in knowing much will be said but nothing will be done.

“Grace for Dummies” might have been a better title for the book, but then self-deprecation and humor would have been required, and make no mistake, this is one serious book that aims to get you out of your “skinny jeans and bandage dresses” and high heels. “Grace will not happen if you are tottering about on stilettos,” Kaufman opines awkwardly. “To enhance your grace,” she suggests, “toss aside those body-hugging knits,” and further-

**Kaufman, punctilious to the core, commends qualities like ‘being inconspicuous.’**

more, you will find that “in A-line skirts, fluid trousers and shirtdresses, a skillful mix of air and fabric can create rhythmic play with every step.” Maybe a pink chiffon muumuu circa 1950 with some vintage Nike Airs? Personally, I refuse to redress my wardrobe and insist on my “bandages” and stilettos: They have a purpose clearly not on Kaufman’s agenda.

This hilarious clothing advice is indicative of the author’s having a dire case of that seductive disease called nostalgia — let’s go back to a kinder, gentler (and less slutty) time — that pervades this book, and I am reminded of a warning from Lincoln Kirstein to a young dancer I once knew: “Nostalgia is pure vanity.”

Kaufman’s references derive from 1558, 1640, 1774, 1922, 1935, and come to a grinding halt a decade later, where she tracks down “the demise of grace” to post-World War II American suburbs — and she has harsh words for the “nicks and cuts” of Dr. Spock. But it is a very tall order to ask us to retreat, relearn and thus redeem our-

selves, when life is so frequently lived in forward motion, reckless as this may be.

Kaufman, punctilious to the core, commends such virtues as “being inconspicuous” — take that, you Popular Culture, you — and extols a few pearls of wisdom from a 1938 booklet titled “Charm.” “Restraint, restraint,” she counsels, “even to the point of leaving your perfume at home when traveling,” though it remains questionable whether this is considerate to one’s fellow travelers in the back of the Buick. My favorite bon mot: “Read French just before going out, to wake up your brain.” Wakey-wakey.

Kaufman’s pedantic book is her *cri de coeur* for the good ol’ days, and she desperately wants to bring back all that lost grace to us texting, heathen, hashtagging reprobates. She particularly has it in for those of us buried in our iPhones and Androids. “Our cellphones are changing our bodies,” she explains, “in ungraceful ways. They’re killing our posture, flattening the natural curve of the neck.” I hardly dare report in my cheeky impudence that even our grace teacher has logged numerous tweets since I began writing this review, but no doubt they were written erect.

Kaufman has chapters on various forms of grace: political and athletic, celebrity and pedestrian, culinary and sculptural. So who makes the grade on the gracemeter? Thumbs up to George Washington, down to Abraham Lincoln; up for Audrey Hepburn, down for Katharine (huh?); up for Jean-Paul Belmondo, down for Brando (I am lodging a formal complaint on that one); up for Olga Korbut, down to “muscle on the mat” Mary Lou Retton; up for Michelle Obama, down for Barack (droopy lids, “middle distance” gaze); up for Roger Federer, down for “grinding, ball-crushing” Serena Williams; up for Jackie Gleason, down for “exhausting” Robin Williams. Wow, it’s such fun being a critic!

But Kaufman’s muse, her great love, is Cary Grant, and her book is a touching ode, both personal and perceptive, to the handsome, debonair, charming, witty and oh so truly graceful Grant. Now, while Grant is without doubt the Cristal of Hollywood actors, he remains, alas, a silver screen celebrity, and Kaufman sanctifies him not just as the divine celluloid presence that he was, but also as her exemplar of grace off-screen, in all things, in life.

She illustrates Grant’s quotidian grace by recounting a thin tale of how he took David Niven’s nervous son under his wing at a Reagan White House affair he attended with his fifth wife (following four graceful divorces one assumes), by promptly ordering them “two large vodka martinis.” No! Really? She milks this banal story for almost three pages to emphasize this extraordinary moment, where, astonishingly, a bona fide movie star does not ignore the progeny of his movie star friend, as a stel-

lar example of Grant's utter supremacy as a gentleman. I think this is called a reach.

She unfortunately caps Grant's canonization by reporting, erroneously, that "it's no secret" that Grant was Ian Fleming's model for James Bond. It may not be a secret, but it also isn't true: Fleming claimed to have based Bond on over a dozen real spies, as well as himself and his brother, and never mentioned Cary Grant.

But Kaufman tipped her hand from the start with another rather graceless comment, blinded, I assume, by her adoration of Grant, "the man who taught me more about savoring grace than all the ballerinas in all the 'Swan Lake's I've ever seen." Given Kaufman's many years as a dance critic watching hundreds, if not thousands, of world-class ballerinas

as Odette/Odile, this is a diss indeed.

Kaufman attempts to commodify grace, selling it to us as yet one more thing to master, and thus, ironically, joins the very culture she criticizes. I am, in the end, puzzled by this book, this labor of love by a good journeyman critic, who I have no doubt in the least means well. A for effort, for sure. She most closely touches upon grace herself in her lovely description of Greg Louganis standing at the tip of the diving board: "perfectly poised between the realms of flesh and spirit. . . . When he left the edge to fall through the air, his movements escaped the world of the body. He became a magnificent abstraction. . . . Slipping into the water, he escaped our world entirely, disappearing past sight and sound."

But perhaps as a direct result of her dutiful exertion, she has managed to reduce the immeasurable, numinous beauty of true grace into a rather plodding, predictable book; and I would venture, atheist that I am, she has done so by focusing almost exclusively on all the visible, behavioral, teachable graces while skating warily around the heart of her own subject: the spiritual, religious dimension, the most beautiful dimension, and the only place in which deep grace can really exist. There, but for the grace of God.

In a late, short and clearly obligatory chapter oozing political correctness, Kaufman interviews religious leaders — a Catholic, a Jesuit, a Lutheran, a Jew, a professor of Hinduism and a Muslim — on their definitions of grace. Thus we

get this condescending distillation: "For Christians, it's a gift in the purest sense: a total freebie. . . . God simply pours it into you, from his heart to yours, . . . a cosmic cha-cha."

And so grace-lite lands, unlike Louganis, with a thud. Kaufman avoids and minimizes any discussion of the state of grace that renders us alive, where we proceed and endure, in spite of our mortality. But mercurial grace is, alas, not within Kaufman's purview. Ultimately, grace is an act of reception, not application — a matter, well, of grace.

But in case I am wrong, don't forget to read your Racine and Rousseau, in the original French, before that night on the town in your airy, A-line muumuu. Cha-cha and au revoir! □

## Head Space

Simon Critchley imagines a structure for memories in a novel filled with philosophy references.

By CALEB CRAIN

IF MY DOG finds a dead rat in the park, he remembers where he found it for months, if not years. I have no trouble remembering the spot either, perhaps because evolution shaped both my dog's brain and mine to facilitate hunting, and hunters need to be able to recall the lay of the land and salient objects within it.

Orators in the ancient world, which lacked teleprompters, took advantage of

### MEMORY THEATER

By Simon Critchley

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this quirk in cognitive design in order to expand their memories. They positioned symbols of topics they planned to discuss in an imaginary structure called a memory palace, and as they spoke, imagined themselves walking through it. An imaginary dead rat in an imaginary doorway, for example, might remind Cicero to begin by insulting his enemy Catiline.

For more than a thousand years, a memory palace was in almost every intellectual's mental toolbox, but the scholar Frances Yates, in her 1966 history, "The Art of Memory," notes that its use began to subside after the invention of movable type, perhaps because printing proved

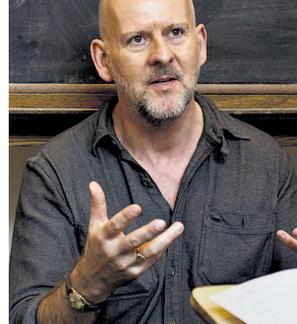
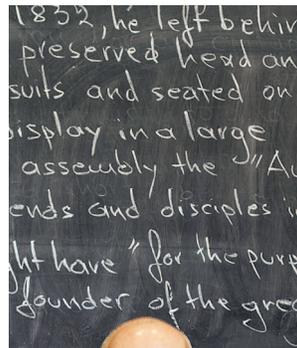
CALEB CRAIN is the author of the novel "Necessary Errors."

superior as an artificial memory technology. By the time the journalist Joshua Foer wrote "Moonwalking With Einstein," his 2011 account of memory palaces, almost the only people still in the habit of constructing them were hobbyists who competed to memorize the order of cards in shuffled decks.

In the 16th century, an Italian philosopher named Giulio Camillo Delminio decided to build what he called a memory theater, a physical version of a memory palace. No one is quite sure how it was supposed to work; the only person Camillo told, Yates wrote, was the king of France, who financed it. But the intent seems to have been mystical. Symbols of every domain of knowledge were to be installed inside. Once a spectator was initiated into the symbols' meanings, he could step in and have a conspectus of all the wisdom in the universe.

In "Memory Theater," a short new book by the philosopher Simon Critchley, the narrator, who seems to be a fictional version of Critchley himself, finds an essay about Camillo's memory theater written by one of his teachers, who has recently died. A maquette of the theater also shows up in his mail, as do astrological charts that seem to have predicted accurately the death of not only his teacher but also Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty. Once the narrator discovers that his own death, too, is prophesied, he sets about building a memory theater for himself.

As a novel, the book doesn't quite work. The narrator is the only character with



Simon Critchley

substance, and he seems to be playacting rather than confessing — hiding from the reader behind a show of formidable learning. The plot is static: Camillo's device is described until, in the last few pages, it is used. The prose is as studded with references to philosophy as a pomander with cloves, and although some are explained — one of Critchley's cribs is a reprint of a couple of pages from his "Book of Dead Philosophers" (2008), which was aimed at a popular audience — in many cases the lay reader will detect a wink but have to guess what's being winked at.

The puzzles will be alluring for some readers, though, and the book does have intriguing ideas. In "The Phenomenology of Spirit," Hegel imagined history as a long, bloody drama acted out by the spirit of history, which played all the characters. Critchley cleverly describes (or rather, claims that his late teacher cleverly described) Hegel's idea of history as a moving memory theater — "a kind of protocinema." The narrator concludes that his own experiments have failed because his memory theater didn't move, and he looks forward to a posthuman upgrade: "an endlessly recreating, re-enacting memory mechanism." This sounds awfully like the Internet, to which it is so tempting nowadays to offload one's more tedious tasks of remembering — and indeed, in a recent interview with Andrew Galloway of 3:AM Magazine, Critchley has admitted that the Internet is "what the whole thing is about." Maybe it makes more sense to think of "Memory Theater" as an allegory. □