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Settling the score

by [David R. Slavitt](#)

A review of *Do I Owe You Something? A Memoir of the Literary Life*, by Michael Mewshaw.

If you are a pipe-fitter, you hang out with other pipe-fitters, and this is true of writers, too. Writers may not be the most interesting people in the world—I hate movies where we watch characters type!—but they are likely to say witty things on occasion, and, because the stints at the desk can be so draining and arduous, these tend to be short, which leaves literary people free time in the afternoons and evenings to shop, cook, or keep each other company. Graham Greene, one of the many luminaries with whom Mike Mewshaw has crossed paths, punched his ticket by doing a hundred words a day, which doesn't seem like a lot but which, if you keep at it, will make a pile of pages and eventually a book. It had once been five hundred words a day, but then Greene cut that down to three hundred, and then one hundred, "just to keep my hand in."

That is the sort of valuable nugget that *Do I Owe You Something?* provides in abundance. For that, alone, the book is worth reading. But there is also bitching, which is what writers spend a lot of their free time doing. Much of it turns out to be justifiable. Mewshaw recounts, for instance, how he got treated shabbily—and dishonestly—by William Shawn at *The New Yorker*. Mewshaw had written a piece about Greene for *Playboy* which turned it down and paid a three hundred dollar kill fee. He collected "a fat sheaf of rejection slips," from *The New Yorker* among others, then placed the article in 1977 in *The Nation* for seventy dollars and in *London Magazine* for thirty pounds. In 1979, *The New Yorker* published Penelope Gilliatt's piece about Greene, much of which was lifted nearly verbatim from Mewshaw. Elizabeth Pochoda at *The Nation* was unwilling to ruffle *The New Yorker's* feathers, so Mewshaw consulted a lawyer, who suggested that he send Shawn a list of parallel passages "and trust him to do the honorable thing." What Mewshaw wanted was an acknowledgment that the magazine had used his material, and whatever they normally paid for a profile. Shawn offered a thousand dollars but was afraid that Ms. Gilliatt was in a precarious state and could not stand another humiliation. If Mewshaw would forgo the acknowledgment, he'd go up to two thousand, and he offered his personal apology.

What he didn't offer was the information that there had been another claim against the magazine over this same profile—Ms. Gilliatt had also ripped off Judith Adamson's article about Greene in *Sound and Light*. And what Mewshaw learned later, from Renata Adler's memoir *Gone: The Last Days of the New Yorker*, was that a factchecker had found the parallels to his article in *The Nation* and had called them to Shawn's attention. So it wasn't "unconscious plagiarism," as Shawn had claimed, but theft, for which there ought to have been punitive damages.

There are other villains—Lewis Lapham at *Harper's*, for one, who assigns a piece on Italy, accepts it, has it set in galleys, and then changes his mind. He asks Mewshaw to cut it in half and take a

thousand dollars rather than the originally promised three. Mewshaw agrees and makes the cuts. Then Aldo Moro gets kidnapped and shot. Lapham has held the piece and now wants further rewrites, including a discussion of the Moro incident. Mewshaw asks for an additional payment, but “*Harper’s* dismissed this idea and me with a brusqueness that indicated no desire for further communication.” The Random House editor Albert Erskine turns out to be a tepid friend (but then he was a publisher). Mailer is ... Mailer, which is to say, “a prisoner, not of sex, but of a fictional character he had permitted to body-snatch him.”

There are heroes, too. Mewshaw’s experiences with George Garrett, Gore Vidal, James Jones, and Robert Penn Warren have all been entertaining, mostly amiable, and lively. Those friends of his whom I’ve known myself come across in these pages as recognizable in large ways and small. (I have never been able to pick up a check, either, in Vidal’s company.) Generosity and decency are always worth celebrating, and this is especially true in the lit. biz. Most of the time, though, writers fall into a middle ground in which the virtues and vices of ordinary life are mixed, although perhaps exaggerated by the stresses of publication and publicity. Even when Mewshaw is recounting quirks and foibles, there is a note of charity without which these accounts would be painful. Anthony Burgess seems to have been at the very least distracted when, quite unwittingly, he provided the collection’s title. Mewshaw is at the Cannes Film Festival and Burgess is on offer in connection with Stanley Kubrick’s *Clockwork Orange*. Burgess had blurbed Mewshaw’s novel *Walking Slow*, and Mewshaw goes to the press conference to introduce himself and thank him. “At the mention of my name and novel, a dim flicker of recognition focused his close-set eyes. ‘Why, yes, what a pleasure to meet you.’ He shook my hand. ‘Refresh my memory. Do I owe you something? A letter? A recommendation? Money?’”

Mewshaw has been around. He is a mid-list author, competent, sometimes better than that, but trying to survive in an adverse ecology in which he sometimes makes a few dollars in journalism. The sad fact is that the magazine business is in almost as bad shape as book publishing. That parts of this book have appeared in *Sewanee Review*, *Southern Review*, *Texas Review*, *Virginia Quarterly Review*, and *Granta* amounts to a terrible indictment of what used to be called the “slicks.”

The fact that Mewshaw is a fringe character probably enhances his value as an observer. That this position is slightly awkward is not lost on him. He gives us almost a found poem in his report about a meal in Rome at Passetto’s with Vidal who notices on the way out that the hat-check girl is reading a bodice-ripper romance in English and tells her, “You shouldn’t be reading that drivel.”

She asks, “What do you recommend?” Vidal says, “You should be reading ... him.” He flings an arm in Mewshaw’s direction. The hat-check girl asks who he is. “He’s a famous American novelist. He’s in Rome to see one of his novel’s being made into a movie.”

As Gore stalks out, the girl asks, “Who are you?”

In retrospect I realize that I should have said, “Gore Vidal.” Instead, I murmured, “Nobody you’d know,” and hurried out with Howard [Austen, Gore’s companion of many years].

Gore had a head start, and we didn’t catch up to him until he was on Via Argentina, stabbing his key at a door and swearing, “It’s broken. It won’t work.”

Baffled, Gore glanced from the key to the lock and back again. Like a man trapped in a bad dream, he appeared to have lost track of where he was and where he belonged.

“We live in the next building,” Howard said.

Mewshaw reports that Greene once said to him: “Failure often has far more influence on a writer than success, travel, or exotic experience. The truth is most of us fall short in our work and in our lives.” What Mewshaw tells students and aspiring writers strikes me as relevant, too. He invites them to look around at writers. “If they wanted to be pro football players, I would urge them to visit an NFL locker room and take stock of what they see. Well, much like football players, most writers get their teeth knocked out or their knees shattered and limp around with strange twitches and sad stories.”

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