

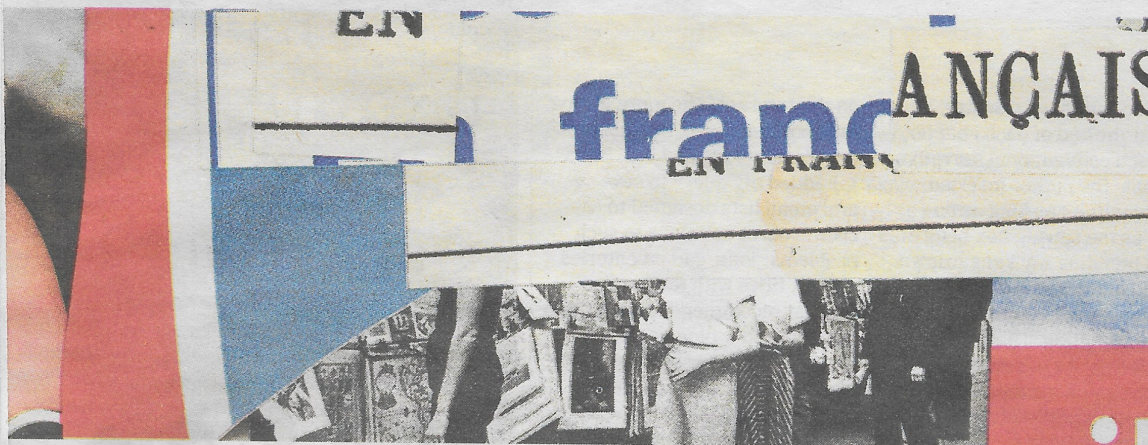
# Book Review

**12 ORLANDO PATTERSON** on Jason L. Riley, Shelby Steele and the state of black conservatism

**14 ROBERT D. PUTNAM** Jason DeParle reviews 'Our Kids: The American Dream in Crisis'

**NEW FICTION** from Neil Gaiman, David Vann, Nina Stibbe, Charles Baxter, Tania James and Tatjana Soli

**The New York Times**  
MARCH 8, 2015



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## THE EXTRAORDINARY JOURNEY OF THE FAKIR WHO GOT TRAPPED IN AN IKEA WARDROBE

By Romain Puértolas  
Translated by Sam Taylor  
302 pp. Knopf, \$22.95.



Puértolas's comic strip of a novel features an "illegal alien" in the guise of a turbaned Rajasthani fakir. Ajatashatru Oghash (pronounced many ways, as the mock-pedantic narrator repeatedly tells us, including "A-jar-of-rat-stew-oh-gosh!") arrives in Paris as a swindler, but in the course of his slapstick adventures he sheds his opportunistic misanthropy piece by piece to grow increasingly innocent — a kind of Candide-in-reverse. His metamorphosis, which includes a dramatic career change from two-bit faker to best-selling novelist, is brought about by the suffering he witnesses and the good people he meets as he traverses Europe, and beyond, in a series of unlikely containers (the wardrobe of the title, as well as a Louis Vuitton trunk, a hot-air balloon and a cargo ship).

Ajatashatru falls in love with a charming Frenchwoman, battles an irate cabdriver whom he has stiffed of his (inflated) fare and befriends a group of Sudanese illegal immigrants, "the true adventurers of the 21st century," whose misfortune is to have been born on "the wrong side of the Mediterranean" and who want only to get into the prosperous "good countries."

Strewn with laugh-out-loud jokes and furnished with a biblical moral at the end, Puértolas's lightweight tale, excellently translated, is close kin to those of Jules Verne. But Ajatashatru is no Phileas Fogg, nor does he share Fogg's universe. His world is ours: postcolonial, rife with the economic inequities left in the wake of empire and with the desperate "illegal" human beings they have created.

## THE PECULIAR LIFE OF A LONELY POSTMAN

By Denis Thériault  
Translated by Liedewy Hawke  
119 pp. Hesperus Nova, paper, \$14.95.



The French Canadian mail carrier Bilodo is an anomaly in today's email-obsessed society, a sensitive isolate who considers delivering real mail a mission, helping to maintain the order of the universe. An amateur calligrapher, he shuns the "reptilian coldness of the keyboard and instantaneity of the Internet" and identifies with the copyist monks of the Middle Ages. He especially enjoys delivering handwritten personal letters — other people's, since nobody writes to him — which he regularly steams open before delivering them, reglued, to their rightful recipients. This "secret vice" brings Ségolène into his life (unbeknownst to her). A beautiful Guadeloupean, she has been corresponding for two years with an unkempt poet on Bilodo's route: The two exchange haiku. When the poet abruptly dies, his postman can't bear to lose Ségolène, so he decides to keep up the dead man's half of the correspondence. But how to turn himself convincingly into another? How to write in the voice of the deceased?

Form is emptiness, emptiness form. Still, composing someone else's poems is no easy trick. In this brief, funny fable (or Zen koan), we applaud Bilodo as he performs it with increasing skill, but we also hope he'll leave behind vicarious experience and step fully into his own life. Charming written and translated, his tale is rooted in an Eastern belief in the circularity of existence. It begins and ends with a fitting verse: "Swirling like water / against rugged rocks, / time goes around and around."

t recent book is "Selected Prose and Poetry of Jules Supervielle," which she translated with Patricia Terry and Kathleen M