That hilarious supplement:


GERALD Murnane’s second novel, A Lifetime on Clouds, was published in 1976, only two years after Tamarisk Row. It is Murnane’s last attempt at anything resembling a conventional novel, and also his most under-rated and least studied book. Appropriately enough for a story whose action takes place largely on suburban and country trains, A Lifetime on Clouds is a place where we can see Murnane’s fictive intent switching tracks and setting off towards new objectives -- objectives that could not have been approached from any other direction.

A Lifetime on Clouds is set in 1953 and 1954. Its protagonist, Adrian Sherd, is a Form Four student at St Carthage’s College, an imaginary school in Swindon, an imaginary suburb of Melbourne. A Lifetime on Clouds is a marvellous recreation of the atmosphere of Australian Catholicism in the 1950s as it faces up to its twin enemies, Sex and Communism. Adrian starts off among a group of ‘bad boys’ at St Carthage’s--rogues like Seskis, O’Mullane and Comrthwaite -- who are unapologetic masturbators, and regularly exchange fine-points of fantasy and technique. Adrian’s own auto-erotic fantasies take him, for several nights of each week, to an imaginary America, where he copulates frenzically with tag-teams of female film-stars. He also conceives entire alternative histories of the human race, and of the Catholic religion, in which the solitary sin becomes the chief determinant of human destiny.

Feelings of guilt, however, and in particular the sight of a pure Catholic schoolgirl called Denise McNamara, turn Adrian around. He abandons the bad boys, swear off masturbation, and leaves America behind him forever. His fantasies now concern the properly Catholic life that he will one day lead as Denise’s husband (although at no point of the novel does he actually speak to her). In the book’s second half, Adrian withdraws more and more into an imaginary, solipsistic world, living out numerous ‘lifetimes on clouds’. By the end, his imagination has carded him away from sensual enjoyment, all the way to an imaginary vocation in the priesthood. Almost every reviewer in 1976 compared the book to Portnoy’s Complaint, but in fact, as an account of male teenage masturbation that is at once honest and hilarious, A Lifetime on Clouds makes Portnoy read like the Boy Scout Handbook.

For all its humour, though, A Lifetime on Clouds is an uncompromising and (considering its author’s background) courageous book. This is no attempt to ‘come to terms with’ or ‘salvage some meaning from’ a Catholic schooling in the 1950s: it summons that schooling up from the past in order to spit it out whole. As in Tamarisk Row, repression and claustrophobia do trigger a compensating movement of narrative creation -- Adrian’s imagined ‘lifetimes on clouds’ -- but that compensation is not figured as adequate, given the isolation and sexual guilt and missed opportunities that it cannot erase. Unlike Clement Killeaton in Tamarisk Row, and unlike Gerald Murnane, Adrian Sherd is not moving towards new vistas at the end of A Lifetime on Clouds: he is a bigger mug than ever, having accepted that his yearnings for guilt-free sexual love were nothing more than ‘impossible dreams’ (157), to quote the novel’s bitter closing words. So, although the plot-structure of the book appears on a literal level -- Adrian’s level to be comic (a descent into a hell of depravity, followed by purgation and salvation) it is in fact an ironic structure, showing its protagonist’s gradual withdrawal from the world. There is a particularly ironic edge, and a documentary atmosphere, to the scenes in which Adrian’s teacher-priests (who are portrayed, to a man, as sanctimonious nerds) try to instil the correct sexual orientation into their charges:

‘The pleasures of the body are for married people alone. At your age anything you do with a girl that gives rise to physical pleasure is sufficient material for a mortal sin. With regard to the bosom, the breasts of a girl -- those are grave matter at all times. And you shouldn’t have to be told that her private places are absolutely out of bounds.

‘But of course you can commit a mortal sin with any part of a girl’s body. I can readily imagine the circumstances when a young fellow would sin over a girl’s hands or arms, the exposed skin around her neck, even her feet or her bare toes.’ (128)

I thought that there had to be a strong element of exaggeration to these scenes, until I spent an afternoon leafing through old issues of the Advocate, from the early ’50s. Among the headlines I saw were: ‘The Cinema -- A Menace to Civilization?’; ‘The Baby-Spacing Legend’; ‘Nuns Used as Russian Slaves (1500 Building Dniper Bridge, Says Smuggled Letter)’; and, best of all, ‘Congo to Root out Polygamy’.

On the whole, A Lifetime on Clouds reacts to this claustrophobic subculture with ironic humour. The high points include Adrian’s formula for confessing his total number of mortal sins each month: he simply multiplies the number of days since his last confession by two, divides this figure
by five, and then adds four ('for weekends, public holidays and days of unusual excitement', 19). Or there is the fact that one of the things that helps to convert Adrian from a masturbator into a pathetic good-goody is a column, in a religious magazine, called 'The Hand That Rules the World'. But alongside its humour, and its documentary account of a lost subculture, A Lifetime on Clouds is extending some of the most complicated themes of Tamarisk Row, as well as introducing new ones. From what begins as another story about the teenage sexual fix, the novel soon broadens into an exploration of the relation between perception, imagination, fantasy and writing. It is in this novel that Murnane's involved negotiation between the search for spiritual meaning on the one hand, and the collapse of that search into repetitive, mechanical and random process on the other, gets properly underway.

The narrative shuttle-movement between reality and imagination in Tamarisk Row takes on an explicitly threatening character in A Lifetime on Clouds, where Adrian retreats more and more into an imaginary place from which he can neither reach out nor be reached out to (a syndrome whose personal consequences will be further explored in Landscape with Landscape). When we first meet Adrian, he is escaping every night into his America, for his sessions with Jayne and Susan and Marilyn. But when religious guilt about masturbation takes hold of Adrian once and for all, the crossings-over and ghostings between what is real and what is not become more sinister.

At the end of the 1953 school year, Adrian and his cohorts decide to keep a tally over summer of the frequency of their masturbation, using ruled score-cards. But the event that triggers Adrian's pet name from 'dreams of America' towards a 'real world', from 'mere images' towards a 'flesh-and-blood creature', will become the final, decisive retreat into a fantastic dream-world.

After his initial sighting of her in church, Adrian sees the 'real' Denise McNamara every afternoon on the train; every night, he lives out alternative 'lifetimes on clouds' with her as his wife: various versions of a courtship; the wedding in 1960; the honeymoon in Tasmania; Adrian's lectures to Denise on the intricacies of married sex-life; their settling at Hepburn Springs, then later at a Catholic commune in the Otway Ranges; tense moments when Adrian begins to tire of his young wife's charms; and his final decision not to court Denise at all, but to enter the priesthood instead. All of these 'events' take place without a word being spoken to, or a hand being laid upon, any 'real' girl. Rather than Denise lifting Adrian out of fantasy, Adrian drags an imaginary version of Denise down into it with him. Adrian's pet name for Denise, 'Earth Angel', captures perfectly the sort of border-zone between reality and the infinite varieties of illusion to which his fixation with her relegates him. The advantage of living in this zone -- of living any fantasy -- is that one is in charge of everything that happens there; the disadvantage is that no-one else may live there with one.

Sherd ends up living in the interstices of the varieties of fantasy, in which the real becomes an eternal fugitive; indeed, he is often trapped in fantasies within fantasies. Adolescent sexual desire provides a perfect ground upon which Murnane can work a set of transformations upon the categories of conscious phenomena: perception, memory, fantasy, dream, and imagination. After all, an object or is it a subject? -- of sexual desire is the most obscure object of all. Shot through with the most heightened levels of fantasy and projection, the object of sexual desire is an overcharged mental object that can never be placed as 'inside' or 'outside', 'real' or 'fantastic'. It is when we give ourselves to desire, or are given over to it, that we can be least sure of just where we are, or whom we are with; it is during these most urgent moments of consciousness that we are willing to postpone most indefinitely any arbitration about what is real. All sexual contact involves a trace of...
auto-eroticism, because all sexual contact involves fantasy. I believe that this connection between desire, fantasy and solipsism (which, in the sphere of fantasy. I believe that this connection between
'sort of exalted joy' (96) for sexual pleasure. But
to gain him entry into heaven, by substituting a
difference that separates all minds.
become nothing but a strong version of the
later work, however, sexual difference will
become nothing but a strong version of the
difference that separates all minds.
Adrian's imagined marriage with Denise is
designed, in contrast to his American adventures,
to gain him entry into heaven, by substituting a
'sort of exalted joy' (96) for sexual pleasure. But
when Adrian layers fantasy upon fantasy and
imagines, for an imaginary Denise's benefit, what
heaven will be like, it turns out to be a place
whose citizens rather envy those who have not yet
achieved this degree of sublimation: the
unfortunate thing is, we can't help remembering
all our lives together on earth. So when I look at
your perfect body and all its most striking features
I actually recall how excited they used to make
me, although I don't feel the slightest excitement
any more' (119). (Note the varieties of mental
content that are simultaneously involved here.
From a fantasy within a fantasy, Adrian
remembers a further fantasy: 'our lives together
on earth'.) And while fantasies of marriage were
originally designed to provide Adrian with a
sexual outlet that would be religiously sanctioned,
he has finally to admit to Denise that the highest
forms of marriage were the chaste marriages of
saints through the ages (120-21). In A Lifetime on
Clouds, sexual fulfilment is the ever-receding vista
's-transcendent' and those that are 'immanent'. In A

This is an extraordinary scene. The fields crossed
neatly by white lanes look back towards Clement's
obsession with grid landscapes in Tamarisk Row.
But the woman showing films of the landscapes
she sees in her mind looks forward too, to The
Plains: the scene is like one of the annual
'revelations' that occur there, when the
intellectuals and artists who live as clients of the
great landowners present their latest results to
select audiences behind heavy curtains. It is also a
perfect emblem of the abstracted and
intellectualised space that the erotic will occupy in
the remainder of Murnane's fiction.
The hero of The Plains will also be a film-maker,
of sorts, and indeed Murnane's books are
obsessed with films. But, as in this instance of the
English girl, it is a wholly abstract cinephilia:
Murnane himself does not own a television, and
goes for years without seeing a film. It is in A
Lifetime on Clouds that Murnane's interest in
photographs and films begins to emerge clearly as
an interest in the nature of perception and
representation. The processes of photography and
film-making are like metaphors for the traces of
'framing' and 'projection' that inhere in any
conscious perception whatsoever for example, the
way that Adrian's obsession with masturbation
causes him to 'project' it onto secular and
religious history, which turn into a History of
Wanking. Metaphors arising from film and
photography allow Murnane to pose questions
about the source of the images that he sees in his
mind, and about the relation between those that
are 'real' and those that are 'imaginary': in
phenomenological terms, between those that are
'real' and those that are 'transcendent' and those that are 'immanent'. In A
Lifetime on Clouds, and particularly through the
increasingly complicated imaginings of Adrian
Sherd -- imaginings that take him further and
further away from the 'real' world -- Murnane
continues to ring the changes upon these two
basic categories of mental phenomena.
Photographs have a similar importance in A
Lifetime on Clouds to the religious paintings and
pictures in Tamarisk Row, once again with the
superadded element of sexual desire: what is just
at the edge of, or altogether beyond the frame, or
buried within a detail of the image, is of more
interest than what it appears plainly to reveal.
Adrian stares at a photograph of Mormon polygamists in People magazine and, although he finds the Mormon women unattractive, he is sure that the mountain range rising behind them would be ‘the sort of place where a tribe of pagans or a palace with a harem of a hundred rooms might be safe from discovery for many years yet’ (59). When Adrian gets hold of a photograph of a naked woman from Health and Sunshine magazine, he buys a magnifying-glass in the hope of being able to see what is hidden in shadows between her thighs:

The trouble was that the glass magnified all the tiny dots in the picture. He was still sure there was something between the woman’s legs but the glass only made it more mysterious. (29)

So the use of photographs in A Lifetime on Clouds continues the bewildering reversals between images of surface and depth that are so prominent in Tamarisk Row, and ties this to the theme of sexuality. The book provokes us to wonder: is the focus of desire on the surface, or on what it conceals? Adrian’s teacher-priests, as we have seen, believe that it is possible to commit a mortal sin with the exposed skin around a girl’s neck but surely sin must be more than skin-deep? As for a photograph of skin, that is something even more flattened out and superficial than skin itself.

Another plot-element in Lifetime involving photographs concerns the efforts of the men of Catholic Action to outlaw the girlie-photos in the Argus -- a possibility that plainly dysmays Adrian and the other sons of those men, since the Argus photographs play such a central role in their sex-lives, indicating yet again the curiously unreal or irreal status of the object of desire. This is all made even more complicated and bewildering by Father Lacey’s contrasting of the girlie-photos with the statues of naked women to be found in the Vatican, his argument being that photographs are less realistic than works of art: ‘you’ll never find one of these masterpieces drawing attention to the bosom or making it appear larger than it really is’ (60).

While photographs foreground questions of surface and depth, the films in A Lifetime on Clouds foreground confusions between images of inside and outside. Is the viewer inside the world or is the world inside her or his world? As I sit in a cinema and stare up at a screen and experience a world, just where is this world of images being invoked? Is it in my skull, or in the projector behind me, or in the camera that the film was in when it was exposed to a world, or in the skull of the cinematographer or film-maker who stared through it? Where does the light in such an experience emanate from and what exactly does it strike? Onto what screen are the images that I see in my mind normally being projected? And when I step outside the cinema and into another world: where are projector, camera, light, skull and screen now? These are really questions to be asked on the plains, but they are lightly touched on at several points in A Lifetime on Clouds, especially when the boys at St Carthage’s are shown a sex-education film:

They were watching the moment of fertilisation. This was what Adrian and all his class had come from miles around to see. But it was nothing like real life. An army of little sperm-men was invading the diagram. The commentator got excited. He thought there was nothing so marvellous as the long journey of these tiny creatures. Adrian didn’t care what happened to the little bastards now that the film turned out to be a fraud…

Was it just an animated diagram like a cartoon? Or did the film-makers pay some lunatic to shoot his stuff into a hollow tube inside the dressmaker’s dummy? Or did they put a tiny camera inside a female organ so that Adrian and his class and even Father Dreyfus and Brother Cyprian were all sitting in the dark inside a woman’s body while some huge fellow outside was doing her for all he was worth but none of them knew what was going on? (70)

This piece of phenomenological questioning is a central moment in the evolution of Murnane’s fiction. Adrian thought that he was going to see fertilisation from the outside. Instead he finds himself inside something but what? A real woman, or a dummy, or a mere two-dimensional cartoon? The moment that life begins turns out, in a piquant irony, to be ‘nothing like real life’. And just how can I ever know whether I am on the inside or the outside, or just what it is that I am looking at, or where I stand in the infinite sequence of apertures and blank screens and eyeballs being struck by rays of light?

Like Tamarisk Row (and later, Inland), A Lifetime on Clouds is full of newspapers and magazines, secular and spiritual: People and Health and Sunshine and Readers 'Digest and the Argus and Australian Women's Weekly and Man; the Advocate and the Tribune and St Gerard’s Monthly. (The latter published by the Divine Zeal Fathers at Bendigo, and containing the column 'The Hand That Rules', together with photos of large, happy Catholic families from far-flung parts of Australia.) So another image that is used in A Lifetime on Clouds, as it was in Tamarisk Row, to
disorient the reader's sense of depth is this image of writing; but here, even more than in Tamarisk Row, Murnane explores the implications of the transgression of the signifier -- the material face of the written sign -- through and beyond its materiality.

The only time Adrian and Denise actually come close to exchanging anything, it is not bodily fluids, but a pair of signifiers emptied of content. One afternoon on the train (in order to prove 'that he really was seriously interested in her and not just trifling with her affections') Adrian holds his exercise book where he thinks that Denise can read what is on the cover:

Adrian Maurice Sherd (Age 16)
Form V
St Carthage's College, Swindon.
A few minutes later, Denise herself holds up an exercise book, and Adrian reads the cover:

Denise McNamara
Form IV
Academy of Mount Cannel, Richmond. (85)

Here again is a version of the abstracted erotic that is perfectly representative of what the erotic will become in Murnane's fiction: a man thinks that a woman might have read some of his writing. But these are signifiers emptied twice over. First, they are mere tags, labels, names: they predicate nothing. Second, we never know for sure whether Denise has any intention of revealing her name to Adrian here; we never know whether what she does constitutes a fully-fledged intentional sign, or the mere accidental display of a signifier.

Sprinkled through A Lifetime on Clouds are pointed references to texts like these ones that are dispensable, trite, mass-produced, rubbishy. The rhythm of Adrian's marriage-on-clouds to Denise is determined more by an empty reiteration and exchange of these already tediously iterative texts than by any meeting of souls. Towards the end of their honeymoon-on-clouds, Adrian begins a sermon to Denise about the unavoidable trials of a large family, but she interrupts him:

'Darling, you don't seem to realise. Ever since I can remember, my mother got St Gerard's Monthly. It taught me what to expect from marriage and to accept whatever family God might send. And you might think this was silly of me, but after I fell in love with you, one of my favourite daydreams was opening up the centre pages of the Monthly and seeing a picture of the Sherd family from wherever we came from.' (100)

Meanwhile, back in earth-bound Swindon, Adrian continues to empty Denise's name of signification, splitting off its materiality and worshipping that instead of Denise herself. He makes anagrams out of the letters of her name, 'hoping to find a secret message about his and Denise's future happiness' (87). Because her name has fourteen letters another arbitrary transformation on its materiality -- he makes fourteen his special number, and uses it to select the town in Tasmania where he and Denise will spend their honeymoon. He does not reflect that, only the previous year, he performed a similar celebration of the signifier, but obscenely: while masturbating in the changing sheds at Mordialloc beach, he fixed his eyes on the name that another boy had written on the wall, MISS KATHLEEN MAHONEY, and 'leaned his head against the soothing shapes of the letters of her name' (66).

During his honeymoon in Tasmania with Denise, Adrian spends ten minutes each morning in the Swindon parish church, in Melbourne, studying Australian Catholic Truth Society pamphlets for illumination on 'how often he should have carnal relations with his wife to be sure of fertilising her as soon as possible after the wedding' (100). His speeches to her in bed are summaries and redactions of what he reads in the pamphlets, 'one topic each night':

'Tonight I'll discuss a subject that probably made you shudder if ever you heard it mentioned when you were young and innocent -- birth control. What I'm about to say is a summary of all I've read about birth control in Catholic pamphlets, and all I've been taught by priests and brothers.

'Any impartial observer would agree that the marriage act -- that operation I've performed on you in the privacy of the marriage bed -- must have a serious purpose quite apart from the fleeting pleasure associated with it. The purpose, as any rational person will agree, is the procreation of children. Now this purpose is part of what philosophers and theologians call the Natural Law. And the Natural Law was designed by Almighty God to make the world run smoothly.' (106-7)

These control-fixated bedtime discourses to Denise are hilarious in what they reveal about Adrian's total adolescent misunderstanding of what adult sexual relationships are like; disturbing in what they reveal about the ideas of gender-roles that apply in religious systems; and fascinating in what they reveal about attitudes towards writing. Adrian is struggling against the very aspect of writing that both Tamarisk Row and A Lifetime on Clouds keep highlighting: différance, or the
tendency of the signifier to cut away from its mooring in the signified. By dictating pamphlet-piffle about Natural Law to Denise instead of speaking to her, and by believing that life can be built on words that have a stable, absolute meaning, Adrian behaves like what we would normally call a fascist, and reveals the etymological connection between 'dictation' and 'dictator'. Lurking behind his attitudes, and countersigning his insane discourses to his imaginary wife, is an Australian version of the Catholic God, who emerges in A Lifetime on Clouds, as in Tamarisk Row, as one more dictator in an endless ironic sequence of dictators: Sherd said, "The whole story of how we first met in Our Lady of Good Counsel's Church and got to know each other on the Corokee train and then learned to love each other over the years is a wonderful example of how God arranges the destines of those who serve Him" (88). This version of God wants to 'make the world run smoothly' in much the way that Adrian wants to make marriage run smoothly: by anchoring it in a 'Natural' law that stablises the signifying system while lying entirely outside its play.

The problem for Adrian is that wherever he looks for the Natural Law he finds only further levels of inscription. One would think that the mind of Adrian's utterly devout maiden aunt might be a suitable receptacle in which to discover eternal truths, but that mind turns out to be figurable only as another text, as one more set of signifiers, as an illuminated manuscript requiring further acts of interpretation:

Whenever his aunt was talking, Adrian thought of her mind as a huge volume, like the book that the priest used at mass, with ornate red binding and pages edged with thick gilt. Silk ribbons hung out of the pages to mark the important places.

"Why aren't Catholics allowed to be cremated?" he asked her. She took hold of the dangling violet (or scarlet or green) ribbon and parted the gilt edging at the section containing the answer. (38)

There is more than a hint of the mechanical in this picture of the way that pious Aunt Kath's mind works -- a hint that it has been mechanically printed in much the same way as her favourite magazines: The Messenger of Our Lady, The Annals of the Sacred Heart, The Monstrance, and The Far East. This is no slight on Aunt Kath: during an unpublished lecture at La Trobe University, Murnane spoke of his own mind in these terms, referring to his 'book of unknown signs the book that is being written on me but not by me.'

In A Lifetime on Clouds, the mechanical is constantly threatening the claims of the spiritual, just as the random or arbitrary is constantly compromising the predestined: Adrian's algebraic formula, early on, for confessing mortal sins; his vision of the General Judgement as taking place in front of 'a huge indicator like the scoreboard at the MCG' with 'an instrument like a speedo' beside each of the Ten Commandments; his method of rolling dice and throwing wet tennis balls against a wall in order to decide the nights on which his intercourse with Denise will impregnate her (19,40,102). This last is a parody of what used to be called 'Vatican Roulette'; it is also a version both of Clement Killeaton's Gold Cup, and of Adrian Sherd's system, during his year of lust, for determining the specific site for his nightly depravities (winding up a toy train, and letting it run down on a track shaped like a map of America). It reminds us, too, that like the keeping of roosters or racehorses (in Tamarisk Row) or mice (in Velvet Waters), the raising of families is an exercise in breeding and blood lines: whatever spiritual values we choose to impose on it, procreation remains at a certain level the mechanical imprinting of a DNA molecule, like the mark left on a brick by a wet ball.

The sudden hint of the mind as an illuminated book in Adrian's view of his aunt will develop into the extraordinary vision in Velvet Waters of the memory as a monastery full of cells in which monks are copying and illuminating manuscripts. Murnane's fiction, it is true, seeks avenues beyond such inscriptive visions of the mind, but its adventure is in the strength of that seeking, not in any finding. There are numerous monasteries in Tamarisk Row, and there is a kind of a monastery in A Lifetime on Clouds as well. Adrian's uncle, the kind and aptly named Mr McAloon, takes him to visit Mary's Mount, a Catholic commune in the Otway Ranges -- a place that Mr McAloon regards as free of 'trashy books and films' and as possibly the final bulwark against the 'spread of Communism'. Indeed, Mr McAloon regards the Mary's Mount commune-ists as exiles from an increasingly communistic secular society. And Mr McAloon points out that the single men's quarters at Mary's Mount are 'laid out like the dormitory of a Cistercian monastery'.

And yet it seems as if Mary's Mount has already been 'invaded' in all sorts of ways, has already been caught up in a play of crossings and transgressions; indeed, everything in Murnane's prose is designed to ironise the claims of its occupants to a hermetic purity. First, the commune has been invaded by rumour, rumour that figures it as a kind of bordello, the very
opposite of what it wants to be. This, Adrian’s uncle explains, is why the Bishop denied the Mounters their own priest:

‘It’s a long story and some of it’s not for young ears. (Mr McAloon glanced at his sons.) You’ll see for yourself when we get to the Mount the single men and women have their own dormitories at least a hundred yards apart with all the married couples in between. But some people even Catholics, I’m sorry to say -- some people love to spread scandal and gossip whenever they see young men and women living up to ideals too high for themselves to match.’ (115)

As well as sex, or the hint of it, the commune has been invaded by that other leading representative of the world at large: money. Mr McAloon reveals that the commune-ists will always need ready cash to pay for ‘little extras’, like ‘trucks and generators and machinery and rainwater tanks and cement’ (116).

There then follows an exchange with Adrian that reveals a third invader -- truly the model for the action of the preceding two:

Adrian said, ‘And books?’

‘Yes, books too. But just quietly I think some of those university chaps ought to spend a bit more time dirtying their white hands with work and a bit less time with their books.’ (116-17)

Writing has fulfilled its disseminatory destiny once again, unperturbed by any hermetic pretensions at Mary’s Mount. Little wonder that sex and money, its two apprentices, have managed to sneak in under its cloak. It is dissemination -- that steadfast refusal of the written sign to have its ambit circumscribed or predicted by any authority -- that makes Adrian most anxious, and that his fantasies attempt most resolutely to counteract. It is precisely the power of dissemination that Adrian feels that he has to deal with when he delivers a speech to Denise about reproduction, preparatory to deflowering her, and worries that through toilet-wall graffiti, or non-Catholic literature, or a biology textbook she might not get ‘the whole story’ directly from her husband (93-94).

Given that A Lifetime on Clouds becomes so canny about written dissemination and its dangers, it can be no accident that the novel’s entire first half is concerned with the sexual equivalent of dissemination: that is, with masturbation. And this is quite independent of any reading of Jacques Derrida, who published two years before A Lifetime on Clouds a book whose title would have been quite appropriate to the story of Adrian Sherd: Dissemination. But Derrida first makes the point about writing and masturbation in a famous reading of Rousseau’s Confessions in 1967. In Of Grammatology, Derrida notices that Rousseau refers to masturbation as ‘that dangerous supplement’, as well as referring to writing as a mere supplement to speech: each of these supplements threatens to usurp the power and plenitude of the whole to which it attaches itself. Murnane, too, has clearly seen a connection between the broadcasting of these two kinds of seed. In the first part of A Lifetime on Clouds, Adrian imagines Cain as the first masturbator in history, revolting both God and his angels with his ‘unnatural trick’, which is portrayed in a highly disseminatory image: ‘Lucifer’s sin of pride seemed clean and brave compared with the sight of the shuddering boy squirting his precious stuff into the limpid Tigris’ (33). Writing and wanking both disrupt the controlled insemination of Natural Law into people’s minds and bodies.

As soon as Adrian’s imaginary relationship with Denise begins, a paranoia about dissemination, about a vagrant circulation of knowledge, sets in. He sees two boys on Swindon station and suspects that ‘they were spies sent by Cornthwaite and the others to find out who the girl was who had turned Sherd away from film stars’ (84). Fearing that she might be attacked by bodgies on her way to buy her father the Saturday night newspaper, Adrian considers sending Denise’s parents yet another piece of dispensable nonsense a Catholic Truth Society pamphlet called So Your Daughter is a Lady Now? Adrian tries to fight dissemination, but he has nothing to fight it with except writing, which is only another word for dissemination anyway.

When we leave Adrian Sherd, he has yet to work his way out from under these bewilderments; he is still committed to the suppression and control of those aspects of the signifier, especially those disseminatory aspects, that writing seems determined to unloose. But if Gerald Murnane, coming from the same subculture as Adrian, was ever in the grip of the same fears, then he must have moved beyond them, towards an acceptance of writing, and of the consequences of its proliferation: first, because he has unloosed on the world a book as honest as A Lifetime on Clouds; and second, because in his work since then he has increasingly made themes of precisely these aspects of writing. At some point, Murnane must have made a choice similar to the one that Adrian toys with at the start of A Lifetime on
Clouds, and traded his right to heaven for safe conduct to limbo.
WORKS CITED


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By Imre Salusinszky
A Season on Earth is Murnane’s second novel as it was intended to be, bringing together all of its four sections—the first two of which were published as A Lifetime on Clouds in 1976 and the last two of which have never been in print. A hilarious tale of a lustful teenager in 1950s Melbourne, A Lifetime on Clouds has been considered an outlier in Murnane’s fiction. That is because, as Murnane writes in his foreword, it is "only half a book and Adrian Sherd only half a character." Here, at last, is sixteen-year-old Adrian’s journey in full, from fantasies about orgies with American film stars a