

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Deadline's May 30! Cultural Weekly Writing Contest

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, May 16th, 2012



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d sharpen your pencils. Welcome to *Cultural Weekly's* first-ever writing contest.

Below, you'll find Neil LaBute's new, 1,000-word short story, "Across the Universe." Your assignment? Write a new story with one or more of the characters and/or story elements from Neil's story, no more than 1,000 words.

Entries will be judged by Neil LaBute (writer and director for theatre/film), Susan Orlean (*New Yorker* writer and author of the current bestseller *Rin Tin Tin*) and Adam Leipzig (*Cultural Weekly's* publisher & managing editor).

The prize? A used copy of *The Scarlet Letter* (you'll understand after you read the story), acquired from Strand Books, personally inscribed to you by Neil, Susan and Adam in honor of your victory!



*Writing contest judges: Neil LaBute, Susan Orlean, Adam Leipzig*

### **Contest Rules**

1. Your story must include one or more of the story elements and/or characters found in Neil LaBute's story "Across the Universe." You may only enter one story.
2. Your story must not exceed 1,000 words, including the title.
3. Email submissions only. Send to [contest@culturalweekly.com](mailto:contest@culturalweekly.com). Entries must be received by 11:59 pm Pacific Time, May 30, 2012.
4. You must submit your story as a Word document. You must include your name, phone number and email address on the *first page of the story only* (your name, phone number and email address do not count in the 1,000 word limit). We will remove your name before the judges read your submission, so it may be considered anonymously.
5. You grant *Cultural Weekly* the irrevocable right to publish your story (whether it is the winner or not) and to archive it indefinitely. You keep the copyright – we're not Google or Facebook.
6. When will the winner be announced? We don't know – it depends on how many submissions we get!

Good luck!

## **ACROSS THE UNIVERSE**

**By Neil LaBute**

It is a sobering thing to willingly ruin a life. Even at seventeen, Beth knew this to be the truth. She knew it, yet she also knew that this simple but powerful fact would in no way stop her from doing it. She looked down again at the massive "D" scrawled in red ink at the top of her paper and then flipped through the pages. Words like "NO" and "AWKWARD" shot out at her like arrows fired from battlements high overhead. In her heart she was aware that she hadn't spent enough time doing the assignment and had relied too heavily on Wikipedia for her own good, but she could never have imagined that this would be the outcome. A big, fat "D" for her efforts. She lifted her head up and looked around the lunchroom; a few classmates were glancing over at her but turned away when she caught their eyes. Suddenly she felt like that girl in the Hawthorne novel that they had trudged through earlier in the year who had to wear a scarlet letter sewn onto her dress. The shame was that intense and no less humiliating, at least when you're a junior in high school and your teacher reads a few excerpts from your paper as an example of what not to do when fulfilling his course requirements. No, when that happens to you it seems as if vengeance is the only option and so vengeance, Beth decided right then and there,

would be hers.

He was a married man, her teacher, with three kids and a wife who appeared to be a bit older than he was. Beth approached him a day or so later in the hallway, stopping him on his way to the 'Staff Lounge' with a smile and a flip of her long hair. She asked him for a moment of his time and even after seven years of teaching, he was still happy to give of himself and promised Beth a meeting on Thursday. Just a quick conference that would clarify some of the mistakes she'd made in her paper and a chance to do some extra credit work to bring her point total back in line with the other B- students in his class. He smiled at her while glancing at his watch; he scribbled the day and time of their appointment on the back of an envelope he was carrying and then turned and moved off down the hall. Beth watched him go and realized that he was a fairly attractive man and still young and that, in spite of her recent laziness in class, she had learned a great deal about American Literature from him over the course of the year. That same thought flashed through her mind at the mall when she went into VICTORIA'S SECRET and snapped up three pairs of panties that were on sale.

That night, after dinner and Tivo and homework, Beth even looked up her teacher's picture in her Freshman yearbook and stared at him for several minutes, his face captured there in black and white and frozen forever on the 'Staff' page for anyone to gawk at. It was a candid photo of him at his desk that had been used that year and she traced an index finger over the image several times. After a moment she got up and closed the door to her bedroom and went back to the annual. Beth could feel a warmth and wetness spreading along her new thong and she reached slowly inside it to satisfy herself with a strange mix of infatuation and terror creeping through her young, powerful limbs. The climax was intense and surprising and even scared her a little as she fell asleep with the lights on in her room, uncertain what any of this actually meant to her and her own tiny place within the vastness of the cosmos.

Standing in the hallway just before noon with a ribbon holding back her thick mane of hair, Beth gathered herself as she waited for all of the students from the eleven-o'clock hour to leave the classroom before she entered it. Of course she wanted to be spotted there. Of course she called out to her friends and laughed loudly to catch the ears of passing faculty members as she was about to meet for her appointment. This had to be done. This was the beginning of the end, at least for her teacher. She knew that the blanket of lies that she was about to unfurl had to be thick and plush and heavily scented with deception. There would be many meetings with the principal and counselors and school board trustees before this was through, endless calls to her parents and moments of weakness where she would feel as if she could no longer go on, but on she must go and see this through to the end. To repeat what he'd whispered to her in that room, the offer he made to change her grade and the way he had touched her knee again and again (Beth had repeated this false report to herself on the bus so many times that it now felt like the absolute truth) and she would never waver or sound less humiliated than the time previous, she promised herself as she stepped inside and closed the door firmly behind her.

He looked up at Beth—this condemned man—somewhat surprised and no doubt having forgotten about the meeting, and in no way aware that his small and simple life was about to change forever. All because of a grade and a few careless comments he'd made at the expense of this student. All because he'd written a "D" at the top of that paper instead of a "C." All because Eve had sprung forth from Adam's rib when perhaps, after the miracle of creation, it would've been better for God to just walk away and leave well enough alone.

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