

of men, women, animals and the city itself capture a now-vanished world in light and shadow, Thek's sculptures evoke the physical materiality of death. Both artists would die of HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, and their work would nearly be lost to art history.

The 2025 film *Peter Hujar's Day* brings Hujar to the screen, and his extraordinary portrait photography has been exhibited widely. Thek's paintings and sculptures are less known, although his work was infamous in the 1960s. His 1967 sculpture *The Tomb*, a life-size wax effigy of his own body, was better known in Thek's day as *The Death of a Hippie* and viewed as acerbic social commentary. Durbin locates the source of both artists' fascination with death in their 1963 visit to the Capuchin Catacombs in Palermo, Sicily, where corpses were left to decompose in the air.

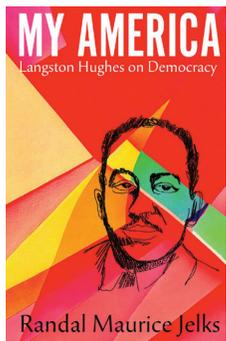
The relationship between the two men stretches from the 1950s to the mid-1970s, when Thek's increasingly erratic moods ruptured many of his closest relationships. But before that, Durbin's biography lingers on the early days of pre-Stonewall gay life, from Miami's boisterous club scene to downtown Manhattan's art galleries. Peter and Paul go from being friends to lovers and back again, their relationship part of a close set of friendships that included women like Susan Sontag, artist Ann Wilson and writer Linda Rosenkrantz, the last of whose recorded conversations with Hujar informed *Peter Hujar's Day*. This is thus not only a dual biography of Hujar and Thek, but a validation of the women whose love and intelligence inspired their work.

Both Rosenkrantz and Wilson assisted Durbin with his research, a reminder that Hujar's and Thek's lives ended far too early. **The Wonderful World That Almost Was** is a requiem for their lives, their work and their world, and a testament to how much was lost in the HIV/AIDS epidemic.

—Catherine Hollis

My America

By Randal Maurice Jelks



BIOGRAPHY

Celebrated author Langston Hughes is perhaps best known as a poet of the Harlem Renaissance, but he also wrote essays, novels, short stories, plays, children's books, librettos, newspaper columns and more. Hughes believed in the

power of art as resistance, and his vision of a true democracy for all people, especially America's Black population, comes through in all of the many genres he mastered. Some of his extraordinary essays, poems and speeches on the subject appear in **My America: Langston Hughes on Democracy** (Broadleaf, \$29.99, 9798889832126). Each thoughtful, passionate work is accompanied by a rousing contemporary analysis by documentary film producer and Indiana University professor Randal Maurice Jelks.

In commenting on Hughes' 1935 speech delivered at the First American Writers Congress, "We Want an America That Will Be Ours," Jelks points out that Hughes' congenial personality was frequently mistaken for optimism. In fact, Hughes was a realist who expressed his anger in his work. He aligned racial equality with class equality, believing that "democratic freedoms could not be without economic rights—sustainable employment, livable housing, and public education that reflected the needs of all." Jelks does not shy away from Hughes' sometimes-controversial support of communist causes: "Young converts are often overenthused for their newfound faith, and Langston's youthful piety got the best of him" when he wrote about the Soviet Union "with rose-tinted glasses." But, Jelks acknowledges, allies of any kind were hard to find. Jelks also explores Hughes' complex feelings about organized religion.

By situating Hughes' work in historical context, Jelks provides insight into the author's philosophy and his feeling of moral obligation. "He was justifiably angry at the life-and-death economic contradictions within US capitalism, which were undergirded by the uses of racism," asserts Jelks. "The forces of social contradictions and the narratives they used must be studied too in order to make a full assessment of Langston's writing." For example, to understand Hughes as a prison abolitionist, one must know that he visited the Alabama prison housing the Scottsboro Boys, nine teenagers falsely accused and convicted of rape, and read his poetry to them. Then he wrote, marketed and sold his poetry for their defense fund.

This thought-provoking and readable collection reminds us of the fragility of democracy and of the role that artists and writers can play in envisioning a just world. By resisting a sanitized version of Hughes, **My America** presents him as a radical thinker who, at the risk of criticism and scorn, demanded better of our country.

—Roger Bishop

Once Upon a Stranger

By Gillian Sandstrom



SELF-HELP

In her witty, wise debut, **Once Upon a Stranger: The Science of How "Small" Talk Can Add Up to a Big Life** (HarperOne, \$29.99, 9780063385412), Gillian Sandstrom shares that she used

to be embarrassed by her father's affinity for chatting with strangers. Then she realized that, rather than being annoyed, people's moods were boosted by meeting him. She also realized his top-notch social skills can be learned through practice, an open mind and a bit of derring-do.

Now, she's ready to help others embrace opening up. "For me, talking to strangers has been transformative," she writes, and "the accumulation of small, ordinary moments . . . add up to me seeing the world differently: with a pervasive sense of trust, safety, and connection."

Sandstrom, the director of the University of Sussex's Centre for Research on Kindness, does an excellent job anticipating and circumventing potential roadblocks. What if a conversation is boring? Well, not every movie is amazing, but we keep watching them, right? "Similarly, there's no need to be disheartened by average or even boring conversations with strangers," since the next one will probably be more fun. And if a chat seems never-ending? Drawing someone else into the discussion or inventing a getaway excuse should do the trick. Overall, she writes with empathy and humor, "You worry far too much. My research studies consistently find that conversations with strangers go better than you expect, and people like you more than you think."

Once Upon a Stranger also explores ways to combat negative self-talk and extols "micro-relationships" that help us "feel safe and at home in the world," and Sandstrom provides an appendix filled with nitty-gritty tips for conjuring up conversations (e.g., praising a dog and then asking its owner about it "is the single easiest way to start a conversation"). Sandstrom understands that making small talk can be daunting, but believes that it's so beneficial, so life-affirming, that it's worth giving it a try. She reminds readers, "you are capable of talking to strangers. . . . After all, besides blood relations, everyone you currently know was once a stranger, and you obviously managed to talk to them just fine."

—Linda M. Castelletto