



“The appalling mystery and unpredictability of this life is what *The Empty Chair* is about,” says author Bruce Wagner, poring over fellow writer/editor Nigel Simeone’s new Bernstein tome.

VIEW FROM THE TOP

Majeure Force

IN HIS JUST-RELEASED BOOK *THE EMPTY CHAIR*, CRITICS' DARLING-DEVIL/WRITER-SCREENWRITER/HOLLYWOOD HATER-LOVER BRUCE WAGNER GETS ALL... SPIRITUAL.

BY SAM WASSON PHOTOGRAPHY BY RAMONA ROSALES

Somewhere on Highway 5, halfway between Los Angeles and San Francisco, the novelist Bruce Wagner had an afterthought. "It sounds grandiose," he told my voice mail. "But if I could give a title to all of my work, it would be from [Italian architect] Piranesi: 'Imaginary Prisons.'" Then came an afterthought to the afterthought, via e-mail: "It's literally tattooed across my shoulders... in Italian." In other words, from *Force Majeure*, his 1991 breakthrough novel, to *The Empty Chair: Two Novellas*, his latest, most nakedly spiritual book, Wagner has consistently (and operatically and farcically) pulled his characters out from under the weight of their own dreams, their own illusory escape hatches, and sent them floating up to enlightenment.

BELOW: Among Bruce Wagner's sea of books: a shaving brush that belonged to Don Juan Matus, the teacher of Wagner's late friend the author Carlos Castaneda.

Enlightenment? In Hollywood? Well, yes, actually; it turns out we're people too. Read, for instance, Wagner's PEN/Faulkner finalist, *The Chrysanthemum Palace*. Read *I'll Let You Go*. There you'll find some of the most tender, most restless characters ever to

wander our fictional pool houses and bungalows. They have grace, these Angelenos—even the hacks and the vulgarians.

In *The Empty Chair*, Wagner, speaking as himself, tells us he's travelled the world, listening to stories of love and grief for the better part of 15 years. His plan was to draw them into some kind of grand American panorama, a Studs Terkel of heartbreak, but decided instead on including only two, told years apart by different people on opposite ends of the country, stories miraculous in many ways, but one way above the others: To Wagner's disbelief, both featured the same chair. In this detail, it seemed, the whole cosmic stunt was waiting to be caught. That's how *The Empty Chair* begins. "The appalling mystery and unpredictability of this life is really what this book is about," he says.

Set all over the world, the novel (or dual novellas) is a local-exotic hybrid of Big Sur, New York, and [Bombay,] India, but its heart first pumped for Wagner here, at home, in Los Angeles. Well, not *his* home; other people's homes. Like his friend Wally Shawn, who has been known to perform his plays in friends' dining rooms, Wagner gave long stretches of what would become *The Empty Chair* to friends as holiday gifts, telling a part of the story aloud, again and again, across the dining rooms of Los Angeles. ("It was a gift they couldn't return if they didn't like it.") All the while, Wagner kept at it, refining the story into what would one day resurface, years later, as a strand in his unpublished, unfinished (3,000-page) novel, *The Jungle Book*. It almost killed him. "I thought [*The Jungle Book*] would be the book of my life," Wagner says, "and it turned out to be the book of my death." He ended up in rehab, but emerged with the raw materials for (so far) two novels: *Dead Stars*, a grotesque, hilarious *Bonfire of the Vanities*-like conflagration of this media culture's hypocrisy addiction—marked by the sort of vicious Hollywood bacchanal Wagner is famous for—and *The Empty Chair*, its spiritual antidote. "I didn't want to be the king of the hill of Dante-esque Hollywood horror," Wagner says. "That's a neat trick to pull off, but it gets old for me as an artist. It does and did."

And yet, no matter how far *The Empty Chair* strays from Hollywood, and it does stray, it is never far from Los Angeles, not really. South of Big Sur

continued on page 84



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continued from page 83

and north of Dante, LA is omnipresent for Wagner, an ideal vessel for the spiritual-transformation stories that charge through his fiction. "In essence, all of my work springs from Los Angeles, from Hollywood," Wagner says, "Hollywood being the heart of this body, this porpoise, called Los Angeles. *The Empty Chair* is an artery in that body. I'm always writing about Los Angeles, always writing about Hollywood, because those two places are the laboratory in which I found the vapor, the

materials, to transmute my emotions and whatever rages or mysteries or difficulties I was working out. Los Angeles is just a name for another mysterious geography."

Los Angeles for Wagner began in Wisconsin. His father worked in the radio business; they shuttled him all over the country to boost up slipping stations, and the rest of the family moved with him, first to Atlanta, then to Hillsboro outside Palo Alto, and finally to Beverly Hills, to Rodeo Drive just south of Wilshire. His mother got a job at Saks a few blocks from home and his father, taken under by the native vapor, got into producing *The Les Crane Show*. "It was just that world," Wagner says. "A company town." Wagner grew up with kids who lived across the street from Olivia de Havilland ("She once lost a diamond ring and offered \$20 to the kid who could find it."), danced at the Paul Henreid Cotillion with Karl

Malden's daughter, had his bar mitzvah at the Friars Club. So, yes: That native vapor—it was in Wagner, too. He was 8.

But there were other 8-year-olds on Wilshire—just as (as Wagner points out) it took more than a murdered mother to make James Ellroy a crime novelist—a reminder that the Hollywood yen is not communicable by osmosis alone; it needs something to precede it, a chi in waiting. "The great themes for me are fame, money, death, and sex," Wagner says. "I would say that Hollywood potentiated my interest in fame and all its corollaries, which are sex, death, and money." Hollywood was just the metaphor walking around outside Wagner's front door, the name he gave his chi.

Which is to say, he was home. Or rather: He was a screenwriter. For about five years. Five years of that Barton Fink feeling, that not-so-imaginary prison of, as Wagner says, "bad faith and hackdom." And another writer

joined the folklore. He got a movie made, but it never got released. Money came in, but nothing came out. "It was killing me," Wagner says. "I had to do something with the anguish. I needed to almost inoculate myself against becoming someone who had failed in order to avoid the catastrophe of permanent melancholy and to avoid a shutdown of evolution." He was 30.

He discovered Weegee's photographs. "He did this weird, radical thing," Wagner says. "He put the camera on the fans for premieres and stopped taking pictures of the celebrities they were there to see. Here was the psychotic underbelly of failure, of the people on the fringes of the business." The broken F. Scott Fitzgerald called his fringe failure Pat Hobby; Budd Schulberg (writing about Fitzgerald) called his Halliday; Steve Tesich called his Karoo. None are alike save for one thing: they're not doing their best work. Wagner called his Bud Wiggins. The book, *Force Majeure*, was a major minor sensation—its first printing of a thousand copies was sold exclusively out of Book Soup—a classic of the genre, and a personal catharsis for Wagner. "That was when I was able to suddenly explore my heart having been tutored by Los Angeles. It was only then that I was capable of moving forward."

He's moved forward through eight novels, far more imaginary prisons, and one more screenplay, *Maps to the Stars*, directed by David Cronenberg and starring Julianne Moore. A few weeks ago, Wagner, almost 60, watched Moore get her star on the Walk of Fame. "It's funny," he says from Highway 5. "The ceremony had a different feel for me, I think, than for people who are not from here. There was a real poignancy for me because I realized how much a part of the fabric it is for me. It's easy to be cynical about that sort of thing, but for me, who was an 11-year-old boy immersed in that world, there was something so intimate, so familiar about it." **LAC**



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—BRUCE WAGNER

LEFT: A painting on tin, a gift from artist Aradhana Seth, novelist Vikram Seth's sister. BELOW: An original Beverly Hills movie star map, a crew gift from director David Cronenberg on wrapping the film *Maps to the Stars*.

