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| TomDispatch  **Tomgram: Eduardo Galeano, A Lost and Found History of Lives and Dreams (Some Broken)**  **By Eduardo Galeano Posted on August 17, 2014, Printed on August 17, 2014 http://www.tomdispatch.com/blog/175882/**  Who isn’t a fan of something -- or someone? So consider this my fan’s note. To my mind, Uruguayan writer Eduardo Galeano is among the greats of our time. His writing has “it” -- that indefinable quality you can’t describe but know as soon as you read it. He’s created a style that combines the best of journalism, history, and fiction and a form for his books that, as far as I know, has no name but involves short bursts of almost lyrical reportage, often about events long past. As it turns out, he also carries “it” with him. I was his English-language book editor years ago and can testify to that, even though on meeting him you might not initially think so. He has nothing of the showboat about him. In person, he’s almost self-effacing and yet somehow he brings out in others the urge to tell stories as they’ve never told them before.  Call it charisma if you want (though I still remember a professor of mine pointing out, in reference to Chinese leader Mao Zedong, that what’s charisma to one is zilch to another). Explain it as you will, from *Memory of Fire*, his three-volume history of the Americas, to his recent [*Children of the Days*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1568584784/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20), a kind of prayer book for our time, he’s never stopped telling us our own stories in ways we haven’t heard them before.  At some point in Galeano’s life as a collector of stories, history decided to trust him and spilled its secrets to him. In 2009, he returned the favor by writing one of the great books of this century, [*Mirrors*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1568586124/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20), a history of humanity in 366 episodes, from our first myths to late last night. Thanks to his publisher, Nation Books, and his devoted literary agent, Susan Bergholz, I’ve chosen 12 of my own favorites from that work for your summer pleasure. Think of this post as a Galeano-esque mini-history of our last century of turmoil through a kaleidoscope of “characters,” human and inanimate -- and then get your hands on *Mirrors* and read the whole thing for yourself. *Tom*  **Century of Disaster**  **Riddles, Lies, and Lives -- from Fidel Castro and Muhammad Ali to Albert Einstein and Barbie**  By [Eduardo Galeano](http://www.tomdispatch.com/authors/eduardogaleano)  [*The following passages are excerpted from Eduardo Galeano’s history of humanity,* [Mirrors](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1568586124/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20) *(Nation Books).*]  **Stalin**  He learned to write in the language of Georgia, his homeland, but in the seminary the monks made him speak Russian.  Years later in Moscow, his south Caucasus accent still gave him away.  So he decided to become more Russian than the Russians. Was not Napoleon, who hailed from Corsica, more French than the French? And was not Catherine the Great, who was German, more Russian than the Russians?  The Georgian, Iosif Dzhugashvili, chose a Russian name. He called himself Stalin, which means “steel.”  The man of steel expected his son to be made of steel too: from childhood, Stalin’s son Yakov was tempered in fire and ice and shaped by hammer blows.  It did not work. He was his mother’s child. At the age of 19, Yakov wanted no more of it, could bear no more.  He pulled the trigger.  The gunshot did not kill him.  He awoke in the hospital. At the foot of the bed, his father commented:  “You can’t even get that right.”  **The Ages of Josephine**  At nine years old, she works cleaning houses in St. Louis on the banks of the Mississippi.  At 10, she starts dancing for coins in the street. At 13, she marries.  At 15, once again. Of the first husband she retains not even a bad memory. Of the second, his last name, because she likes how it sounds.  At 17, Josephine Baker dances the Charleston on Broadway. At 18, she crosses the Atlantic and conquers Paris. The “Bronze Venus” performs in the nude, with no more clothing than a belt of bananas.  At 21, her outlandish combination of clown and femme fatale makes her the most popular and highest-paid performer in Europe.  At 24, she is the most photographed woman on the planet. Pablo Picasso, on his knees, paints her. To look like her, the pallid young damsels of Paris rub themselves with walnut cream, which darkens the skin.  At 30, she has problems in some hotels because she travels with a chimpanzee, a snake, a goat, two parrots, several fish, three cats, seven dogs, a cheetah named Chiquita who wears a diamond-studded collar, and a little pig named Albert, whom she bathes in Je Reviens perfume by Worth.  At 40, she receives the Legion of Honor for service to the French Resistance during the Nazi occupation.  At 41 and on her fourth husband, she adopts 12 children of many colors and many origins, whom she calls “my rainbow tribe.”  At 45, she returns to the United States. She insists that everyone, whites and blacks, sit together at her shows. If not, she will not perform. At 57, she shares the stage with Martin Luther King and speaks against racial discrimination before an immense crowd at the March on Washington.  At 68, she recovers from a calamitous bankruptcy and at the Bobino Theater in Paris she celebrates a half-century on the stage.  And she departs.  **Photograph: Saddest Eye in the World**  Princeton, New Jersey, May 1947.  Photographer Philippe Halsman asks him: “Do you think there will be peace?”  And while the shutter clicks, Albert Einstein says, or rather mutters: “No.”  People believe that Einstein got the Nobel Prize for his theory of relativity, that he was the originator of the saying “Everything is relative,” and that he was the inventor of the atom bomb.  The truth is they did not give him a Nobel for his theory of relativity and he never uttered those words. Neither did he invent the bomb, although Hiroshima and Nagasaki would not have been possible if he had not discovered what he did.  He knew all too well that his findings, born of a celebration of life, had been used to annihilate it.  **Father of the Computer**  Alan Turing was sneered at for not being a tough guy, a he-man with hair on his chest.  He whined, croaked, stuttered. He used an old necktie for a belt. He rarely slept and went without shaving for days. And he raced from one end of the city to the other all the while concocting complicated mathematical formulas in his mind.  Working for British intelligence, he helped shorten the Second World War by inventing a machine that cracked the impenetrable military codes used by Germany’s high command.  [[http://www.tomdispatch.com/images/managed/egmirrorspbk.jpg](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1568586124/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20)](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1568586124/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20)At that point he had already dreamed up a prototype for an electronic computer and had laid out the theoretical foundations of today’s information systems. Later on, he led the team that built the first computer to operate with integrated programs. He played interminable chess games with it and asked it questions that drove it nuts. He insisted that it write him love letters. The machine responded by emitting messages that were rather incoherent.  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Mao was China and China was his shrine. Mao exhorted all to follow the example set by Lei Feng and Lei Feng exhorted all to follow the example set by Mao. Lei Feng, a young Communist apostle of dubious existence, spent his days consoling the sick, helping widows, and giving his food away to orphans. His nights he spent reading the complete works of Mao. When he slept, he dreamed of Mao, his guide for every step. Lei Feng had no girlfriend or boyfriend because he did not waste time on frivolities, and it never occurred to him that life could be contradictory or reality diverse.  **Fidel**  His enemies say he was an uncrowned king who confused unity with unanimity.  And in that his enemies are right.  His enemies say that if Napoleon had a newspaper like *Granma*, no Frenchman would have learned of the disaster at Waterloo.  And in that his enemies are right.  His enemies say that he exercised power by talking a lot and listening little, because he was more used to hearing echoes than voices.  And in that his enemies are right.  But some things his enemies do not say: it was not to pose for the history books that he bared his breast to the invaders’ bullets,  he faced hurricanes as an equal, hurricane to hurricane,  he survived 637 attempts on his life,  his contagious energy was decisive in making a country out of a colony,  and it was not by Lucifer’s curse or God’s miracle that the new country managed to outlive 10 U.S. presidents, their napkins spread in their laps, ready to eat it with knife and fork.  And his enemies never mention that Cuba is one rare country that does not compete for the World Doormat Cup.  And they do not say that the revolution, punished for the crime of dignity, is what it managed to be and not what it wished to become. Nor do they say that the wall separating desire from reality grew ever higher and wider thanks to the imperial blockade, which suffocated a Cuban-style democracy, militarized society, and gave the bureaucracy, always ready with a problem for every solution, the alibis it needed to justify and perpetuate itself.  And they do not say that in spite of all the sorrow, in spite of the external aggression and the internal high-handedness, this distressed and obstinate island has spawned the least unjust society in Latin America.  And his enemies do not say that this feat was the outcome of the sacrifice of its people, and also of the stubborn will and old-fashioned sense of honor of the knight who always fought on the side of the losers, like his famous colleague in the fields of Castile.  **Ali**  He was butterfly and bee. In the ring, he floated and stung.  In 1967, Muhammad Ali, born Cassius Clay, refused to put on a uniform.  “Got nothing against no Viet Cong,” he said. “Ain’t no Vietnamese ever called me nigger.”  They called him a traitor. They sentenced him to a five-year jail term, and barred him from boxing. They stripped him of his title as champion of the world.  The punishment became his trophy. By taking away his crown, they anointed him king.  Years later, a few college students asked him to recite something. And for them he improvised the shortest poem in world literature:  “Me, we.”  **Walls**  The Berlin Wall made the news every day. From morning till night we read, saw, heard: the Wall of Shame, the Wall of Infamy, the Iron Curtain...  In the end, a wall which deserved to fall fell. But other walls sprouted and continue sprouting across the world. Though they are much larger than the one in Berlin, we rarely hear of them.  Little is said about the wall the United States is building along the Mexican border, and less is said about the barbed-wire barriers surrounding the Spanish enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla on the African coast.  Practically nothing is said about the West Bank Wall, which perpetuates the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and will be 15 times longer than the Berlin Wall. And nothing, nothing at all, is said about the Morocco Wall, which perpetuates the seizure of the Saharan homeland by the kingdom of Morocco, and is 60 times the length of the Berlin Wall.  Why are some walls so loud and others mute?  **Barbie Goes to War**  There are more than a billion Barbies. Only the Chinese outnumber them.  The most beloved woman on the planet would never let us down. In the war of good against evil, Barbie enlisted, saluted, and marched off to Iraq.  She arrived at the front wearing made-to-measure land, sea, and air uniforms reviewed and approved by the Pentagon.  Barbie is accustomed to changing professions, hairdos, and clothes. She has been a singer, an athlete, a paleontologist, an orthodontist, an astronaut, a firewoman, a ballerina, and who knows what else. Every new job entails a new look and a complete new wardrobe that every girl in the world is obliged to buy.  In February 2004, Barbie wanted to change boyfriends too. For nearly half a century she had been going steady with Ken, whose nose is the only protuberance on his body, when an Australian surfer seduced her and invited her to commit the sin of plastic.  Mattel, the manufacturer, announced an official separation.  It was a catastrophe. Sales plummeted. Barbie could change occupations and outfits, but she had no right to set a bad example.  Mattel announced an official reconciliation.  **Lied-About Wars**  Advertising campaigns, marketing schemes. The target is public opinion. Wars are sold the same way cars are, by lying.  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The Republicans in power and the Democrats out of power became a single party united against terrorist aggression.  After the war had slaughtered Iraqis in vast numbers, most of them women and children, Bush confessed that the weapons of mass destruction never existed. “The most lethal weapons ever devised” were his own speeches.  In the following elections, he won a second term.  In my childhood, my mother used to tell me that a lie has no feet. She was misinformed.  **Riddle**  They are the most important members of our family.  They are gluttons, devouring gas, oil, corn, sugarcane, and anything else that comes their way.  They own our time: bathing them, feeding and sheltering them, talking about them, and opening the way for them.  They reproduce faster than we do, and are 10 times as numerous as they were half a century ago.  They kill more people than do wars, but no one condemns the murders, least of all the newspapers and television channels that live off their advertisements.  They steal our streets. They steal our air. They laugh when they hear us say: “I drive.”  **Lost and Found**  The twentieth century, which was born proclaiming peace and justice, died bathed in blood. It passed on a world much more unjust than the one it inherited.  The twenty-first century, which also arrived heralding peace and justice, is following in its predecessor’s footsteps.  In my childhood, I was convinced that everything that went astray on earth ended up on the moon.  But the astronauts found no sign of dangerous dreams or broken promises or hopes betrayed.  If not on the moon, where might they be? Perhaps they were never misplaced. Perhaps they are in hiding here on earth. Waiting.  *Eduardo Galeano is one of Latin America’s most distinguished writers. He is the author of a three-volume history of the Americas,* Memory of Fire*, and most recently,* Children of the Days: A Calendar of Human History*. He is the recipient of many international prizes, including the first Lannan Prize for Cultural Freedom, the Casa de las Américas Prize, and the First Distinguished Citizen of the region by the countries of Mercosur. These excerpts are taken from his history of humanity,* [Mirrors](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1568586124/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20)*, translated by Mark Fried.*  This post is excerpted from [*Mirrors: Stories of Almost Everyone*](http://www.amazon.com/dp/1568586124/ref=nosim/?tag=tomdispatch-20) Copyright © 2009 by Eduardo Galeano; translation copyright © 2009 by Mark Fried. Published by Nation Books, a member of the Perseus Group, New York, N.Y. Originally published in the Spanish language in 2008 by Siglo XXI Editores (Spain and Mexico) and Ediciones del Chanchito (Uruguay). 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Call it charisma if you want (though I still remember a professor of mine pointing out, in reference to Chinese leader Mao Zedong, that what’s charisma to one is zilch to another). Explain it as you will, from Memory of Fire, his three-volume history of the Americas, to his recent Children of the Days, a kind of prayer book for our time, he’s never stopped telling us our own stories in ways we haven’t heard them before.

At some point in Galeano’s life as a collector of stories, history decided to trust him and spilled its secrets to him. In 2009, he returned the favor by writing one of the great books of this century, Mirrors, a history of humanity in 366 episodes, from our first myths to late last night. Thanks to his publisher, Nation Books, and his devoted literary agent, Susan Bergholz, I’ve chosen 12 of my own favorites from that work for your summer pleasure. Think of this post as a Galeano-esque mini-history of our last century of turmoil through a kaleidoscope of “characters,” human and inanimate -- and then get your hands on Mirrors and read the whole thing for yourself. Tom

Century of Disaster

Riddles, Lies, and Lives -- from Fidel Castro and Muhammad Ali to Albert Einstein and Barbie

By Eduardo Galeano

[The following passages are excerpted from Eduardo Galeano’s history of humanity, Mirrors (Nation Books).]

Stalin

He learned to write in the language of Georgia, his homeland, but in the seminary the monks made him speak Russian.

Years later in Moscow, his south Caucasus accent still gave him away.

So he decided to become more Russian than the Russians. Was not Napoleon, who hailed from Corsica, more French than the French? And was not Catherine the Great, who was German, more Russian than the Russians?

The Georgian, Iosif Dzhugashvili, chose a Russian name. He called himself Stalin, which means “steel.”

The man of steel expected his son to be made of steel too: from childhood, Stalin’s son Yakov was tempered in fire and ice and shaped by hammer blows.

It did not work. He was his mother’s child. At the age of 19, Yakov wanted no more of it, could bear no more.

He pulled the trigger.

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He awoke in the hospital. At the foot of the bed, his father commented:

“You can’t even get that right.”

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At 17, Josephine Baker dances the Charleston on Broadway. At 18, she crosses the Atlantic and conquers Paris. The “Bronze Venus” performs in the nude, with no more clothing than a belt of bananas.

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At 68, she recovers from a calamitous bankruptcy and at the Bobino Theater in Paris she celebrates a half-century on the stage.

And she departs.

Photograph: Saddest Eye in the World

Princeton, New Jersey, May 1947.

Photographer Philippe Halsman asks him: “Do you think there will be peace?”

And while the shutter clicks, Albert Einstein says, or rather mutters: “No.”

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If not on the moon, where might they be? Perhaps they were never misplaced.

Perhaps they are in hiding here on earth. Waiting.

Eduardo Galeano is one of Latin America’s most distinguished writers. He is the author of a three-volume history of the Americas, Memory of Fire, and most recently, Children of the Days: A Calendar of Human History. He is the recipient of many international prizes, including the first Lannan Prize for Cultural Freedom, the Casa de las Américas Prize, and the First Distinguished Citizen of the region by the countries of Mercosur. These excerpts are taken from his history of humanity, Mirrors, translated by Mark Fried.

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