TALK OF THE TOWN

A FORMER RECEPTIONIST REFLECTS ON LIFE AT THE NEW YORKER

by Andrea Crawford

In 1957, when Janet Groth walked into the offices of The New Yorker magazine on West 43rd Street for the first time, she was a 19-year-old, Iowa-born, Minnesota-bred college graduate with literary ambitions. During her interview—E.B. White himself—she said that she wanted “to write, of course, but would be glad to do anything else.” The New Yorker magazine, calling the memoir the best of an impressive list of such books, has gathered her stories into a new book, The Receptionist: An Education at The New Yorker, published last summer and to be released in paperback in June. With graceful prose and rich detail, Groth has modeled for Dorothy Parker. She writes of attending cocktail parties with “a crowd that had learned to drink in the twenties and of how she lost both her heart and virginity to an unnamed New Yorker cartoonist who mired her with marital intent. In one highly critical story, Groth tells her “innocent yet not quite innocent” relationship with the writer Joseph Mitchell, whose acquaintance began one evening on the F train, when she was headed to a graduate seminar on Elizabethan verse at NYU and he to his Greenwich Village home. Soon thereafter the two forged an intimate connection, during which Groth “The Dead” over drinks at a writers’ hangout called Complete’s. From 1972 until 1978, Mitchell took her to lunch every week, typically on Fridays, where they often discussed his writing—a significant topic in these years when he struggled with writer’s block and published nothing. But his personal, professional, did come for Groth—and long before publications of his novel, The New Yorker in 1978 to start what would become a successful academic career. While at the magazine, she had pursued a doctorate in English literature at NYU, a degree that required 15 years to complete as she took one class at a time. A professor emeritus at SUNY Plattsburgh, Groth has authored or co-authored four previous books, including an award-winning critical assessment of Edmund Wilson. Academic life brought its own challenges.

Groth turns a critical but kind eye upon her youthful struggles, grappling with her own reticence, missteps, and the “shame of the writer who doesn’t write.” She liked and she did not. While full of such anecdotes, Groth’s memoir is also a forthright appraisal of young ambition, pretense, and disappointment. Groth—a former apothecary and midwife, and a rare female landowner, serves as the protagonist in aaguardsman, digit set to Churning butter. In November of 1957, Groth had moved to New York City. Garrison Keillor appeared with her in Garrison’s Minnesotatopia, calling the memoir the best of an impressive list of such books, has gathered her stories into a new book, The Receptionist: An Education at The New Yorker, published last summer and to be released in paperback in June. With graceful prose and rich detail, Groth has modeled for Dorothy Parker. She writes of attending cocktail parties with “a crowd that had learned to drink in the twenties and... was hard at it still”—and, at such occasions, of being subjected to the infamous stories of Dorothy Parker. She modeled for...
A NEW SERIES BRINGS THE ARABIC CLASSICS TO ENGLISH READERS
by Eileen Reynolds / GSAS ’11

A new translation brings no boredom to my longing, / nor does the love for longing, / nor boredom to tomay

As a surprise. He was not a chivalrous Arthurian knight or lovesick Elizabethan dandy, but rather the 8th-century bard Al-Kindi, considered by Arabic scholars to be the last of the great Islamic Bedouin desert poets. Reflecting on tribal politics, the rigors of desert life, and, of course, the agonies of love, Al-Kindi in the 9th century, with an oral tradition stretching back even farther—developed a system of meter and rhyme as complex as anything within the European literary canon. But owing to the difficulty of translation, this poetry has remained, like many premodern Arabic works, virtually unknown to English readers. For the nonfluent, the form of translationsofthe Ko-...