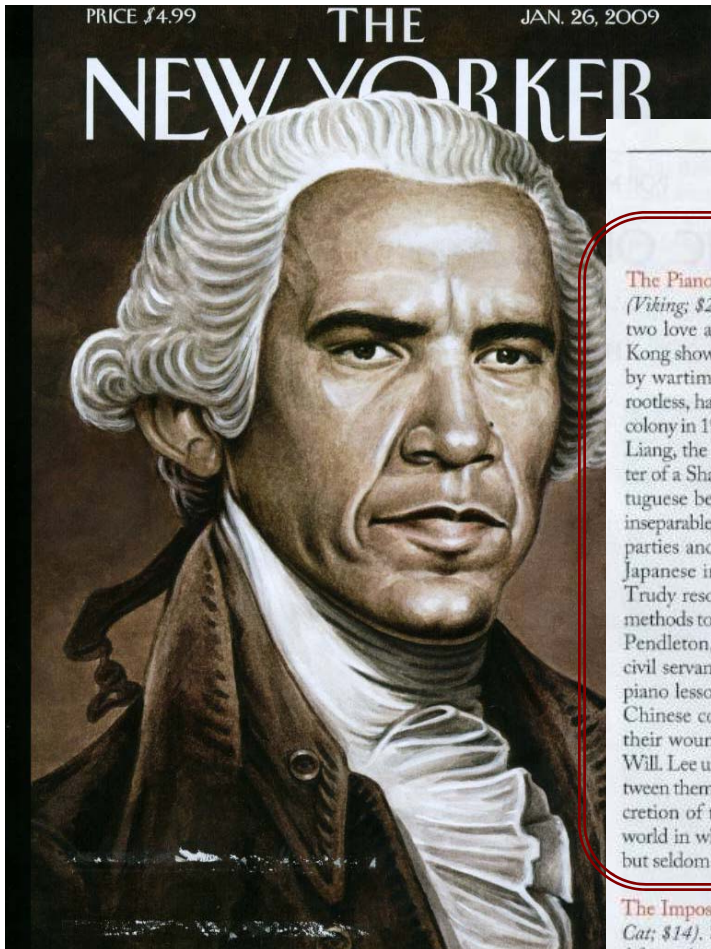


As seen in THE NEW YORKER

January 26, 2009



BRIEFLY NOTED

The Piano Teacher, by Janice Y. K. Lee (*Viking*; \$25.95). This cinematic tale of two love affairs in mid-century Hong Kong shows colonial pretensions tainted by wartime truths. Will Truesdale, a rootless, handsome Briton, arrives in the colony in 1941, and is swept up by Trudy Liang, the blithe and glamorous daughter of a Shanghai millionaire and a Portuguese beauty. They quickly become inseparable, their days spent in a whirl of parties and champagne, but when the Japanese invade, Will is interned and Trudy resorts to increasingly Faustian methods to survive. After the war, Claire Pendleton, the naive wife of a British civil servant, arrives. She begins giving piano lessons to the daughter of a rich Chinese couple, and falls in love with their wounded and inscrutable driver. Will Lee unfolds each story, and flits between them, with the brisk grace and discretion of the society she describes—a world in which horrors are adumbrated but seldom told.

The Impostor, by Damon Galgut (*Black Cat*; \$14). Set in post-apartheid South Africa, this gripping novel explores the seamier aspects of reconciliation. Adam, adrift after losing his job to a young black candidate, moves to an isolated town to write poetry. Boredom sets in, relieved only by the appearance of an old school acquaintance, Canning, who invites Adam to spend weekends on his nearby game farm. There Adam meets Canning's wife, Baby, who is both alluring and chillingly aloof, and begins to realize that no one's motives are as pure as they appear. Galgut gives even seemingly innocuous details sinister overtones: the clicking of peacocks on a roof, the shuffling steps of Canning's elderly black servants. Beneath a fairly standard thriller plot (affairs, corruption) runs a critique of contemporary South

Africa, from the venality of those enriched by a reinvigorated economy to the stale pieties of the white liberal class.

So Damn Much Money, by Robert G. Kaiser (*Knopf*; \$27.95). Lobbying, Kaiser writes, is a business of "huge numbers and vague standards," forever reorienting itself in an effort to skate just inside the limits of legality. Kaiser follows the career of Gerald S. J. Cassidy, a kid from a poor family who became a lawyer for migrant workers, an aide to George McGovern, and, latterly, a lobbyist for universities, cranberries, defense contractors, and Taiwan. Cassidy pioneered the use of earmarks, fought to save the Sea-wolf submarine, and took congressmen to N.C.A.A. Final Four games. When George Bush came to power, Cassidy, despite his Democratic roots, scrambled to hire Republicans, including, briefly, Jack Abramoff, then on the brink of disgrace. Kaiser's account dwells less on blatant corruption than on what is perfectly, depressingly legal. Lobbyists, for all their policy-shaping aspirations, come across as simple bagmen, conveying cash between buyers in the private sector and all-too-willing sellers in Congress.

The Magician's Book, by Laura Miller (*Little, Brown*; \$25.99). In this powerful meditation on "the schism between childhood and adult reading," Miller recounts her tumultuous relationship with the favorite books of her youth, C. S. Lewis's "Chronicles of Narnia." Filled from an early age with a distrust of the Catholic faith in which she was raised, Miller didn't notice the Christian subtext, and when she learned of it, as a teen-ager, she felt "tricked, cheated." Combining memoir, criticism, and biography, Miller takes Lewis to task for his "betrayals," including the racial stereotyping and elitism that, she argues, inform the books. Yet her respect for Lewis's talent remains; scrupulously placing him in his historical context, she crafts a nuanced portrait of the author as a sensitive curmudgeon and comes to the realization that "a perfect story is no more interesting or possible than a perfect human being."

