

A close-up portrait of Lewis Hyde, a middle-aged man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a blue polo shirt. The background is a blurred wooden fence. A white rectangular box is overlaid on the left side of his face, containing text. A dashed orange line points from the left edge of the box to the text.

by Lloyd Schwartz

LEWIS HYDE:

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→ GIFT-GIVER,  
TRICKSTER,  
DEFENDER OF  
FORGETTING

*After the artistic economy and mischief makers,  
the writer turns to another mysterious topic*



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Reading a book by Lewis Hyde RI '14 is like turning and turning a many-faceted prism in more directions than you thought possible. A recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim Foundation grant, a Lannan Fellowship, three National Endowment for the Arts creative writing grants, a National Endowment for the Humanities grant, and a MacArthur Fellowship, Hyde is this year's Evelyn Green Davis Fellow at the Radcliffe Institute, working on a major new project: a contrarian (his word) defense of the loss of memory.

Lewis Hyde came to national prominence in 1983 with his book *The Gift: Imagination and the Erotic Life of Property* (the subtitle was later changed to *Creativity and the Artist in the Modern World*), which explores the idea of the work of art as a gift—a gift to the artist (as when we call an artist “gifted”) and the artist’s gift to the world. This is the “gift exchange.” In tribal cultures, offering a gift is necessary, and it must be received with gratitude and then passed on. But in modern culture, an artist has to earn a living, and that gift has some value as a commodity—that is “the public life of the imagination, the ownership of art.”

“The gift exchange,” Hyde told me in a recent conversation, “had in the background my own puzzlement about how to lead a dignified life if one wanted to write poetry. It was a question for myself, though the book itself is written as if everyone has that problem. There’s often a personal hook for what I do. But what I tend to do is find a framework that has literary value to it.”

Hyde finds it useful to write about topics that are mysterious even to the writer. “You don’t want to write about anything you have a command over, because it would be very boring. One feature of these ‘mythopoetic contexts’ is that they open outward and lead you into unknown territory.”

Hyde was born in Cambridge, Massachusetts, but spent his high school years in Pittsburgh, where his father, a research scientist in optics who worked in industry, was transferred. Hyde thought he would go into science himself, but in college, at the University of Minnesota (both his parents came from Minneapolis, and both, Hyde says, were “big readers”), he slipped into the humanities. He wrote for the college newspaper and won the Academy of American Poetry Prize for one of his poems. His college friends were “a gang of literary types,” including Garrison Keillor and Patricia Hampl, with whom he’s still close. He studied with the eminent poet John Berryman, “an active alcoholic,” Hyde says, who killed himself a few years later. He started doing graduate work in comparative litera-

ture at the University of Iowa, but wasn’t fond of all the literary theory and left with only a master’s. When Hyde returned to Cambridge, he worked in the alcoholism ward at Cambridge City Hospital, and in 1986 he published a memorable essay in *American Poetry Review* called “John Berryman and the Booze Talking.”

Hyde says he learned to write by writing and translating poetry (with Robert Bly’s encouragement, he translated the first major English collection of poems by the Spanish Nobel Prize-winner Vicente Aleixandre). The catalogue of images in the title poem of Hyde’s own poetry collection, *This Error Is the Sign of Love* (Milkweed Editions, 1988) may very well provide the central kernel of all his prose work: “the tear that saves a man from power, . . . The leak in the nest, the hole in the coffin, . . . The teacher’s failings in which the students ripen, . . .”

the Sargasso Sea that gives false hope to sailors and they sail on and find a new world  
the picnic basket that slips overboard and leads to the invention of the lobster trap  
the one slack line in a poem where the listener relaxes and suddenly the poem is in your heart like a fruit wasp in an apple,  
this error is the sign of love!

“In the simplest sense,” Hyde says, “what one learns by writing poetry is to pay attention to every word and to the cadence of every sentence—the *shape* of things. A paragraph is made not unlike the way you make a stanza of a poem. Literary non-fiction is prose written with the kind of attention you expect from a fiction writer or poet. Prose writing has kind of taken over my estate. I write a few poems each year. But I write prose very slowly, with the pace of a poetry writer. I end up,” he hopes, “paying the kind of attention that I think all writing deserves.”

The book that followed *The Gift* was *Trickster Makes This World: Mischief, Myth, and Art* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), which Hyde calls “the rebuttal to the gift book.” “One problem with gift exchange,” he says, “is that there are always outsid-

“I write a few poems each year. But I write prose very slowly, with the pace of a poetry writer.”

ers—people who are not happy with the circle of generosity. *Trickster* is the outsider's critique of gift exchange." In it he tells the story of Hermes, whose mother scolds him for stealing Apollo's cattle. Hermes replies that if Zeus won't give him honor, he will steal it. So the artist is not only the one with the gift, but also the subversive outsider who crosses boundaries, the mischief-maker who by taking disrupts the cycle of giving.

Three years ago, Hyde returned to the gift economy question in his book *Common as Air: Revolution, Art, and Ownership*, what he calls "a defense of public domain," re-examining for our age of the Internet and digital copying the historical American ideal of Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, and Madison "that cultural creations are a kind of property nobody owns so that we all have access to them—that it matters that not everything we've created be owned in perpetuity." In the *New York Times Book Review*, the Harvard historian Robert Darnton '60 (the Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and University Librarian) praised Hyde's "eloquent and erudite plea for protecting our cultural patrimony from appropriation by commercial interests." "I'm a pro-copyright guy," Hyde says. "I'm sympathetic to the 'content' industry. But the balance between public and private often gets ignored."

In the works now is *A Primer for Forgetting*, Hyde's Radcliffe Institute project, a multifaceted exploration of the limits of memory triggered—as he suggests in one of the many collage-like vignettes with which the book is currently organized—by the increasing dementia and "calcified language" of his mother, "the shell of her old self." "When my short-term memory goes," he writes, "I don't want to be penned up in the wickerwork of my rote responses. . . . no heroic measures, please."

"The topic of memory and forgetting is one of those inexhaustible domains," Hyde says. The implications are not only personal—taking off from the 13th-century Zen master Dogen's aphorism "We study the self to forget the self"—but also political, as in South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, to acknowledge and then forget history. And possibly even to forgive. "Of course," as Hyde told a Radcliffe audience, "we have to be conscious of evil in the world. If you forget that, you're in trouble. But I'd like this book to be more thought-provoking than thought-insisting."

"This all has to do with time," he says, "and time is a great mystery. It's so strange to live in time, but we're in it, and we don't know what the alternative is. This is an age in which medicine has come to allow people to live long enough in ways we haven't seen before. Still, time strips us and we're all going to die. Our attitude toward this is worth examining."



At Kenyon College, where Hyde is the Richard L. Thomas Professor of Creative Writing, he offered a course on cultural memory and ended up interested in the cases where forgetfulness seemed more useful than memory. He calls his new project "a thought experiment and an experiment in form."

The "discontinuous" modular form, a series of brief anecdotes and quotations, is something Hyde is fond of. "It's fun to read books of letters or diaries. If I wrote a 5- or 10-page essay, I might break it up and scatter its pieces. But it's something I'm allowing myself to hold lightly and wait and see what happens."

Hyde says an award like the Radcliffe fellowship gives one time to really dig into something: problems, topics for which a researcher needs a year of uninterrupted time. "Unless there's some way to get that time, you'll never learn the thing that comes out at the end."

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Hyde is exploring instances in which forgetfulness seems useful.

➔ LISTEN to Hyde read from his book at [www.radcliffe.harvard.edu](http://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu).

➔ **A PRIMER  
FOR  
FORGETTING**

by LEWIS HYDE



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## Hurricane of '38

DINNER AT THE ROUND MAHOGANY TABLE MOTHER and Father bought in London 50 years ago. Father has read a book about the erosion of ocean beaches on the East Coast. Mother says, "That book never mentions the hurricane of '38." She was 19 that year, and in college at Mount Holyoke. "I don't know how I knew it," she says, "but I knew there was an eye to the storm, and so I made my way to Stafford Hall." Two minutes later she says, "That book never mentions the hurricane of '38. I don't know how I knew it, but I knew there was an eye to the storm, and so I made my way to Stafford Hall."

"You're going in circles," Father says. They say the CAT scan showed some atrophy of her frontal lobes, but the old material is still there. She is very much her old self. Her verbal tics and defenses remain. "Well now, Mrs. Pettibone," she says to herself, staring into the

refrigerator before dinner. "We'll cope. We'll get along." She is the shell of her old self, calcified language and no organism alive enough to lay down new layers.

Would it be possible to live in such a way as to never acquire habits of mind? When my short-term memory goes, I don't want to be penned up in the wickerwork of my rote responses. If I start being my old self, no heroic measures, please.

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## Cell Death

AS THE HUMAN EMBRYO DEVELOPS, ITS ORGANS ARE shaped by a process known as "programmed cell death." Two flipper-like appendages turn into hands as the cells between the fingers die off, separating the digits. Sometimes the cells just fall away and at other times they are devoured by other cells, there being at least two forms of natural cell death—*autophagy*, or self-eating,

and *apoptosis*, from the Greek for the “dropping off” of petals from flowers or leaves from trees. Both of these must be distinguished from the traumatic cell death that results from wounds or disease. Trauma simply damages the body, whereas programmed cell death carves useful organs and tissues out of otherwise undifferentiated flesh. It is a shaping force, an aesthetic force.

Normal forgetting is the programmed cell death of mental life. It takes experience and shapes it into a useful story.

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## Boring

WORKING TO HEAL HERSELF OF THE TRAUMA OF RAPE, Sohaila Abdulali took it upon herself to work with young women, teaching them about rape’s dangers and effects. At first she found it upsetting to include her own story in these classes, but after many tellings the intensity of feeling faded. She even surprised herself during one class. Someone asked what was the worst thing about being raped: “Suddenly I looked at them and said, ‘the thing I hate the most about it is that it’s *boring*.’” Not that it was boring when it happened, but time had passed, the work had been done, and she wasn’t interested anymore.

French psychologist Pierre Janet proposed that we shouldn’t think of memory as a record of the past but as something dynamic: “*Memory . . . is an action; essentially, it is the action of telling a story.*”

If memory is the action of telling a story, then cell-death-forgetting comes when the story has been told so fully as to wear itself out and drop away. Then time begins to move again, then the future can unfold.

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## Dementia Test

THE DOCTOR ASKED MOTHER TO REMEMBER THREE words—two concrete and one abstract—train, virtue, shoe. Ten minutes later, he asked if she remembered them. Virtue had slipped away. Father told the story at dinner, repeating the words himself. Mother looked trapped, distressed. She went to bed early in those days and Father was perplexed. “What did we used to do in the evenings?” he asked.

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## Crick/Borges

IN AN ESSAY IN THE JOURNAL *NATURE*, FRANCIS Crick, one of the men who discovered the shape of DNA, once argued that “we dream in order to forget.” Each of our days is so filled with particularity, we are so swamped with sensory detail, that the mind needs

some sort of filtering mechanism to sort out the trivial and retain the essential. Dreaming, Crick argues, serves this function. In fact, without some such process we would all be like Borges’s monstrous figure, Funes, who was unable to forget even the smallest details of his day, so that a tree at 3:06 PM with the light just so on its leaves stayed with him as wholly distinct from the same tree two minutes later shaded by a cloud. “He was . . . almost incapable of general, platonic ideas. . . .” Borges’s narrator remarks, for “to think is to forget a difference, to generalize, to abstract.” It is required of us to forget many particular trees before we can know Tree itself. The ancients broadened the stroke, saying that it is required of us to forget entire worlds—the Age of Iron, these eons of hearsay—before we can recall to mind eternal things.

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## Baseball

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS—JULY 18, 2013. ALREADY with the most wins in the American League, the Red Sox will get a big boost to start the second half of the season. “The most important thing for us is that we . . . get back into this ballpark and feed off the energy of the people here in Fenway,” manager John Farrell said Thursday. . . . When asked what has impressed him most with his team, Farrell said, “Our ability to forget—forget what yesterday had in store for us . . . and to refocus on our goal for today. . . .”

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## Numbered

THE DOCUMENTARY FILM *NUMBERED* FOLLOWS several Israelis who have had their survivor relatives’ concentration camp numbers tattooed on their arms. They wanted an intimate, enduring connection to the survivors; they wanted to embody the command “Never forget.”

“All my generation knows nothing about the Holocaust,” said one young woman. “You talk with people and they think it’s like the Exodus from Egypt, ancient history.” A cashier in a minimart in Jerusalem, she is often asked about the number on her arm. One police officer told her, “God creates the forgetfulness so we can forget.” She replied, “Because of people like you who want to forget this, we will have it again.” The first time she showed the tattoo to the grandfather who bore the original, he bent and kissed it.

“Hurricane of ’38,” “Cell Death,” “Boring,” “Dementia Test,” “Crick/Borges,” “Baseball,” “Numbered” from *A Primer for Forgetting* by Lewis Hyde. Copyright © by Lewis Hyde. Forthcoming from Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC, in September 2015. [www.fsgbooks.com](http://www.fsgbooks.com)