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Thomas Pynchon: A Brief Chronology

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Thomas Pynchon

A Brief Chronology

- 1937 Born Thomas Ruggles Pynchon Jr., May 8, in Glen Cove (Long Island), New York.
- c.1941 Family moves to nearby Oyster Bay, NY. Father, Thomas R. Pynchon Sr., is an industrial surveyor, town supervisor, and local Republican Party official. Household will include mother, Catherine Frances (Bennett), younger sister Judith (b. 1942), and brother John. Attends local public schools and is frequent contributor and columnist for high school newspaper.
- 1953 Graduates from Oyster Bay High School (salutatorian). Attends Cornell University on scholarship; studies physics and engineering. Meets fellow student Richard Fariña.
- 1955 Leaves Cornell to enlist in U.S. Navy, and is stationed for a time in Norfolk, Virginia. Is thought to have served in the Sixth Fleet in the Mediterranean.
- 1957 Returns to Cornell, majors in English. Attends classes of Vladimir Nabokov and M. H. Abrams and serves on staff of college literary magazine.
- 1958 Collaborates with Kirkpatrick Sale on an unproduced musical called “Minstral Island,” a dystopian fantasy set in the year 1998.
- 1959 Publishes stories “**The Small Rain**” in *Cornell Writer* and “**Mortality and Mercy in Vienna**” in *Epoch*, the Cornell English Department literary quarterly. Graduates from Cornell with B.A. in English. Turns down Wilson Fellowship, creative writing instructorship at Cornell, and editorial job at *Esquire*. Moves to Greenwich Village. Applies to Ford Foundation for grant to write an opera libretto, but is turned down.
- 1960 Moves to Seattle to work for Boeing Aircraft as a technical writer and engineering aide in nuclear missile programs—first with the Bomarc Service Information Unit and later with the Minuteman Field Support Unit. Stories “**Low-lands**” published in March in *New World Writing* and “**Entropy**” published in spring issue of *Kennyon Review*. Candida Donadio becomes his literary agent. Signs

contract with J. B. Lippincott for untitled novel and begins working relationship with editor Corlies "Cork" Smith. Publishes "**Togetherness**," about safety procedures for the Bomarc guided missile, in *Aerospace Safety* in December.

- 1961 "**Under the Rose**" (later a chapter in *V.*) published in *Noble Savage* in May. "Entropy" selected for *Best American Short Stories 1961*.
- 1962 In March, "Under the Rose" awarded second prize and appears in *The O. Henry Prize Stories 1962*. September, leaves Boeing Aircraft job and spends time in California and Mexico.
- 1963 *V.* is published by J. B. Lippincott in April and receives favorable reviews. Pynchon is best man at wedding of Mimi Baez and Richard Fariña, Portola, CA, August 24. Flees *Time* magazine photographer in Mexico City. "Entropy" republished in *Nelson Algren's Own Book of Lonesome Monsters*, October.
- 1964 February 1, *V.* receives William Faulkner Foundation Award for best first novel of 1963, and in March is named as a finalist for the National Book Award (which is given to John Updike's *The Centaur*); paperback edition issued in March. Application for graduate study in mathematics at University of California, Berkeley, is turned down. "**The Secret Integration**" published in the *Saturday Evening Post*, December 19.
- 1965 "The World (This One), the Flesh (Mrs. Oedipa Maas), and the Testament of Pierce Inverarity" (later part of *The Crying of Lot 49*) published in *Esquire* in December. "A Gift of Books," review of the novel *Warlock* by Oakley Hall, published in December issue of *Holiday*.
- 1966 "The Shrink Flips" (portion of *The Crying of Lot 49*) published in *Cavalier* in March. *The Crying of Lot 49* published by J. B. Lippincott, April 27. Friend Richard Fariña killed in motorcycle accident, April 30; Pynchon is a pallbearer at his funeral. "**A Journey into the Mind of Watts**" published in *New York Times Magazine*, June 12.
- 1967 In January signs contract with Viking Press (where editor Cork Smith had moved) for untitled novel to be delivered in December. *The Crying of Lot 49* wins Richard and Hinda Rosenthal Foundation Award (\$2,000) from the National Institute of Arts and Letters in May.

- 1969 Lives in Manhattan Beach, CA.
- 1972 Manuscript of *Gravity's Rainbow* delivered to Viking in January; working title is "Mindless Pleasures."
- 1973 ***Gravity's Rainbow*** published by Viking Press on February 28 in simultaneous cloth and paper editions; it sells 45,000 copies the first year.
- 1974 *Gravity's Rainbow* named co-winner of National Book Award for Fiction (with Isaac Bashevis Singer's *A Crown of Feathers and Other Stories*). It is also unanimously selected by judges for Pulitzer Prize in fiction, but advisory board declines to give the award, calling the work "unreadable," "turgid," "overwritten," and "obscene." Viking president Tom Guinzberg arranges for comedian "Professor" Irwin Corey ("the World's Foremost Expert") to give Pynchon's acceptance speech at National Book Award ceremony, April 18.
- 1975 *Gravity's Rainbow* awarded Howells Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters and the American Academy of Arts and Letters (given to one work of fiction every five years). Pynchon declines to receive the award.
- 1976 Aloes Press in London issues unauthorized edition of "Mortality and Mercy in Vienna," first in a series of piracies of his stories; later ones include "Low-lands" (1978), "The Secret Integration" (1980), and "The Small Rain" (1982).
- 1977 March issue of *Playboy* publishes article by Cornell classmate Jules Siegel, "Who Is Thomas Pynchon ... And Why Did He Take Off with My Wife?," containing unverifiable biographical information.
- 1982 Terminates his relationship with literary agent Candida Donadio.
- 1983 Writes introduction for Penguin reissue of Richard Fariña's *Been Down So Long It Looks Like Up to Me* in February (reprinted in *Cornell Alumni News* in July 1984). Unauthorized pamphlet publications in England of "Entropy" (dated "Troy Town: Trystero, 1957") and "A Journey Into the Mind of Watts" (dated "Westminster: Mouldwarp, 1983"). New literary agent Melanie Jackson sells rights to a book of uncollected short stories to Little, Brown for reported \$150,000.

- 1984 *Slow Learner*, collection of five previously published stories, published by Little, Brown in April. Essay “**Is It OK To Be a Lud-dite?**” appears in *New York Times Book Review*, October 28.
- 1986 Former agent Candida Donadio sells more than 120 letters Pynchon had written to her agency for \$45,000 to collector Carter Burden.
- 1988 Publishes review of *Love in the Time of Cholera* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez in *New York Times Book Review*, April 10. Awarded MacArthur Fellowship in fall, with stipend of \$310,000, paid over five year term.
- 1990 *Vineland* published by Little, Brown in February. Marries literary agent Melanie Jackson, granddaughter of Supreme Court Justice Robert H. Jackson and great-granddaughter of Theodore Roosevelt. Lives in New York City. Blown Litter Press publishes letters stolen from files of Corlies Smith in pamphlet titled “Of a Fond Ghoul.”
- 1991 Son Jackson Pynchon born.
- 1992 Writes introduction for Donald Barthelme’s posthumous collection *The Teachings of Don B*, published in November.
- 1993 Essay (on sloth) “**Nearer, My Couch, to Thee**” appears in *New York Times Book Review*, June 6; collected in *Deadly Sins* (1994).
- 1994 Writes liner notes to *Spiked! The Music of Spike Jones*, CD compilation released by Catalyst in April.
- 1995 Father Thomas Sr. dies, July 21.
- 1996 Writes liner notes to CD *Nobody’s Cool* by New York band Lotion, released February 27 by spinART label. “Wanda Tinasky” letters, which originally appeared between 1983 and 1988 in the *Anderson Valley (CA) Advertiser*, are published by Vers Libre Press with the suggestion they were written by Pynchon. He denies authorship, and experts eventually conclude the letters were the work of a since-deceased poet and postal worker Tom Hawkins. Carter Burden dies, and his family donates his collections, including the Pynchon letters purchased from Candida Donadio, to the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York. Mother Catherine dies in November.

- 1997 *Mason & Dixon* published by Henry Holt in April. CNN airs videotape of Pynchon on Manhattan street, but, at his request, does not identify him.
- 1998 Writes introduction to *Stone Junction* by Jim Dodge. *New York Times* publishes excerpts from his letters to Donadio held by Morgan Library, March 4. At Pynchon's request, the Burden family and Morgan Library agree to seal these letters until after his death.
- 1999 **"Hallowe'en? Over Already?"** (a 500-word article on son's school Halloween picnic) appears in *The Cathedral School Newsletter*.
- 2001 Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, acquires the corrected typescript of *V.* and eight letters written by Pynchon in the early 1960s.
- 2002 Ransom Center acquires manuscript of "Minstral Island" (1958).
- 2003 Writes introduction for Plume edition of *1984* by George Orwell. Makes voice "appearance" on episode of *The Simpsons* that airs January 25, 2004.
- 2004 Makes second voice "appearance" on *The Simpsons* in episode that airs November 14.
- 2006 In June, Penguin announces new novel scheduled for release in December. *Against the Day* published November 21 by The Penguin Press.
- 2009 *Inherent Vice* published August 4 by The Penguin Press.

Compiled by Paul Royster
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Note:

The information in this brief chronology was compiled from published sources, including *The New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, various booksellers' catalogs, and other online sources. Dates have been independently verified whenever possible. Gerald Howard's recent article, "Pynchon From A to V," in *Bookforum*, Summer 2005, has been extremely informative and helpful.

This chronology is intended as a teaching aid or "learning object" for teachers and students of literature. It is modelled on the chronology style developed by The Library of America under the guidance of the late Hanna M. ("Gila") Bercovitch.

Useful or interesting online sites associated with Thomas Pynchon include:

- San Narciso College Thomas Pynchon Home Page
<http://www.pynchon.pomona.edu/>
- ThomasPynchon.com
<http://www.hyperarts.com/pynchon/>
- Thomas Ruggles Pynchon, Jr., Spermatikos Logos
<http://www.themodernword.com/pynchon/>
- Pynchon Listserve
<http://www.waste.org/pynchon-l/>
- Pynchon Notes
<http://www2.ham.muohio.edu/~krafftjm/pynchon.html>
- vheissu: Thomas Pynchon — A Collection
http://www.vheissu.org/varia/eng_intro.htm

Mr. Pynchon's literary agent is Melanie Jackson of The Melanie Jackson Agency, 250 West 57th Street, Suite 1119, New York, NY 10019. His attorney is Jeremy Nussbaum of Cowan, Liebowitz & Latman, P.C., 1133 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10036-6799.

