F

ew American novelists today contend with “History” writ large. Born in 1933, the same year as Philip Roth and Cormac McCarthy, Norman Rush belongs to the generation of writers that does. Among them, he was the most affected by the political radicalism of the 1930s and 60s. Aged seventeen he wrote a manifesto, “Papers Against the State”; at eighteen he served a prison sentence for re-fusing the Korean War draft. His early stories and poems reimagined “little-known events in the tragic history of the Democratic Left”. But his mature fiction is shot through with utopian yearnings, which it both gently sati-
rizes and forthrightly explores. He has set his three major works (Whites, 1986; Mating, 1991; Mortals, 2003) in post-Cold-War Bot-
swana, where the country figures as a comic 
force majeure in his characters’ attempts to remade the world.

Utopia has stirred in Rush’s fiction from the beginning. In an early story, “Riding” (1973), three men gather away from their wives near a swamp pit on Cape Cod in the summer of 1967. The news of ghetto risings in Newark and Detroit fills them with “inexplicable 
positive feeling” and “relief at having been 
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The novel is full of well-observed light comedy. Ned is proud of “carrying the rucksack of an army that had never fought a war”, just as he is proud of his “thick, shaggy 
limb of urine”. Vacillating about the proper 
ethique when confronted with a man covered 
in tattoos, he opts for treating them “like wall-
paper”. But for a novel this short, the intrigues 
are frustratingly diffuse, and they circle like 
dead moons around the main star of Douglas. This is a country-house comedy desperately 
shy of fulfilling any of the dramatic 
collisions such a set-up promises. The revelation 
of an unexpected affair, details of former 
wives and boyfriends, run-ins with the Euro-

As for Ned’s two missions: he masters the 
eulogy, making a simple tribute, with Boswell 
as his source. But this sincerity only seems to 
provoke cynicism and evasion from his old 
comrades. Even Nina gets the chance to condescend: “One thing she knew and Ned did not, 
was that there is no permanent friendship 
between men, among men”.

The political element in this novel is what 
makes it most perplexing. The old head of the 
gang, Douglas has lived out his last years in a 
fortress, shutting the world out. And Ned has 
organized a massive protest that invites every-
one in:

He felt drunk with gratitude and the conviction 
of victory. He thought, ‘You can’t control every-
th ing . . . But this we can control. There would 
be no war. In part because of them there would 
be no war in Iraq. A few new people had come 
on to the overhang and he was going to shake 
their hands with them, too. There would be no war.

He thought, ‘No war, No invasion. No. 
These lines take us back to a historical preci-
pice; for a moment Rush is able to make us wonder: “What is the collective capable 
of?” Subtle Bodies flickers with the possibili-
ty of a utopian politics rooted in love and 
friendship, much as the Greeks believed that 
eros could bind the private and public spheres. 
But Rush’s utopia, in the end, always seems 
irreducibly spousal. Marriage remains his 
avant-garde. 

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How Habits of Culture Shape 
Our Rational Thinking: 
A Comparison of Classical Greece 
and Ancient China

by 
Professor John Warden
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“Olana”, the Catskills

exclusivity of Douglas’s cabal seems out of 
proportion to her emotional intelligence. Does she not realize that the “ghostly surviv-
als” of their college humour have migrated 
profitably into her own marriage?

perhaps for Ned, whose new young wife, 
Nina, thinks of him as a “sort of Jesus, a 
secular Jesus, of course, not that Ned would 
tolerate the description”. Ned must perform 
two tasks over the weekend. The first is 
to deliver a eulogy for Douglas. The second is 
to get the group to sign a petition against the 
impending invasion of Iraq, which, along with 
the mass protest he is planning in San Francis-
co, he is convinced will make George W. Bush 
reconsider his options.

Subtle Bodies looks set to be a meditation 
on friendship, much as Mating dealt 
with romantic beginnings and Mortals with 
marriage. But following Nina’s unexpected 
arrival at the estate much of the novel retreads 
impassioned and domesticated; the form almost un-
naturally compressed. The story tells of forty-
eight-year-old Ned, a manager of a fair trade 
cooperative in Berkeley, who, in 2003, hurries 
est when he learns about the death of his col-
lege friend Douglas in a lawn mower accident. 
“Le grand Douglas” was the ringleader of 
elogical for this latecomer mass to undertake 
underground support activities for the families of the first wave of resisters”.

As for Ned’s part in Douglas’s becoming who he is. In an early story, “Riding” (1973), 
three men return to their wives later that even-
ing. They are convinced the riots will provoke a 
poorly conceived right-wing response by the 
US government. The three of them will join in 
solidarity with black people and be sent off to 
camps. Millions will be drawn leftward by 
their collective oppression: “It would be 
logical for this latecomer mass to undertake 
derful protest that invites every-
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