

Andrew Porter's stories, written and revised with the meticulousness of a bonsai sculptor, sprout almost entirely from his imagination. But most are sparked by a personal observation — of an acquaintance from his past, of a relationship with which he once was intimate, of an action or event that has remained glued to his mind's eye.

A story in the Trinity University professor's debut collection is a fair indicator of the way he works. "Departure" zooms in on two teenage boys in small-town Pennsylvania, in the heart of the Amish country (although the boys are not Amish). They are typical of most Porter characters, not the popular kids, outsiders but not total geeks. They frequent a diner to observe Amish kids congregating, trying to merge into the mainstream, parking their buggies around back, changing into blue jeans in the bathroom. It is "their one night of freedom."

"That story is actually one that is rooted in the world of my childhood," says the 36-year-old writer, who grew up in Lancaster, Penn., in the heart of Amish country. "I used to go to this arcade in a strip mall, and these Amish kids would show up in street clothes and play Pac Man. For years that image of those kids haunted me. There was something sad about it. And I knew behind this image there was something important to me that I didn't understand."

"Departure," one of 10 stories in the new collection "The Theory of Light & Matter," probes

that mild hangover of unease. The story leaves the reader with a sense of emptiness, perhaps similar to what those Amish kids felt.

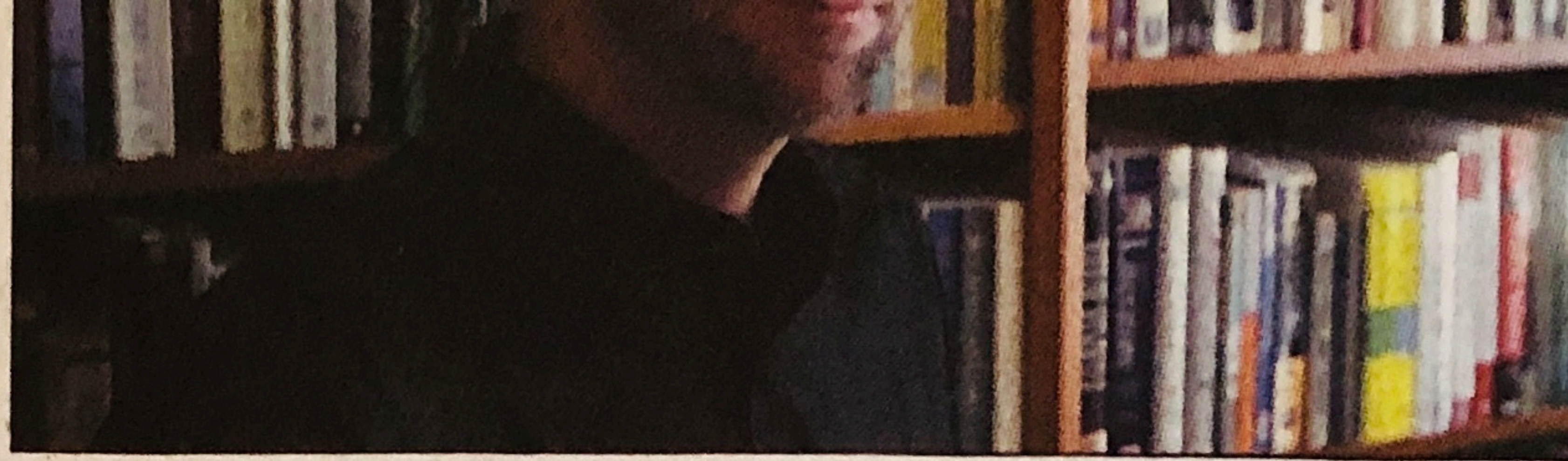
Winner of the 2007 Flannery O'Connor Award for short fiction, "The Theory of Light and Matter" is being published Wednesday. Porter has a reading Oct. 23 on the Trinity campus.

Marilynne Robinson, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of "Gilead" who was one of Porter's teachers at the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop, calls his fiction "highly controlled," his voice "honest and grave."

"I want my stories to end on a certain emotional note," says Porter, who lived a lot of lean years pursuing the writer's life, bouncing from Baltimore to Houston to the West Coast, teaching part time at several universities, before settling at Trinity to teach fiction writing four years ago. "I don't tend to be interested in elaborate plots. I tend to simplify the plot so the reader is focused principally on the characters."

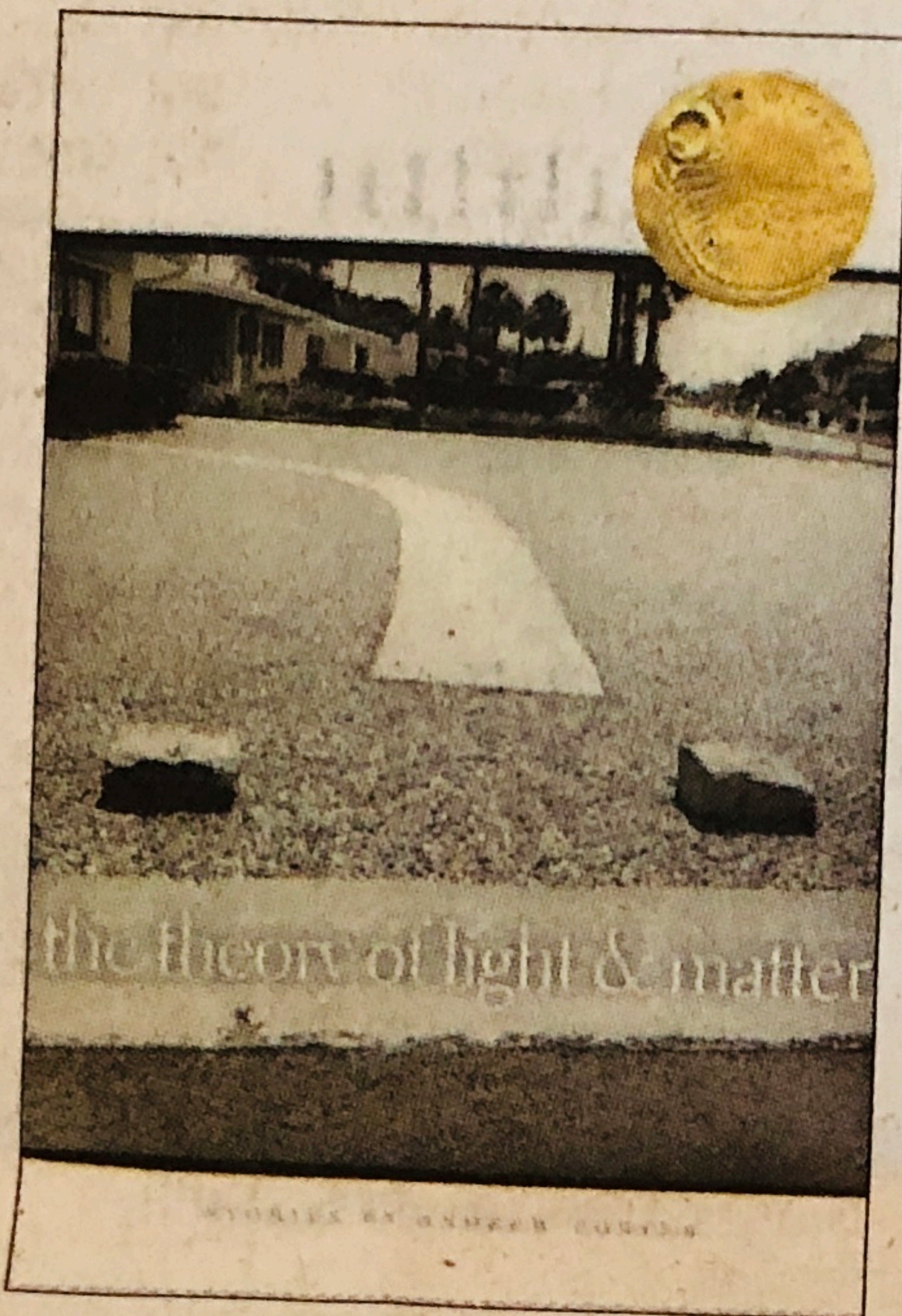
"I want to tell a story that resonates with a reader on an emotional level. I want the reader to be engaged in characters' lives and problems. Rather than have a reader think after reading a story — I don't have a message in mind, I'm not trying to make a point — I want the reader to have a certain feeling."

A sense of betrayal hovers over the dense stories in "Theory of Light and Matter." Many char-



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Trinity University professor Andrew Porter won the Flannery O'Connor Award for his debut collection of short stories, which are based on small towns and life in suburbia.



acters, such as a young boy whose best friend dies in a freakish accident in "Hole," look back at a crossroads event in their lives. As a consequence, guilt pervades the book, particularly the virtuosic title story.

It is told from the point of view of a young woman in college who is torn between her public persona as a smart, attractive student deeply involved with a promising young medical student and the secret time she spends at the cramped apartment of an older physics professor, just talking, drinking wine. She isn't physical with the teacher, but she discovers she can bare herself emotionally to him. Not so with the young man she already knows she will marry.

At a fundamental level, the story is a meditation on what it means to love someone: "If Colin suspected anything, he didn't show it. And if what I was being was unfaithful, I didn't allow myself to believe it." But Colin does find out about Robert, and as the story closes, we learn that Heather has indeed become a doctor's wife. She has come to grips with the fact that Colin "fulfills a part of me, an important part of me, and that Robert fulfilled another equally important part of me." She believes that "the only truth lies in the secrets we keep from each other."

"One thing I'm interested in as a writer is memory," Porter says, "the role memory plays in our lives, the way we reconstruct memory. I'm drawn to characters that are in some ways stuck in the past and in some cases paralyzed by that past. I'm interested in the dynamic of how present-day conflicts are affected or informed by the past."

"So guilt is a major theme in these stories, how these characters feel responsible or culpable for these events."

The writer who influenced Porter most as a developing writer, when he was a college student at Vassar in the early '90s, was the late Raymond Carver, whose sense of the absurd and precise way of expressing it is well-documented in short story collections such as "What We Talk About When We Talk About Love" and "Cathedral."

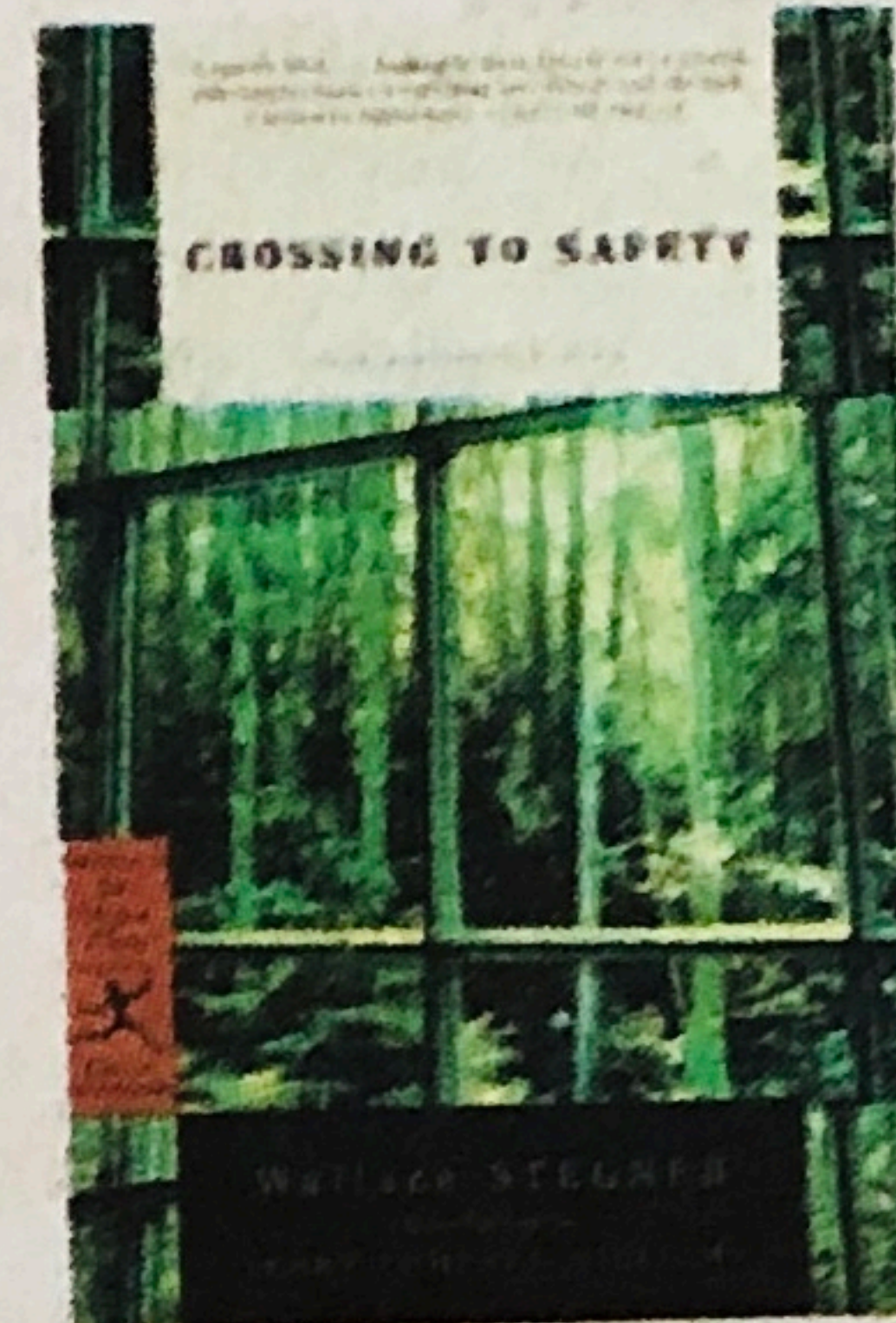
"What I learned from Carver is the importance of making sure everything matters," says Porter, "and not being satisfied with a story you don't think is finished. He taught me that the real pleasure is in the writing itself and making sure it is as perfect as you can make it."

Andrew Porter will read from and sign copies of "The Theory of Light and Matter" at the book's launch party at 7 p.m. Oct. 23 in Trinity University's Holt Center. The event is free and open to the public.

Here are some literary, cinematic and musical recommendations from Andrew Porter, author of "The Theory of Light and Matter."

Books

- Wallace Stegner, "Crossing to Safety"
- Junot Díaz, "Drown"
- Alice Munro, "Selected Stories"
- Walker Percy, "The Moviegoer"
- Richard Yates, "Revolutionary Road"

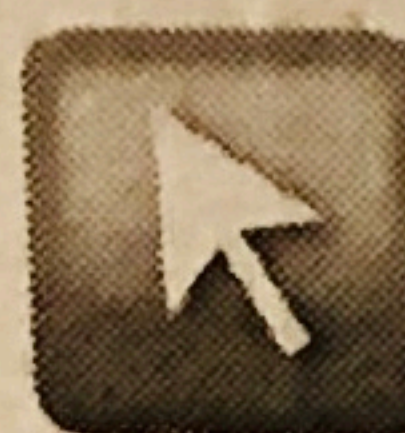
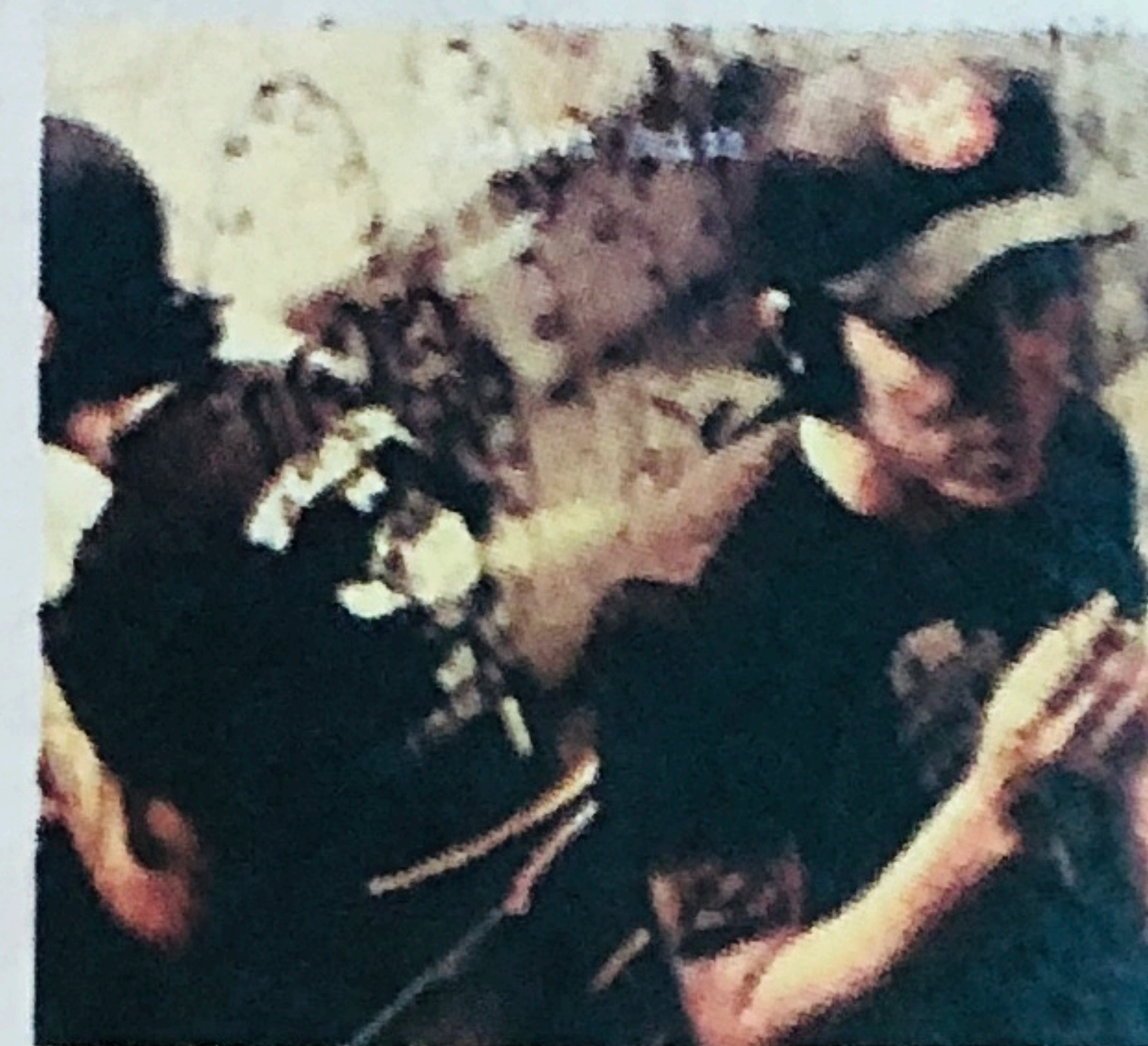


Films

- "Jules and Jim" (Francois Truffaut)
- "The American Friend" (Wim Wenders)
- "Ali: Fear Eats the Soul" (Rainer Werner Fassbinder)
- "Scenes from a Marriage" (Ingmar Bergman)
- "Manhattan" (Woody Allen)

Albums

- Radiohead, "OK Computer"
- Elliott Smith, "Either/Or"
- Joy Division, "Unknown Pleasures"
- The Clash, "The Clash"
- Belle & Sebastian, "Fold Your Hands Child, You Walk Like A Peasant"



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For a link to Andrew Porter's Web site