

“I don’t see myself as an investigative reporter,” the journalist, writer, and documentary filmmaker Greg Palast told Thai Jones for the Albany, New York, *Times Union* (June 18, 2006). “I see myself as a reporting investigator.” Palast has also labeled himself a “forensic economist,” and he has compared himself to Sam Spade, the dogged, hard-boiled fictional private detective created by Dashiell Hammett and portrayed by Humphrey Bogart in the film *The Maltese Falcon*. Palast began his career in the 1970s as a consultant for state governments, mainly concerning utilities, and an investigator for labor unions and other non-corporate groups. He turned to journalism to alert a greater number of people to wrongdoings that he believed were being perpetrated by companies, politicians, lobbyists, and governments—activities that, in his view, the mainstream media in the U.S. has ignored or downplayed intentionally or through ignorance. His column, “Inside Corporate America,” appears in the London *Guardian* and its sister newspaper, the Sunday *Observer*; he is also on the staff of the British TV program *Newsnight*, on which he is seen in the field wearing his signature raincoat and old gray fedora. According to Palast, the profit-driven American media cannot afford to publish what he writes, because his words are likely to antagonize the corporations that generate advertising revenue. (Only a few articles by Palast have appeared in U.S. print publications, among them the *Nation*, *Harper’s*, *In These Times*, the *Progressive*, the *Washington Post*, and *Rolling Stone*.) “I don’t like being in journalistic exile,” he told a *PR Week* (May 22, 2006) interviewer. “I don’t like my words trying to swim across the Atlantic. They could drown—and that usually happens. But it’s nearly impossible for raw, original investigative journalism to really make it into U.S. papers.”

Palast has investigated the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill in Prince William Sound, Alaska, in 1989; the influence of corporate lobbyists on government policy in Great Britain in the late 1990s; the controversial ballot counting in Florida after the 2000 presidential election, after which the U.S. Supreme Court declared the Republican candidate, George W. Bush, the winner; the Enron Corp.’s role in the energy crisis that affected millions of Californians in 2001–02; former president George H. W. Bush’s ties to the Saudi Arabian royal family and Saudi millionaires (in particular, members of the bin Laden family) and his success in quashing official scrutiny of their connections to terrorists; ways in which the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the U.S. Treasury Department harm rather than help developing nations; and current plans to build two dozen nu-



Daragh McDonagh, courtesy of Greg Palast

Palast, Greg

(PAL-ast)

June 26, 1952–
*Investigative
journalist*

*Address: c/o American
Program Bureau, 313
Washington St., Suite
225, Newton, MA
02458; c/o Dutton
Publicity, 375 Hudson
St., New York, NY
10014*

clear power plants in the U.S.—two to be built by the company that owns the plant in Fukushima, Japan, that was damaged by the earthquake and tsunami of March 2011. Some of those matters and others are the subjects of Palast's books *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy* (2002), which earned the U.S. National Press Club's Arthur Rowse Award for Press Criticism, and the collection *Armed Madhouse* (2006), whose original subtitle called it "dispatches from the front lines of the class war." Both books were *New York Times* best-sellers, and each has been updated and expanded.

Palast's investigative reporting on the televangelist Pat Robertson's business empire earned him the 1998 David Thomas Prize from the London *Financial Times* and a nomination for the 2000 Business Writer of the Year award from the Press Association, a British group. Palast co-directed, co-produced, co-wrote, and appeared as himself in the documentary *Bush Family Fortunes*; the film was shown in 2005 at the now-defunct Freedom Cinema Festival, where it won the George Orwell Courage in Journalism Award. Through his Web site Palast sells DVDs of that documentary and his other films: *The Assassination of Hugo Chávez* (2006), about the president of Venezuela; *Big Easy to Big Empty: The Untold Story of the Drowning of New Orleans* (2007); *The Election Files* (2008), about the last three U.S. presidential elections; and, most recently, *Palast Investigates*, a compilation of reports that aired on *Newsnight*.

Writing for the *Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch* (June 19, 2006), Bill Eichenberger characterized Palast as "a righteous crusader for truth and justice"; Anne Simpson, a Glasgow, Scotland, *Herald* (April 1, 2002) reporter, described him as a "swashbuckling subversive ever on the alert" and as "among the last of that old-fashioned journalistic breed, the outraged pamphleteer, a tireless investigative reporter striving to expose the gross and tiny tyrannies of life." Palast declared to Eichenberger, "Most of the pinheads in America who consider themselves journalists aren't reporters; they're repeaters. They go to press conferences and raise their hands politely, hoping to ask the president's official prevaricators what they should say. They rewrite press releases and pen bootlicking profiles of corporate CEOs who poison kids, then take away health insurance. These reporters are not scum. That would be unfair. It's their editors who are scum—news murderers, every one of them. . . . So they call me a 'muckraker'—a person who digs through the mud and glop of government and corporate files. Well, that's exactly what I am. I shovel up the dirt and garbage of our American democracy and show it to you." In an interview with Alexander Greenwood for *SoonerThought.com* (May 11, 2006), Palast said, "I want to make enemies. I don't want anyone from either [political] party to like Greg Palast; I want them to know that I'm going to get the truth out."

Palast's work has been praised by the environmental lawyer Robert F. Kennedy Jr.; Joseph E. Stiglitz, the winner of the 2001 Nobel Prize in economics; the documentary filmmaker Michael Moore; and the cognitive scientist and activist Noam Chomsky. His detractors include Kathleen Harris, Florida's secretary of state in 2000, who, as widely

"I don't like being in journalistic exile. . . . But it's nearly impossible for raw, original investigative journalism to really make it into U.S. papers."

quoted on the Web, has described him as “twisted” and “maniacal,” and people who, believing that the U.S.’s so-called war on terror was designed to indulge Israel and American Jewish organizations, have accused Palast of being an apologist for Israel and Zionism. Palast’s articles about influence peddling among members of British prime minister Tony Blair’s cabinet led the British tabloid the *Daily Mirror* one day in 1998 to publish Palast’s portrait on its front page under the headline “The Liar.” In May 2007 Markos Moulitsas, the founder of the blog *dailykos.com*, criticized Palast for repeatedly referring to “500 Karl Rove emails”; in Palast’s view the emails were evidence that Rove—a Republican strategist and George W. Bush adviser—had helped remove thousands of African-Americans and others from voter-registration rolls in Florida in 2000, but Moulitsas charged that the label “Rove emails” was inaccurate and that there was virtually nothing incriminating in the messages. He also labeled Palast “dangerous,” for claiming that Democrats knew about Rove’s role in suppressing black votes but refused to do anything about it because they might someday want to resort to Rove’s tactics.

Palast gives lectures through the American Program Bureau. On his Web site he solicits contributions to the Palast Investigative Fund, a charitable trust, to help him continue his work. He told *Current Biography*, “Until all the dragons are slain, I’m not resting.”

The only son of Gilbert L. and Gladys (Kaufman) Palast, Gregory Allyn Palast was born on June 26, 1952 in Los Angeles, California. He has one sister, Geri Palast, a lawyer, who served as assistant secretary of labor for congressional and intergovernmental affairs during the presidency of Bill Clinton; currently, she is the executive director of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, which focuses on funding of New York State public schools. Greg Palast dedicated his first book to his mother, who held a school-cafeteria job, and his father, a World War II veteran and furniture salesperson who “hated every minute” of his working life, in Palast’s words; Gil Palast also co-founded the La Mesa-Foothills Democratic Club, in California. Greg Palast wrote in his first book that he grew up in “the scum end” of Los Angeles, “between the power plant and the garbage dump.” During his youth he developed “a great anger and dislike” for the privileged, he told Simpson. He attended Fernangeles Elementary School and Richard E. Byrd Middle School, Los Angeles County public schools. At 13 he began attending civil rights demonstrations; during a Vietnam War protest in 1970, he was arrested.

Earlier, Palast attended John H. Francis Polytechnic High School, in Los Angeles. He told *Current Biography* that he left the school before his senior year. “Basically they were melting my brain, and I had to save myself,” he said. “Before I finished high school, I talked my way into college. Before I finished college, I talked my way into graduate school.” After a brief stint at San Fernando Valley State College (now California State University at Northridge), Palast transferred to the University of California (UC) at Los Angeles and then UC–Berkeley. At Berkeley Palast met a member of the radical political group the Weathermen, who encouraged him to familiarize himself with right-

Palast has been described as “among the last of that old-fashioned journalistic breed, the outraged pamphleteer, a tireless investigative reporter striving to expose the gross and tiny tyrannies of life.”

wing politics and learn about the “ruling elite” from “the inside.” Spurred by that advice, Palast applied successfully to the University of Chicago, in Illinois, where he studied economics; one of his professors was Milton Friedman, who won the Nobel Prize in economics in 1977 and later served as an adviser to President Ronald Reagan. Palast earned an A.B. degree from the university in 1974 and an M.B.A. in 1976.

During the next decade Palast worked as an investigator for blue-collar organizations including the United Steelworkers of America, the United Electrical Workers Union, and the Enron workers’ coalition in Latin America. “I didn’t want to take some pig job,” he told *Current Biography*. “So I decided I wanted to do something interesting, and use some skills for the working class.” One case in which he was heavily involved for years concerned the Long Island Lighting Co. (Lilco) and its construction from 1973 to 1984 of the Shoreham Nuclear Power Plant (which operated for a total of only 48 hours before it was permanently shut down, in 1989). The government of Sussex County, in Long Island, New York, a Lilco customer, armed with evidence Palast had unearthed, successfully sued Lilco for deceiving the public regarding the costs of construction in order to justify rate increases. Leonard Buder wrote for the *New York Times* (December 6, 1988) that Palast (known as Gregory Palast then), in his capacity as an economist and utilities specialist, testified in behalf of Sussex County at the Lilco trial held in 1988. In 1998, after a series of legal appeals, Lilco was converted into a public-private hybrid, with the Long Island Power Authority, a government agency, gaining ownership of parts of the utility—the outcome that Palast had hoped for all along, he told *Current Biography*. In John Rather’s *New York Times* (May 3, 1998) account of that conversion, which led to significant reductions in customers’ utility rates, Palast was identified as a “utility regulation analyst.” By his own account, he served as a consultant to 19 U.S. state governments.

Palast became involved in another long, drawn-out case shortly after the oil tanker *Exxon Valdez* suffered rips in its hull when it ran aground on Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound, off the southern coast of Alaska, on March 24, 1989. An estimated 11 million gallons of crude oil (or far more, according to some sources) gushed from the damaged ship, ultimately covering about 11,000 square miles of the sea and more than 1,000 miles of shoreline. The oil coated and killed hundreds of thousands of seabirds and mammals along with their food supplies: countless salmon and other fish, which died not only from contact with the oil but also because of the destruction of the vast populations of plankton and other organisms that made up their diets. The deaths of the fish, in turn, destroyed the livelihoods of thousands of Native American fishermen. In its public pronouncements the Exxon Corp. called the environmental disaster an accident and blamed it on one man—Joseph Hazelwood, the tanker’s captain. Members of the Chugash Alaska Corp., which represents the fishermen and other native Alaskans who live along the southern coast, recruited Palast to look into the causes of the spill and possible recourse for those who had lost their means of support because of it.

After extensive research Palast concluded that the spill was an accident that had been waiting to happen. When the tanker struck Bligh Reef, Captain Hazelwood was below decks, having fallen asleep after getting drunk. His replacement as lookout, the third mate, had no way of getting a warning from the device (a radar reflector) planted near Bligh Reef, because for over a year the ship's radar had been broken; the tanker's owner, the Exxon Shipping Co., had refused to allocate funds to have it fixed. In addition, from information contained in corporate documents, Palast discovered that executives of Exxon and the five other companies that own the Alaska pipeline knew that, contrary to legal requirements, the equipment in place to contain spills within Prince William Sound was grossly inadequate, but that they had voted against the expensive measures necessary to improve it. Moreover, an Exxon technician revealed to Palast that samples of contaminated seawater collected months and years earlier had alerted Exxon managers that smaller oil spills had already occurred, but that the managers had ordered the worker to "dump out oily water and refill test tubes from a bucket of cleansed sea water," Palast wrote in *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*. In another piece of evidence (the whole of which, according to Palast, filled four volumes), one former commander of the Port of Valdez (the *Exxon Valdez's* point of departure in Alaska) told Palast that when he showed his supervisor a report to be filed with government agents regarding an earlier oil spill, he was told, "You made a mistake. This was not an oil spill." In 1994 a jury awarded \$5 billion in punitive damages to the Native American fishermen and other injured parties, but for years afterward, through legal maneuvers undertaken at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars, Exxon avoided making any payments. In 2008—by which time about a fifth of the 32,000 original plaintiffs had died—the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Exxon's punitive damages could not exceed \$507.5 million.

In an article for Truthout.org (May 4, 2010), Palast wrote that "the party most to blame" for the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill was not Exxon but BP (formerly British Petroleum). BP Pipelines (Alaska) Inc. is another of the companies that own the Alaska oil pipeline. On April 20, 2010 an offshore rig leased to BP that was drilling for oil in the Gulf of Mexico off the coast of Louisiana exploded, killing 11 crew members and, during the next several months, spilling at least 185 million gallons of oil (or as much as 227 million gallons, some sources maintain). The oil spread over thousands of miles of seawater, polluted hundreds of miles of shoreline, and killed huge numbers of fish, shrimp, seabirds, and other animals. "In the end, this is bigger than BP and its policy of cheaping-out and skiving the rules," Palast wrote for Truthout.org. "This is about the anti-regulatory mania which has infected the American body politic. While the 'tea baggers' are simply its extreme expression, US politicians of all stripes love to attack 'the little bureaucrat with the fat rule book.' . . . Americans want government off our backs . . . that is, until a folding crib crushes the skull of our baby; Toyota accelerators speed us to our death; banks blow our savings on gambling sprees; and crude oil smothers the Mississippi. Then, suddenly, it's, 'where the hell was the Government!'"

Earlier, in 1995, Palast's frustration over what he saw as journalists' complicity with, or obliviousness to, a massive Prince William Sound cover-up led him to become a reporter himself. He secured a job with the center-left London *Observer* and the London *Guardian*. (The former is published on Sundays; since 1993 it has been owned by the latter, which comes out Mondays through Saturdays.) At that time both newspapers were owned by the Scott Trust, which had been set up in 1936 to ensure that the *Guardian* remained editorially independent; the trustees were forbidden to benefit personally from the publication of the newspapers, and all profits were returned to the *Guardian*. In 2008 the trust was converted to a limited company; like its predecessor, the Scott Trust Ltd. does not pay dividends, and all profits from the *Guardian* and the *Observer* are plowed back for their operating expenses.

In one of his earliest investigations in Great Britain, Palast went undercover, pretending to represent Texas oil shippers and power-plant builders and intimating that he himself was on the take, as a means of looking into corporate lobbyists' dealings with British cabinet officials and members of Parliament. "Investigative reporting requires massive amounts of time, money and resources, and most news outlets aren't willing to make that commitment," Palast told a reporter for the *Oregonian* (April 4, 2003). "And most investigative reporters in America aren't really trained as investigators. They're promoted from within because they've done a good job elsewhere in the paper, but they don't really know how to investigate." The so-called cash-for-access scandal was dubbed Lobbygate and became front-page news in Great Britain in 1998, about a year after Tony Blair became prime minister. Mark Johnson reported for *PR Week* (April 18, 2003, on-line) that thanks to recommendations by the British governmental Committee on Standards in Public Life and the British trade group the Association of Professional Political Consultants, "lobbyists now work as strategists for their clients, offering advice on which ministers to meet on each issue, how to build a case to government, as well as arranging meetings. But no personal introductions." In the first edition of *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, Palast wrote that "the real story" was not about lobbyists but about "Tony Blair and his inner circle" and "New Labour's obsessive pursuit of the affection of the captains of industry and the media."

The controversy surrounding the counting of ballots in Florida in the 2000 U.S. presidential election led Palast to investigate the problems that had beset many of the state's polling places and thousands of voters on Election Day, particularly in several southern Florida counties that were heavily Democratic and African-American. (According to the later-released federal tally, in Florida, where 5,851,785 votes were officially recognized in the presidential contest, the total number of votes for the Republican nominee, George W. Bush, surpassed the number cast for the Democratic nominee, Al Gore, by 637, or .0001 percent.) There was much turmoil connected with the recount of the ballots, which continued until December 12, 2000, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the recount must end; during that process the

U.S. news media repeatedly discussed problems with paper ballots as well as computer-voting-machine malfunctions and breakdowns in the southern counties. Palast learned that some 180,000 ballots that had been cast were not counted because they had been “spoiled” in some way; of those, according to U.S. Civil Rights Commission demographers, an estimated 54 percent had been cast by African-Americans. Palast also discovered that before Election Day, with the approval of Jeb Bush, Florida’s Republican governor and a brother of George W. Bush, Florida’s Republican secretary of state, Katherine Harris, had removed the names of 57,700 Floridians (a figure Palast later revised upwards, to 94,000) from voting rolls on the grounds that they had previously been convicted of felonies and were thus prohibited from voting in Florida. But, as Palast later wrote for *Harper’s* (November 2004), “only 3 percent” of the 94,000 “could later be verified as former convicts.” Many of those who were turned away at the polls had been found guilty only of misdemeanors, and in thousands of other cases, their names were identical or merely similar to those of convicted criminals. When Palast returned to Florida in 2004, he found that only about 1,000 of those purged from the voting rolls in 2000 had been reinstated. “Those who attempt to get back their vote,” he wrote, “have been required, depending on the county, to seek clemency from Jeb Bush for crimes committed by others, or to provide fingerprints for investigation, or to undergo ad-hoc court-like proceedings to prove they are themselves and not some convict with a similar name.” In the October 14, 2004 issue of the *New York Times*, the columnist Paul Krugman cited Palast’s 2000 and 2004 investigations in Florida and wrote that the abuses by state officials were not “aberrations.” Rather, Krugman declared, “they’re the inevitable result of a Republican Party culture in which dirty tricks that distort the vote are rewarded, not punished.”

Palast wrote about the events in Florida for the *Observer*. In *The Best Democracy Money Can Buy*, they are described in a chapter called “Jim Crow in Cyberspace,” which begins, “In the days following the presidential election, there were so many stories of African Americans erased from voter rolls you might think they were targeted by some kind of racial computer program. They were.” The 2002, 2003, and 2004 editions of that book are all subtitled *An Investigative Reporter Exposes the Truth About Globalization, Corporate Cons, and High-Finance Fraudsters*. The first, 2006 edition of *Armed Madhouse* was subtitled *Who’s Afraid of Osama Wolf?, China Floats, Bush Sinks the Scheme to Steal ’08, No Child’s Behind Left, and Other Dispatches from the Front Lines of the Class War*; the 2007 edition is subtitled *From Baghdad to New Orleans: Sordid Secrets & Strange Tales of a White House Gone Wild*.

Palast is currently investigating plans for the construction of some two dozen new nuclear power plants in the U.S., for which, he wrote in a report for Truthout.org and BuzzFlash.org (March 14, 2011), the administration of President Barack Obama may provide as much as \$56 billion in loans. In the same report he identified one such proposal as the South Texas Project, which calls for the building of two such plants on the Gulf Coast of Texas. According to Palast, the principal

SUGGESTED READING:

(Albany, New York)
Times Union J p1
June 18, 2006

(Glasgow, Scotland)
Herald p9 Apr. 1,
2002

gregpalast.com

Los Angeles Times
Calendar p1 May 19,
2003

builder under consideration is the Tokyo Electric Power Co., the owner of the nuclear power plant in Fukushima, Japan, that was damaged by the earthquake and tsunami that struck Japan on March 11, 2011. Another possible participant is a division of the company Shaw Construction, which, Palast charged, faked safety tests connected with the Shoreham nuclear power plant in the 1970s.

Palast is the co-author, with Jerrold Oppenheim and Theo MacGregor, of *Democracy and Regulation: How the Public Can Govern Essential Services* (2003), which was written for and published by the United Nations International Labour Organisation. Parts of it were based on lectures Palast had given at Cambridge University, in England, and the University of São Paulo, in Brazil. The book explains how water, gas, electricity, and telephone services are supplied and regulated in the United States and how, by emulating aspects of the U.S. systems, other nations could reduce the costs of providing such services. *Democracy and Regulation* won the 2004 Upton Sinclair Freedom of Expression Award from the American Civil Liberties Union.

Palast lives in the U.S. with his wife and occasional collaborator, Linda Levy, and their teenage twins, a son and a daughter.

—C.S.

Pearlman, Edith

June 26, 1936– Short-story writer

Address: c/o Lookout Books, Dept. of Creative Writing, University of North Carolina–Wilmington, 601 S. College Rd., Wilmington, NC 28403

For over four decades beginning in the late 1960s, Edith Pearlman's insightful, touching, crisply crafted short stories appeared in various magazines, literary journals, and newspapers but remained under the radar of most critics and members of the reading public—despite the fact that she earned many literary honors, including on three occasions one of America's most prestigious awards for short fiction, the O. Henry Prize. During that time she also published three books—*Vaquita and Other Stories* (1996), *Love Among the Greats and Other Stories* (2002), and *How to Fall* (2005)—and saw her work included in prominent anthologies, among them *Best American Short Stories* (1998, 2000, 2006). Pearlman's relative obscurity ended after Lookout Books published *Binocular Vision: New & Selected Stories*, in January 2011. In a single day the book received glowing notices in the pages of the *New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, with both critics starting their reviews by admitting that they had never heard of the 74-year-old Pearlman. “You know, I've known all along that I had a rather small following, so I wasn't surprised they hadn't heard of me,” Pearlman said in an interview with *Current Biography*, the source of quotes for this article unless otherwise noted. In his review for the *Los Angeles Times* (January 16, 2011), David L. Ulin wrote that it was *because* he had never heard of Pearlman that he got to experience “the great joy of discovering her, the thrill of coming upon a writer with an eye, and a command of language, so acute.” Roxana Robinson, in her assessment for the *New York Times Book Review* (January 16, 2011), described the writing in *Binocular Vision* as “intelligent, perceptive, funny and quite beautiful.” The following week the *New York Times* included the book on its “Editors' Choice” list.