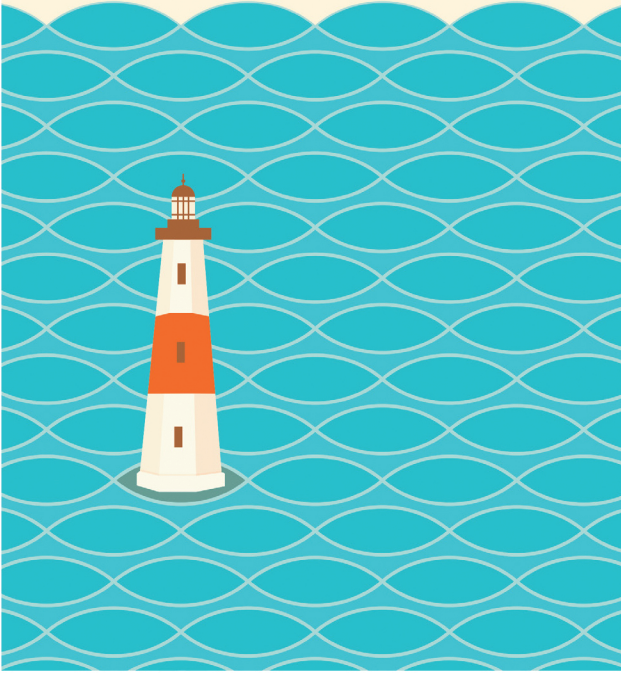


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Montauk *Cover*

MAX FRISCH
IDENTITY

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Markers of Silence and Contemplation: A Conversation in Three Parts with Tony Perez, Jacob Vala, and Jonathan Dee

Max Frisch's *Montauk* slithers between the inner realms of experience and observation. Narrated by Frisch himself, or some close approximation, the text centers on an actual, weekend-long affair with Lynn, an employee of his publisher and woman thirty-three years his junior. Though Lynn has not read Frisch's work, her presence stirs up a messy self-examination of his alienation from and failed relationships with women. A lover, a ping-pong opponent, a reader, Lynn seems to open a space in which Frisch explores his doomed connections with those closest to him. In the two-day span, he adopts a digressive form to capture the lived experience, both internally and externally: "I want to invent nothing; I want to know what I notice and think when I am not thinking of possible readers. Do I write just to satisfy readers, just to give critics something to work on?" *Montauk* examines its author as much as it examines its own form.

I recently spoke with three men involved with the

2016 reissue of Frisch's text. Tony Perez is an editor for Tin House Books. Jakob Vala created the beautiful cover art—the watery, minimalistic, heaving blue seascape interrupted by a red lighthouse. Jonathan Dee's introduction to the release proves to be a helpful guide for readers unfamiliar with Frisch. Here we discuss the intersection between Max Frisch's world and art and how the most recent release of his late modernist opus came to be.

I. Conversation with Tony Perez, Tin House Books Editor

CH: How did you first discover *Montauk*? And what drew you to the decision to put it back in print?

TP: When we reissue an out-of-print book, it's typically because somebody—usually another writer—has been a great evangelist for it. In this case, that was Scott Cheshire. The first time I met him he raved about the book, convincingly enough that I started trolling for copies online. But I couldn't find the slim, beat-up paperback for under about \$40. Soon thereafter, he published a great essay about his own discovery of the book, and "plotless novels" in general, which finally made me suck it up and pull the trigger. I think I read it that first time in a single sitting. It felt like the spiritual older cousin of some of my favorite recent novels: those by Jenny Offill (as Scott mentions in his essay), Ben Lerner, Sheila Heti, and others. But it felt singular too, not quite like anything I'd ever read. I was surprised that no one had reissued it. When we started jumping through hoops to track down the rights, that part made a lot more sense. I eventually learned that I was certainly not the first person to try. Just when we started feeling self-satisfied about this great discovery, we realized that it had been sitting under our noses all along.

Jonathan Dee had written glowingly about the book in the second issue of *Tin House*.

CH: What was the process like as far as obtaining the rights and getting the book back into print? How long ago did this process start?

TP: That part was tricky; the various rights were held by a number of different publishing entities and estates, and it seemed like no one had the whole lay of the land. Luckily the people who *did* have a piece of the puzzle were kind, helpful, and enthusiastic about getting the book back into print. So, for those interested in bureaucratic proceduralism: the rights to *Montauk* itself were controlled by Suhrkamp Publishing House in Berlin, but the English language edition was controlled by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt. At some point over the years they lost track of the translator's agreement, so were unable to issue the rights, as we'd need Geoffrey Skelton's estate's blessing. We found his son through the Society of Authors, and he gladly signed off on it. However, the translation was co-registered with Skelton and Frisch, so we needed permission to publish the translation from Frisch's estate as well. Thomas Strässle at the Max Frisch Foundation helped us secure those final rights. Those emails put a hurt on my gmail storage, I'm sure.

CH: How would you describe Frisch's influence upon contemporary literature? Have you found there is a Frisch community out there embracing this reprint of *Montauk* or was it harder-going to remind people in America who Frisch is than you thought it might be?

TP: It's tough to say exactly what Frisch's influence is among American writers, but I think *Montauk* anticipated a lot of the autofiction that's been popular the last few years. Frisch wasn't someone that I heard name-checked terribly frequently before we took this project on, but when I talk

about him now, I'm pleasantly surprised how many writers I know admire his books. Of course, I routinely discover that other people's blind spots aren't as gaping as my own.

I've been really happy with the reception so far; these things are always an uphill battle, but there seems to be something like palpable excitement for this book. Ben Lerner sent a nice note the other day, and I got the impression he's been talking it up to whomever will listen. I can't imagine a better person to have out on the stump for *Montauk*.

CH: Do you think this is a key work to understanding Frisch's life? Or is it unwise to treat *Montauk* as any sort of historical account?

TP: I'm inclined to take Frisch at his word that this is a novel—not straight memoir—but whether or not the scant plot went down exactly as he wrote it, it's clearly a very personal book. So on some deeper level, I think anyone that wanted to understand Frisch's life and perspective would be wise to start here. Still, you may want to cross-reference those impressions with his Sketchbooks prior to making any grand pronouncements at cocktail parties.

CH: In a passage on page 25, Frisch writes that he is “not interested in politics at all.” Of course, if you've read other works of his you can see this may not exactly be 100% true, but I'm curious as a publisher what you look for in literature. Are you looking for more ambiguity and nuance in the texts you're interested in or do you think work should be more clearly political and didactic in its approach? Would *Tin House* publish an author whose politics are not in accord with its own political perspective?

TP: I think there's an important place for didactic political writing—God knows there's plenty out there to be didactic about—but in literature I gravitate toward

stories where whatever conclusion we're coming to isn't foregone. A couple years ago at our Writers Workshop, Jim Shepard made a useful distinction between drama and conflict. To paraphrase him poorly, a situation can be intensely dramatic but still one-sided, whereas a compelling central conflict is one that the reader is at least initially fruitfully uncertain how to negotiate.

I think I'd have a hard time acquiring a new book if I found its politics totally despicable. Though I can't say I've been put in a position where I had to make that tough decision. But when it comes to reissues, I'm open to books that I might take issue with, even if only because I think they're important for the historical/cultural record. Next year we're publishing a translation of the Dutch writer Jan Wolker's *Turkish Delight*; there's plenty in it that makes me squeamish, but it was a tremendously important and influential book (and its main character, however awful he might act, certainly embodies a compelling conflict).

II. Conversation with Jakob Vala, *Montauk* Cover Designer

CH: How would you describe your creative process for this assignment?

JV: I begin every cover design by reading the manuscript and taking note of any imagery or themes that stand out. For me, *Montauk* is an exploration of the aging male identity. As the author-narrator relates his insecurities and regrets over past relationships, he reveals an underlying loneliness. I wanted to express this vulnerability as well as the sort of drifting tone of Frisch's writing. It was also important, to me, to reference the iconic Montauk lighthouse—not only as an indicator of place, but as a symbol of masculinity and isolation.

In creating my illustrations, I started with a few sketches, but quickly transitioned to the computer, making the lighthouse first. From there, I played with pattern and color until I felt I had a few solid concepts.

CH: How was this assignment different than other cover design assignments you have had in the past?

JV: I was given quite a bit of freedom to explore with this cover. The editor, Tony Perez, wanted to pay tribute to the original edition and suggested a retro-minimalist aesthetic, which I'm always game for. I believe I was told to have fun and "win a design award or something."

CH: Compared to the other cover designs you did for *Montauk*—all of which are gorgeous, by the way—what do you feel stands out about the final choice for this edition of *Montauk*?

JV: Thank you. We had fantasies of printing all four covers, but, in the end, there was a clear consensus. The final cover feels most authentic to the story and its era, without looking dated.

CH: How was the decision made for the final cover?

JV: I presented five covers to the rest of the book staff. My single photo-based concept was immediately eliminated. Everyone had a favorite of the four remaining covers, but we all agreed that the final option was the best. It was a quick decision.

CH: How did your reading of *Montauk* influence the cover design? Have you read any other of Frisch's texts? If so, were they on your mind while thinking how to work with *Montauk*?

JV: I'd only heard of Frisch in passing before we acquired *Montauk*. The cover was inspired, solely, by my reading of the book and the small bit of research I did, in order to establish a fuller context. An advantage of redesigning something like *Montauk* is the amount

of existing discourse. These outside perspectives can be helpful, to a point, but I tried to avoid overcomplicating the design process with too many opinions.

CH: Though each of the cover designs exhibits their own vitality, there are aesthetic similarities among the other illustrations. You play with repetition of color and shape. What brought that aspect out for you? Did you approach the cover with a theme in mind?

JV: Tony and I wanted to honor the mid-70s time period of the original printing, while appealing to a contemporary audience. I love the paperback aesthetic of that time: the grid structure of Penguin's covers and Alvin Lustig's earlier work for New Directions. Those covers have an elegant minimalism, created through pattern and a very intentional use of color. I also chose to limit the color palette as a nod to older printing techniques. Except for the off-white, paper color, the final cover uses various opacities of only two colors.

III. Conversation with Jonathan Dee, Writer of the *Montauk* Introduction

CH: While *Montauk* is based upon actual events in Frisch's life, some passages read like fragmented vignettes in a narrative whose plot is secondary to the themes, language, and form. How does this stylistic approach complicate (or mirror) the relationship between memory and narrative?

JD: The "plot" of the book is indeed secondary—simple and uneventful; the drama proceeds from the compulsive, associative workings of Frisch's memory, as he puts the events and sensations of the present into the broader, sadder context of the history of his relationships

with women. That restlessness and discontinuity—that fragmentation, as you put it—seems to me a good formal mirror for the ways in which one recalls, voluntarily or otherwise, one's own life and the mistakes therein.

CH: Frisch writes, "The writer is afraid of feelings that are not suited to publication; he takes refuge then in irony; all he perceives is considered from the point of view of whether it is worth describing, and he dislikes experiences that can never be expressed in words." In your experience as a novelist, does language automatically obfuscate lived experience? How would this relate to Frisch's actual relationships?

JD: I think what he's talking about is the double consciousness with which every writer is familiar: the awareness of life as material, even as life is being lived. This awareness predates the writing itself, so I don't see it as being about language per se.

CH: In the introduction, you mention Frisch's catastrophic long-term relationships with the women in his life. Though this book seems to mostly be about a single affair he had, do you see *Montauk* as an oblique (but perhaps more genuine) glimpse into Frisch's other failed relationships?

JD: Entirely. The affair with the young publicist is less subject than lens. Its ersatz intimacy, its lack of consequence, are the terms upon which its "success" depends; Frisch comes to realize that those terms have been set by himself, within himself, over the course of a lifetime.

CH: *Montauk* is written in a similar form and style to Frisch's later work—short sentences with lots of open white space. How do you think the gaps and blank margins work with the book's thematic objectives?

JD: They are markers of silence and contemplation. Though I suppose technically they make this book (like *Man in the Holocene* and others) read more quickly, paradoxically they also slow the prose down, isolate the ideas within it, pull them up from the stream of time.

CH: Toward the end of your introduction, you claim that *Montauk* fits into a tradition we now call autofiction. Do all autobiographies, at least on some level, defy passive remembrance? Is the writer inventing, perhaps unconsciously, his or her own life story as he or she writes it? What does fictionalizing a biography offer to the reader?

JD: *Montauk* avails itself of fictional forms and techniques, but that's not the same as saying that the material it contains is fictionalized. It's true, of course, that all autobiography involves levels of invention, both conscious and subconscious. I'm kind of old-fashioned, though, in feeling that there is still a moral line, important if not always bright, between acknowledging the limits of memory and deliberate falsification for aesthetic gain.

CH: As a novelist yourself, how has your reading of Frisch influenced your own writing?

JD: When I was much younger, *I'm Not Stiller* very compellingly taught me what an unreliable narrator was. As for the influence of his later novels, I'll paraphrase Joy Williams: some great books can teach us little about technique, their way of touching us is simply by exploding on the lintel of our minds.