Don’t be fooled by the slapstick comedy and the silly names, the labyrinthine plots that careen around and veer maddeningly toward irresolution and paranoia, the playful gags and the abundant nods to pop culture—or to stoner culture, for that matter. Thomas Pynchon writes serious moral fiction.

Although his name has become a byword for postmodernism and impenetrable prose, *Bleeding Edge* makes clearer than ever before what has been true since the publication of *V.* half a century ago: Pynchon is a writer with a profound, unwavering moral vision and an abiding commitment to realism. Not the realism of a Balzac or a Howells, of course, but the kind employed by Dostoevsky and Flannery O’Connor, the kind that forgoes verisimilitude in favor of the fantastic and the grotesque in order to make a point about the nature of reality—what is real and enduring, and what isn’t.

“Tanks are mortal, pears eternal,” was Milan Kundera’s memorable formulation in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, and this eloquent phrase pretty well captures Pynchon’s take on the subject, too. Perennial champion of the animate over the inanimate, tireless advocate of love, not war, he begins and ends *Bleeding Edge* with the simultaneous
bursting into bloom of “what looks like every Callery Pear tree on the Upper West Side,” as Ziggy and Otis, two brothers on the cusp of adolescence, head to school.

Their mom, our protagonist, is Maxine Tarnow, a fraud investigator who will spend much of the novel digging into the affairs of hashslingerz, a sinister tech security company, and its equally questionable CEO, Gabriel Ice. The pear blossoms' return marks the passage of a turbulent year—its rough, or possibly exact, midpoint is September 11, 2001—and holds out the hope of continuity and renewal in nature, and family, in sharp contrast to the “flimsy” towers of the World Trade Center and the fleeting nature of “all forms of reality in which the basic unit is the pixel, all of it gone down without a sigh into the frozen midwatch hour.”

Maxine’s quest to get to the bottom of hashslingerz, like Oedipa Maas’ attempt to untangle Pierce Inverarity’s corporate holdings in The Crying of Lot 49, combines elements of hardboiled detective fiction with the engineering genius of Rube Goldberg. A tip from an ex-fling is all it takes to set in motion a chain of events that will see Maxine cross paths with March Kelleher, a long-time liberal activist who also happens to be Gabriel Ice’s mother-in-law; Russian mobster Igor Dashkov and his aspiring-rapper minions, twins Misha and Grisha; and Conkling Speedwell, an olfactory sleuth who bills himself as a “freelance professional Nose” and harbors a deep admiration for the Führer.

She also meets brutal federal agent Nicholas Windust, to whom Maxine finds herself attracted against her better judgment, and a dozen or so assorted computer programmers, graphic designers, hackers, and venture capitalists who are weathering the bursting of the dot-com bubble with varying degrees of success. Throw in Ziggy’s krav maga teacher, along with Maxine’s best friend, therapist, sister, parents, and ex-husband—and you still have a relatively manageable cast of characters, actually, by the author’s usual standards.

The plot, too, has many frayed edges but only a single main strand, and this
I unfolds in a straightforward, chronological way. The prose hardly, if ever, trips one up. For Pynchon enthusiasts, *Bleeding Edge* may make for an unsettlingly quick read, even as it offers plenty of enjoyable opportunities to spot allusions to earlier works. (Some will already have noticed that March Kelleher is reminiscent of *Vineland*’s Sasha Gates and Windust of Brock Vond.)

Such admirers can rest assured that the novel’s readability has less to do with keeping things light than with ensuring that its message comes through loud and clear. Here, as in his other novels, Pynchon plays the dunce in reverse by hiding philosophy, and even theology, under a comic book cover—in this case, under a pile of references to Beanie Babies, *Friends*, and the Y2K debacle.

Beneath all that, *Bleeding Edge* offers an extended meditation on what mass media has done to obscure Americans’ vision and erode our values. It’s a subject Pynchon first broached in 1966, in an essay for the *New York Times Book Review* on the previous year’s Watts Riots in Los Angeles. “While the white culture is concerned with various forms of systematized folly—the economy of the area in fact depending on it—the black culture is stuck pretty much with basic realities like disease, like failure, violence and death, which the whites have mostly chosen—and can afford—to ignore.”

His solution was for white Angelenos to take a small detour on their daily commute—probably on their way to or from manufacturing “what is known around the nation as the L.A. Scene,” which “exists chiefly as images on a screen or TV tube”—and just “take a look at Watts. A quick look. The simplest kind of beginning.”

In the spring of 2001, a new kind of “screen” has taken the avoidance of unpleasant realities to a new level. A homonym for “departure,” as Maxine notes right away, *DeepArcher* is an online gaming application that serves, like the L.A. Scene, as “a virtual sanctuary to escape to from the many varieties of real-world discomfort.” Players use it to navigate a Second Life–like representation of the nonfictional Deep Web—the part of the Internet not accessible to or indexed by search engines.
the Internet not accessible to or indexed by search engines—in avatar form.

When Maxine points out that “avatar” is the Hindu word for “incarnation,” she meets with blank stares. But even if the game’s programmers “don’t do metaphysical,” as we’re told, Pynchon repeatedly frames technology in exactly those terms. In the site’s early, heady days of rapid growth, with hackers from around the world contributing code, DeepArcher appears to be modeled on Milton’s descriptions of as-yet-uncreated matter in *Paradise Lost*: “a darkness pulsing with whatever light was before light was invented,” “the immeasurable uncreated.” The Fall comes soon enough, in the form of virtual gentrification, as corporate and government agents remake DeepArcher in their own image.

The catch to playing God in a virtual world, or even just spending a lot of time there, the novel implies, is that it threatens to eclipse even the most basic truths, up to and including one’s own mortality. “I don’t die,” Gabriel Ice says, eyeing the business end of Maxine’s Beretta. “There’s no scenario where I die.”

This triumph of systematized folly over reality, however, will last only as long as the power supply. “What happens when the grid goes dark? Generator fuel runs out and they shoot down the satellites, bomb the operation centers, and you’re all back down on planet Earth again. All that jabberin about nothin, all ’at shit music, all ’em links, down and gone.”

There’s nothing dire or morbidly gleeful in these predictions—Pynchon is no doomsday prepper—just a subtle hopefulness that a return to “meatspace” and “the slow drumbeat of Iroquois prehistory” might provide twenty-first-century America with a helpful course correction, away from our current escapism and regression. “September 11 infantilized this country,” Maxine says. “It had a chance to grow up, instead it chose to default back to childhood.”

In the end, our national character is what *Bleeding Edge* wants to get to the bottom of, not
hashslingrz. Gabriel Ice’s connections are still hopelessly tangled at the end of the novel, but readers might not even notice this, as what is at stake in Maxine’s quest subtly shifts away from fraud investigation and toward her family, and how her sons will fare in the world.

Parenting is not a new theme for Pynchon, although it, like his moral vision, has somehow largely escaped detection by the critics. In *Vineland*, the secret of adulthood is “that life is soldiering, that soldiering includes death, that those soldiered for, not yet and often never in on the secret, are always, at every age, children.” In that novel, Zoyd Wheeler stumbles upon this truth when, as the single father of a toddler with the flu, “he had his belated moment of welcome to the planet Earth, in which he knew, dismayingly, that he would, would have to, do anything to keep this dear small life from harm.”

Maxine arrives at much the same conclusion: “The only question it’s come down to is, where will Ziggy and Otis be protected from harm?” Not just physical harm, but spiritual harm, is what she wishes to prevent. “I don’t want to see them turn into their classmates, cynical smart-mouthed little bastards,” she confesses to her father, “but what happens if Ziggy and Otis start caring too much, Pop, this world, it could destroy them, so easily.”

Learning how to maintain one’s sanity and humanity both—to “Keep cool, but care,” in the words of V.’s McClintic Sphere—has been the task set before every Pynchon protagonist. If their reaction to the pear tree is anything to go by, Ziggy and Otis should be all right. “Awesome, Mom.” “Doesn’t suck.” A quick look, at their mother’s urging. The simplest kind of beginning.

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