

T. Kimball Brooker Prize Essay
Samuel Puliafito

Lorraine Louie and the Art of Vintage Contemporaries

Collection Focus

In 1984 Random House launched Vintage Contemporaries, a series of paperback novels that highlighted the literary fiction of young and upcoming writers. The series included early works from Denis Johnson, Raymond Carver, Joy Williams, Jay McInerney, and Richard Ford. Vintage Contemporaries also reissued notable works by established authors, including Charles Portis, Frederick Exley, and Peter Matthiessen. From its inception, the literary quality of the novels published under the Vintage Contemporaries imprint was matched by graphically consistent and visually unique cover designs.

Utilizing a basic template developed by graphic designer and artist Lorraine Louie, the covers for books published under the Vintage Contemporaries imprint from 1984 until late 1988 relied on prominent, punchy typography, a dramatic use of negative space and flat color, and allusive, dream-like visual imagery. The cover of Kaye Gibbons' 1988 novel *Ellen Foster* is an example of this early style. The predominantly white cover is overlaid with imagery and text in a visual collage. In the upper right corner, a rectangular block of dark purple contains the author's name in a white sans serif font that evokes the white base of the cover. To the left, a dot matrix adds visual interest as it transitions into the title of the novel presented in the same sans serif font in green with drop shadows, adding a three-dimensional character to the flat plane. Beneath the title, an illustration, done by Chris Moore, depicts a child's bedroom engulfed in water, evoking the wistful imaginings of the eponymous narrator.

By the end of 1988, the graphic language of novels printed by Vintage Contemporaries had shifted under the leadership of Louie. Frederick Exley's trilogy—*A Fan's Notes*, *Notes from a Cold Island*, and *Last Notes from Home*—typifies this shift. The visual illustration—previously a single component of a visual mélange of text, texture, and art—consumed the cover. This artwork was then overlaid with the author's name and the title of the novel. While the typography retained its font and differential use of shadowing, it became secondary to the artwork. Meanwhile, the illustrations themselves retained the surrealistic and naïve aspects seen on the covers of earlier releases. Indeed, all three covers within Exley's trilogy retain between them the visual motif of pages floating away from a writer's desk into the ether.

The juxtaposition of Louie's heavily structured designs and the fantastical imagery that accompanied them was and remains a notable stylistic innovation in the history of book design. Her work evoked the relationship between reader and text, a relationship that depends on the imaginative capacity, memory, and literary frame of reference of each reader.

The graphic template developed by Lorraine Louie, who died in 1999, was abandoned in the early 1990s. It has been subsumed by a more diverse and less visually cohesive set of cover designs under the Vintage Contemporaries imprint. However, the fact that some of Louie's designs remain in print testifies to the longevity and legacy of her work.

Collection Inspiration, Organization, and Direction

I began collecting Vintage Contemporaries in 2009, when I read "Cathedral" by Raymond Carver. At the end of the story, the narrator attempts to describe a cathedral to a blind man. After failing to adequately describe it, the narrator tries to draw one, guiding the blind man's hand as he draws. As they draw together, the blind man visualizes the cathedral and the narrator, closing his eyes, understands the blindness of the man. "Cathedral" was the final story in Carver's collection of the same name. That collection was the among the first seven releases issued by Vintage Contemporaries. The cover design of *Cathedral* provided the visual foundation for all of the releases that followed.

My collection consists of a range of novels published by the Vintage Contemporaries imprint prior to 1991. It is organized under a tripartite classification scheme: (1) first publications (called "A Vintage Original") originally printed under the Vintage Contemporaries imprint; (2) reprints of novels initially released in hardcover by Random House or its imprints that were subsequently re-released in paperback by Vintage Contemporaries within three years of their initial release; and (3) republications under Vintage Contemporaries of novels originally printed by Random House or its imprints greater than three years prior to its re-release or originally printed by other publishing firms at any date.

Acquisitions are made on the basis of distinctiveness and beauty in cover design, including graphical composition and visual illustration, as well as literary merit and personal interest. In terms of visual criteria, I value the earlier design scheme (present on printings prior to late 1988) which utilizes negative space and inset illustrations above the later design language which relied on larger, page-filling illustrations. In terms of literary criteria, many of the works published under the Vintage Contemporaries imprint correspond to my literary tastes. These works frequently highlight the lives and perspectives of marginalized individuals, suffering interpersonal and social challenges as the result of their status or worldviews. Often, the outlooks of these individuals are surreal, morally difficult, or criminalized. As a result of these thematic emphases, the novels are empathetic and illuminating. It is these novel within the series to which I am especially drawn. However, my collection will continue to develop and grow as my literary tastes change. Over a hundred novels were published by Vintage Contemporaries between 1984 and 1991. This deep catalogue will continue to bear fruit for my reading for several years.

Annotated Bibliography

All covers designed by Lorraine Louie. Illustrators are individually noted when known at the date of application submission. Random House imprints include Vintage Books, Vintage Contemporaries, and Alfred A. Knopf.

First Editions (Vintage Originals)

Eisenstadt, Jill. *From Rockaway*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988. Condition: very good.

Ford, Richard. *The Sportswriter*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1986. Cover illustration: Rick Lovell. Condition: good.

Kaysen, Susanna. *Asa, As I Knew Him*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1987. Cover illustration: Rick Lovell. Condition: fair.

McInerney, Jay. *Bright Lights, Big City*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1984. Cover illustration: Marc Tauss. Condition: good.

Tauss' illustration is among the best. The man in the trenchcoat is flanked by the "bright lights" of a neon sign and the "big city" embodied by the World Trade Center. The visual perspective also mirrors the second-person narration of the text.

—. *Ransom*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1985. Cover illustration: Rick Lovell. Condition: fair.

Pett, Stephen. *Sirens*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1990. Cover illustration: Rick Lovell. Condition: very good.

Prager, Emily. *Clea and Zeus Divorce*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1987. Cover illustration: Frank Morris. Condition: good.

Swan, Gladys. *Carnival for the Gods*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1986. Cover illustration: Rick Lovell. Condition: good.

Williams, Joy. *Breaking and Entering*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988. Condition: very good.

Reprints (First Vintage Contemporaries Edition following initial hardcover release by Random House or its imprints)

Carver, Raymond. *Cathedral*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989. Originally published in hardcover by Alfred A. Knopf in 1983. Cover illustration: Garnet Henderson. Condition: mint.

The first acquisition. This 1989 edition sports the later cover design, as well as a new illustration in place of the original illustration by Marc Tauss from the first Vintage Contemporaries edition in 1984.

Exley, Frederick. *Last Notes from Home*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1990. Originally published in hardcover by Random House in 1988. Cover illustration: David Monteil. Condition: very good.

Johnson, Denis. *Fiskadoro*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1986. Originally published in hardcover by Alfred A. Knopf in 1985. Cover illustration: Rick Lovell. Condition: very good.

—. *The Stars at Noon*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1986. Originally published in hardcover by Alfred A. Knopf in 1986. Cover illustration: Rick Lovell. Condition: mint.

Williams, Joy. *Taking Care*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1985. Originally published in hardcover by Random House in 1982. Condition: good.

Reissues (First Vintage Contemporaries Edition following extended period since initial release by Random Hour or its imprints or following initial publication by a publishing house other than Random House and its imprints)

Exley, Frederick. *A Fan's Notes*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988. Originally published in hardcover by Harper & Row Publishers in 1968. Cover illustration: David Monteil. Condition: mint.

A foundational part of the collection. A favorite book, a classic design. This version features the 1988 redesign, a revision on the 1985 Vintage Contemporaries version which featured the classic white frame over the same artwork.

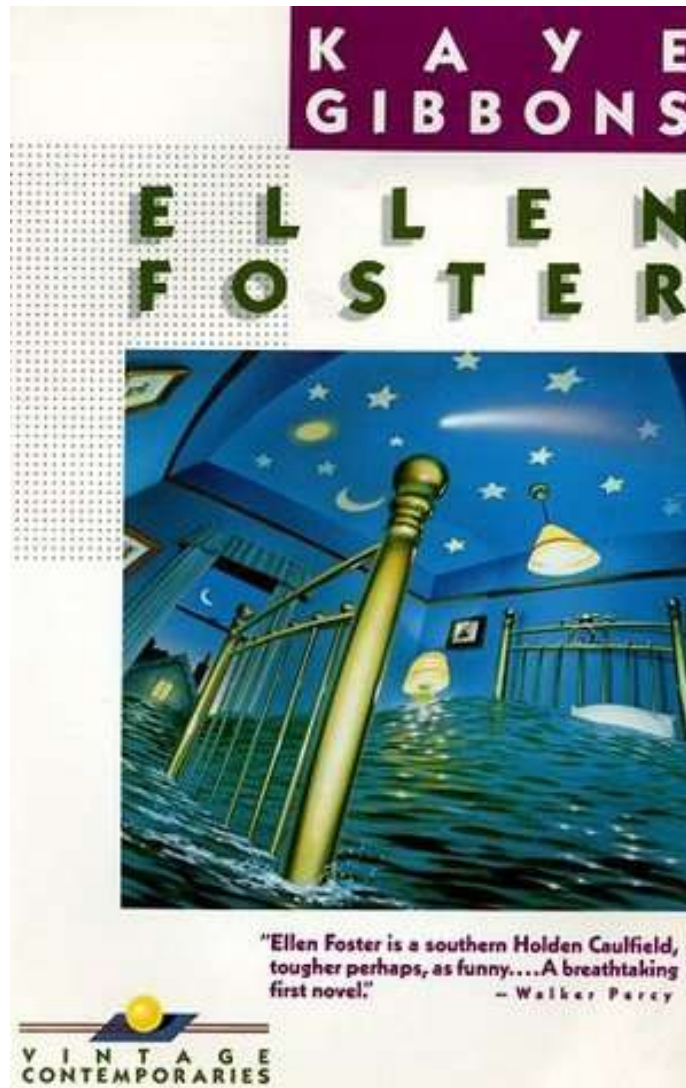
—. *Pages from a Cold Island*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988. Originally published in hardcover by Random House in 1975. Cover illustration: David Monteil. Condition: very good.

Ford, Richard. *Rock Springs*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988. Originally published in hardcover by The Atlantic Monthly Press in 1987. Cover illustration: Robert Crawford. Condition: good.

- . *The Ultimate Good Luck*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1987. Originally published in hardcover by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1981. Cover illustration: Chris Moore. Condition: very good.
- Gardner, Leonard. *Fat City*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1986. Originally published in hardcover by Farrar, Straus and Giroux in 1969. Condition: fair.
- Gibbons, Kaye. *Ellen Foster*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1988. Originally published in hardcover by Algonquin Books in 1987. Cover illustration: Chris Moore. Condition: very good.
- Martin, David. *The Beginning of Sorrows*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989. Originally published in hardcover by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in 1987. Cover illustration: Samuel Bayer. Condition: very good.
- McDonnell, Terry. *California Bloodstock*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989. Originally published in hardcover by Macmillan Publishing in 1980. Cover illustration: Janet Wooley. Condition: good.
- McGuane, Thomas. *To Skin a Cat*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1987. Originally published in hardcover by Seymour Lawrence in 1986. Cover illustration: Rick Lovell. Condition: very good.
- Portis, Charles. *Norwood*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1985. Originally published in hardcover by Simon & Schuster in 1966. Condition: good.
- Prager, Emily. *A Visit from the Footbinder*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1987. Originally published in hardcover by Simon and Schuster in 1982. Cover illustration: Frank Morris. Condition: very good.
- Weesner, Theodore. *The Car Thief*. New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1987. Originally published in 1972 by Random House. Condition: very good.

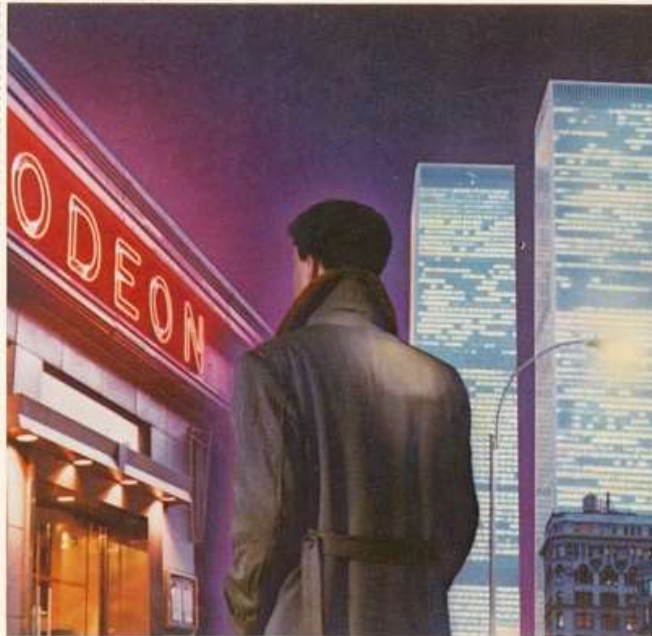
Visual Supplements

Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons and *Bright Lights, Big City* by Jay McInerney are representative of the earliest visual style developed by Lorraine Louie. The cover of *Ellen Foster* was illustrated by Chris Moore and the cover of *Bright Lights, Big City* was illustrated by Marc Tauss.



J A Y
McINERNEY

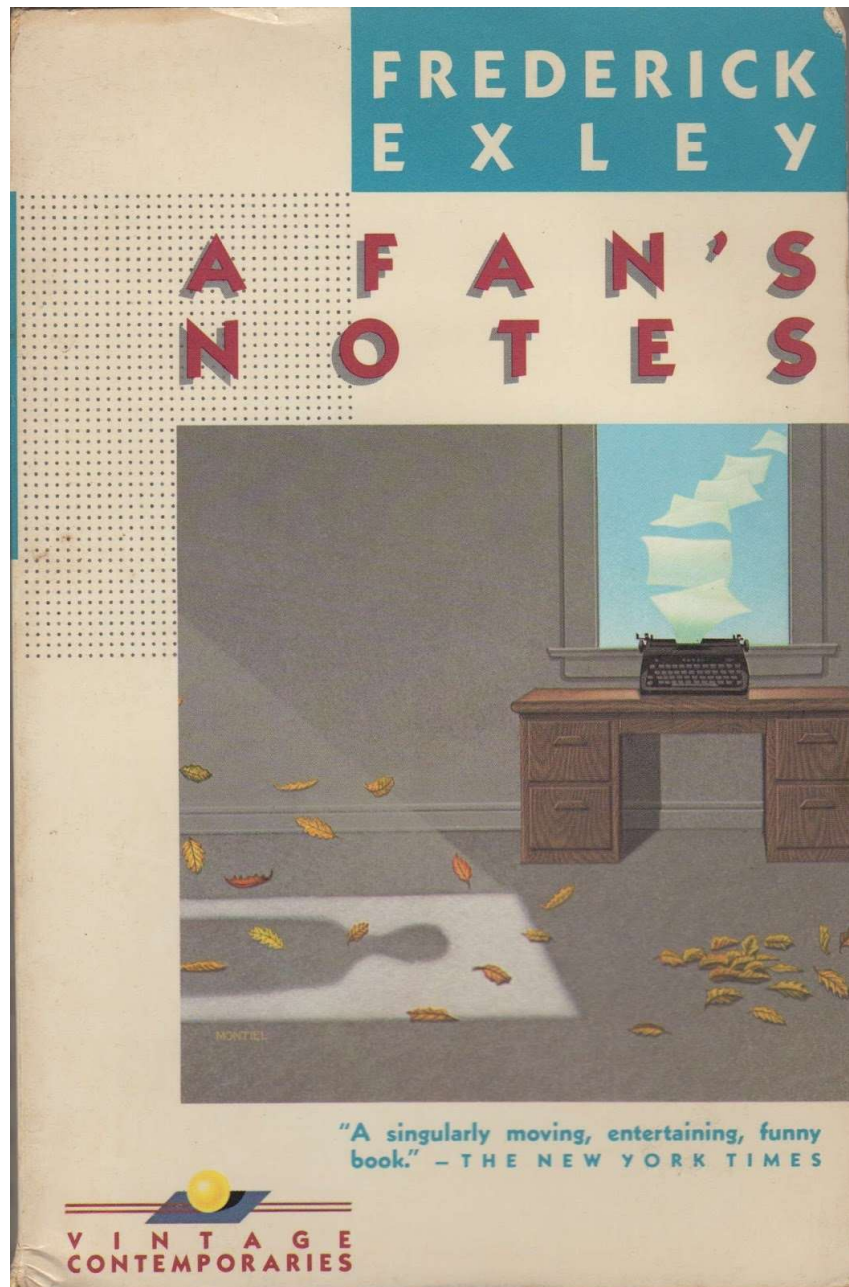
BRIGHT LIGHTS,
BIG CITY

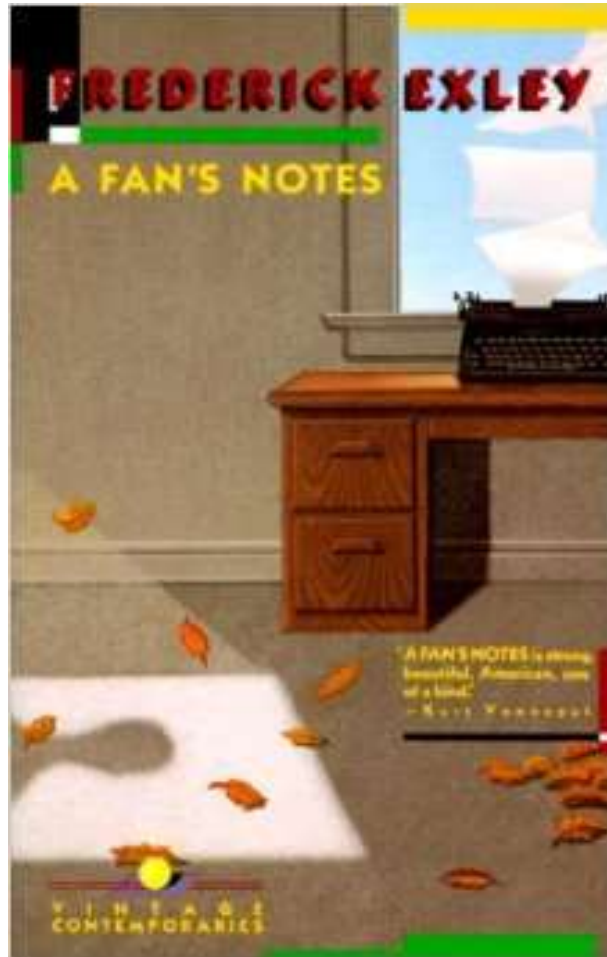


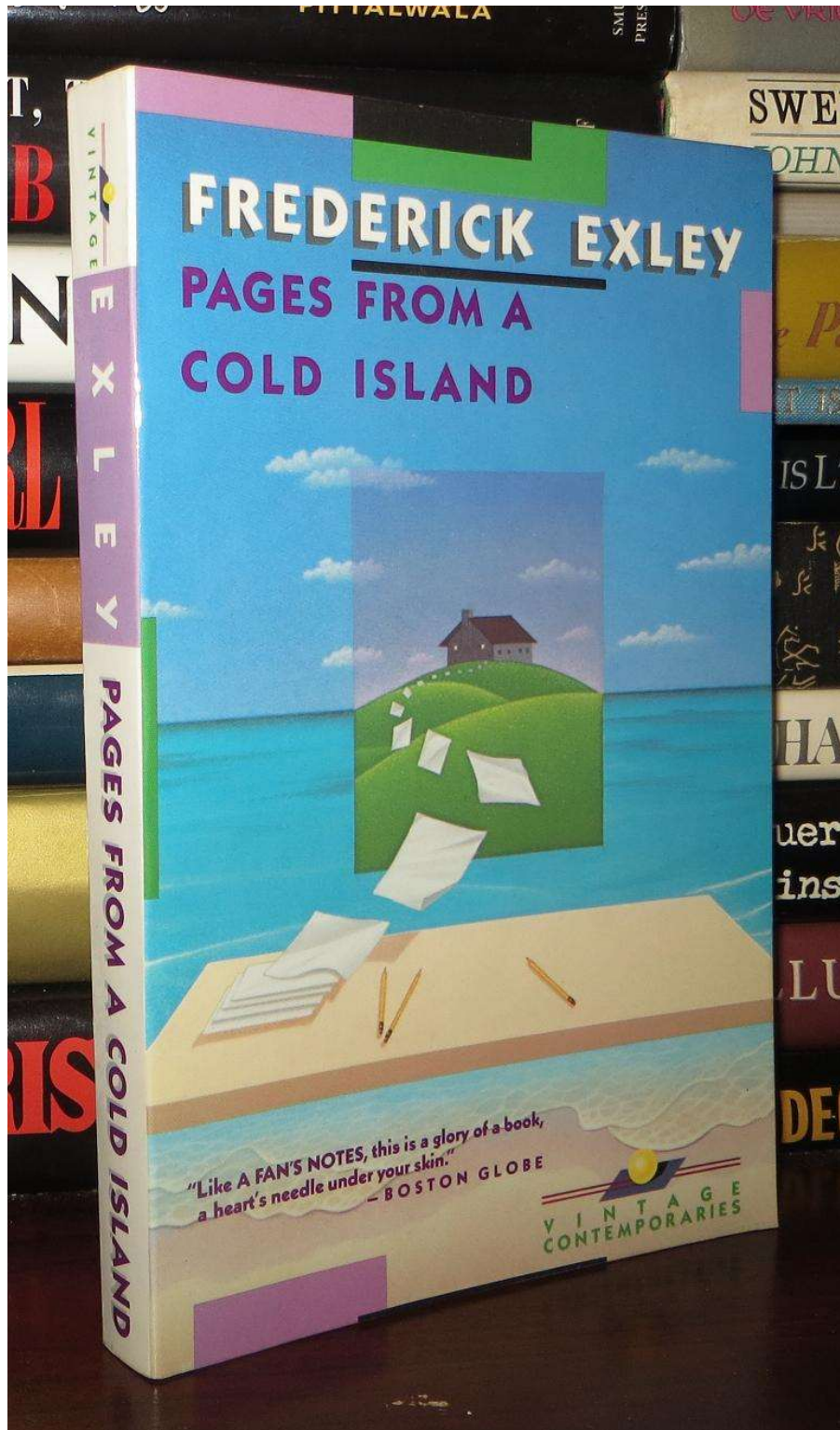
"A rambunctious, deadly funny novel that goes right for the mark—the human heart."
— RAYMOND CARVER

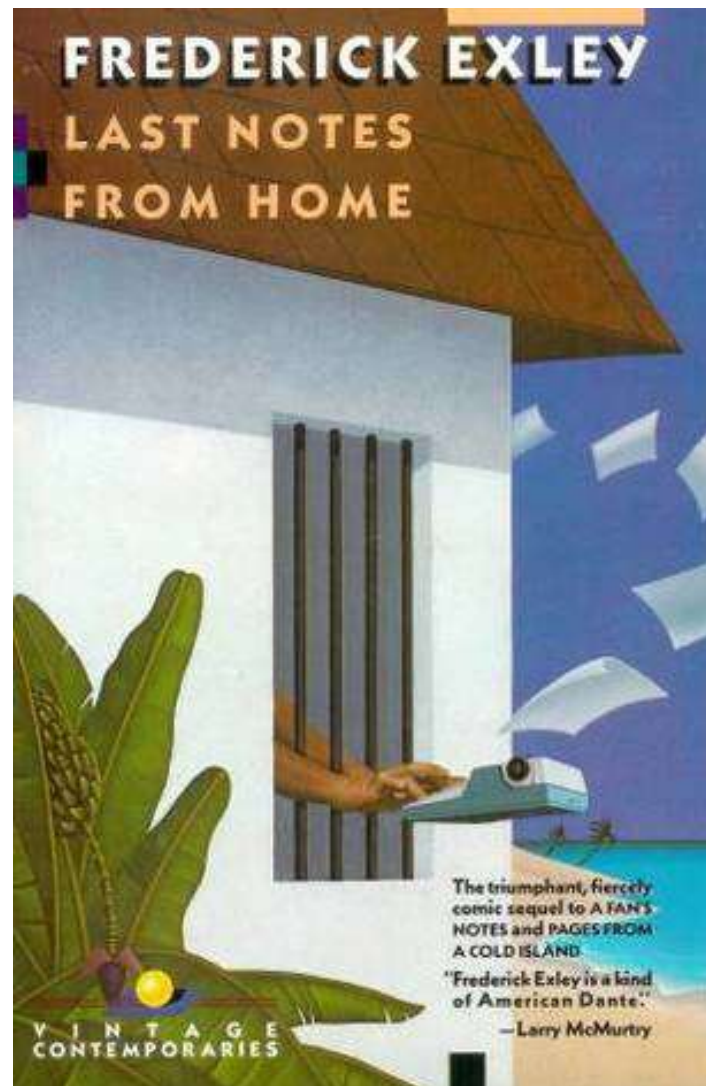

V I N T A G E
C O N T E M P O R A R I E S

Frederick Exley's trilogy—*A Fan's Notes*, *Pages from a Cold Island*, and *Last Notes from Home*—are excellent representations of the shift in Louie's template in late 1988 and good examples of shared visual motifs between novels. The early 1985 edition of *A Fan's Notes* is included first for comparison.









Finally, two editions of Raymond Carver's *Cathedral*. The first cover, published in 1984, provided the basis for all subsequent Vintage Contemporaries releases until late 1988. It was designed by Lorraine Louie and illustrated by Marc Tauss. The second cover, published in 1989, was designed by Lorraine Louie and illustrated by Garnet Henderson.

