Francine Prose

The 2010 winner of Washington University’s International Humanities Medal
Inside This Issue:

SECTION ONE
Three Studies in American Music

Remembering Jazz Pianist Hazel Scott: When Elegance Met Swing ................................. 3

“I’ve never been afraid of any deviation:” Joan Jett’s Electric Ladyland ......................... 6

Hat and Beard, Wizard and Zombie: The Complex Temper of Thelonious Monk .......... 9

SECTION TWO
International Humanities Medal Winner Francine Prose: Three Commentaries on Her Works

WU Drama Professor Henry Schvey Discusses Francine Prose’s The Lives of the Muses: Nine Women and the Artists They Inspired ................................................................. 12

WU Fiction Writer Marshall Klimasewiski Discusses Francine Prose’s Guided Tours of Hell: Novellas ................................................................. 16

WU English Professor Gerald Early Discusses Francine Prose’s Blue Angel: A Novel................................. 18

SECTION THREE
Three Women Speak Their Minds

The Rebel with a Cause and a Column ....................... 20

The Norman Conquest or The Last Wife of Norman Mailer Speaks ............................ 22

The Grand Dame and Her Views of Our Constructed and Contested World .......... 24

The Golden Age of Cold War Scholarship and Its End ................................................. 26

The Center for the Humanities will Conduct an NEH Summer Institute, 2011 ................. 28

Make a Gift to the Center for the Humanities

Join with other donors and supporters to ensure that the Center for the Humanities can continue to fulfill its mission. Help us continue to make the humanities a part of public life and yours.

Send your check, payable to Washington University, to:

The Center for the Humanities
C/o Shannon MacAvoy Grass
Washington University in St. Louis
Campus Box 1202
One Brookings Drive
St. Louis, MO 63130-4899

We have reviews, essays, and notes available only on the Web. Please go to “Markings” on our website at http://cenhum.artsci.wustl.edu. Our latest online review is of Arthur C. Brooks’s Who Really Cares: America’s Charity Divide. New work is posted every few weeks.

Belles Lettres
Publisher and Editor: Gerald Early
Managing Editor: Jian Leng

Please address all correspondence concerning Belles Lettres to the Editor.
popular feminist adage emblazoned across coffee mugs, t-shirts, and tote bags reads “well-behaved women seldom make history.” This statement’s popularity depends, I suspect, not only on pithiness mixed with a grain of truth, but also on the undeniable fact that so many women (men, too, for that matter) have been socialized to “make nice.” For it is often by troubling the waters and making waves that one “makes” history. Karen Chilton’s Hazel Scott: The Pioneering Journey of a Jazz Pianist from Café Society to Hollywood to HUAC allows us to ponder an equally fascinating philosophical corollary to the aforementioned quip, namely, what happens when trailblazing women—undeniable makers of history, whether well- or ill-behaved—are relegated to the historical margins and seemingly forgotten, leaving little-to-no memorable trace of their historical significance? In her reconstruction of the exemplary life and career of Scott, Chilton has shown the glamorous pianist to be one such forgotten figure long overdue for historical resurrection.

It is the trailblazing aspect of Scott’s life that I wish to foreground in this review. (Chilton alludes to as much by choosing the modifier “Pioneering” for her title.) Indeed, I don’t find it too outlandish to suggest that without Hazel Scott we may not have seen the likes of an Oprah Winfrey; or to claim that Scott and her first husband, Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., were truly “America’s First Black Power Couple,” predating the Obamas by over half a century. As a child Hazel Scott was a precocious and headstrong musical prodigy. She was born in Port of Spain, Trinidad, in 1920 to middle-class parents, Thomas and Alma. Her father, an intellectual with wanderlust, abandoned the family when Scott was just three; Scott’s mother was a classically trained pianist with professional aspirations. Along with her mother and grandmother Scott immigrated to Harlem before her fifth birthday and began formal piano lessons at the hand of her mother (indeed before then, the toddler/prodigy delighted family and friends in Trinidad by playing popular calypso and religious tunes by ear as adults looked on in wonderment). When Scott was eight, her mother brought her to Juilliard where she auditioned with Rachmaninoff’s “Prelude in C Sharp Minor.” Although she was far too young to receive a scholarship (the youngest scholarship recipients were thirteen), she was accepted to the prestigious school, studying under the tutelage of Oscar Wagner, who immediately recognized her genius upon hearing her play.

Thus began the professional training of this remarkable musician, actress, dancer, activist, entertainer, and exquisite beauty. During the Depression her mother, unable to earn a viable living teaching Harlem students classical piano, took up the saxophone as a way to make ends meet. Quickly, Alma became good enough on the sax to earn herself a spot with African-American multi-
instrumentalist and singer Valaida Snow and the Berry Brothers, and she toured up and down the eastern seaboard with the act. After her stint with Snow, Alma joined pianist Lil Hardin Armstrong’s all-girl band and, thereafter, the Harlem Harlicans. When Alma was on the road, Scott continued with her training and academic education. When Alma was home, the house “became a mecca for musicians.” The list of frequent visitors reads like a who’s who of Harlem’s musical royalty: Fats Waller, Art Tatum, James P. Johnson, Willie “the Lion” Smith, Lester Young, and Billie Holiday, to name just a few. All the while, Scott was honing her skills, picking up tricks of the trade and becoming a consummate performer.

Hazel Scott is perhaps best known for “swinging” or “jazzing” the classics, taking music from the conventional Western European classical canon and swinging it, inflecting tunes with jazz or boogie-woogie rhythmic and melodic improvisations. This makes perfect intuitive sense given her deep knowledge of and exposure to both the classical and jazz music worlds. Mentored by the all-time great jazz pianist Art Tatum (who himself played with lots of musical panache and embellishment), Scott developed this jazzing of the classics into her performance signature.

Her professional break came in 1939 when she became the headline act at Barney Josephson’s liberal-leaning Café Society nightclub, a gig she won largely through the instigation of jazz chanteuse Billie Holiday, who saw Scott as something of a protégé. When Café Society Uptown opened the following year, Scott’s performances were so popular that Josephson raised her salary to $1500 per week, a sum nearly unheard of for a female jazz instrumentalist. Remarkably, she was just nineteen years old at the time.

The year 1942 marks the pinnacle of Scott’s career. Wildly popular not only among the general public but with celebrities from multiple sites in the entertainment world, she flourished as the center of attention, referring to herself as “a truly spoiled baby.” When Hollywood came calling, Scott negotiated an impressive film contract with the help of Café Society impresario, Barney Josephson. Among her multiple demands were clauses that stipulated the following: that she would have final approval over all her filmed musical performances, that she would wear her own clothes rather than appear in anything she deemed less than attractive, and, perhaps most provocatively, that she would appear only as herself on film, regardless of the cast of characters or the plot of the film. This feat of negotiation is indeed remarkable, as one need only remember that most black actors at this time who entered the business were permitted to play only servants or buffoons. By playing herself, she was, in effect, refusing to be an actor. Her early film career, however, while glamorous and profitable, was short-lived. When a costume dispute with dancer/choreogra-pher David Lichine on the set of _The Heat’s On_ (1943) led to Scott’s three-day self-imposed strike on the set, the film’s director, Harry Cohn, was said to have pronounced, “She will never set foot in another movie studio as long as I live” (85). Just how portentous Cohn’s remark would be is more than anyone at the time could know.

By August 1945, Scott had married Abyssinian Baptist Church leader and recently elected Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. The two had carried on an illicit affair since at least 1944, even though Powell was still legally married and Scott herself was in a committed relationship with another man. The two seemed to fully complement each other even though concerns about women’s gender roles—i.e., his congregation’s concerns about the preacher’s wife playing in nightclubs—loomed just below the surface. Eventually, Scott agreed to stop nightclub performances in favor of concert hall settings. Although not a death knell per se, the change (in repertoire and venue) dealt a serious blow to her lucrative career.

It was Powell’s idea to launch Scott’s turn as a concert pianist at DC’s Constitution Hall, a place where only a few years before Negro singer Marian Anderson had been denied access to perform by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR). In accordance with the DAR’s policy of “white artists” only, Scott’s request was refused, even as the Powells appealed to both President Harry and First Lady Bess Truman for remedy. Neither the President nor the First Lady would intervene on Scott’s behalf. It was not the first time, nor would it be the last time, that Scott would seek to rectify Jim Crow’s social injustice, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

While on tour in the state of Washington, Scott was denied service at a local diner and brought suit against the establishment. At trial the Powells were ultimately vindicated because it was proved that the restaurant had had a long-standing policy to not
serve “colored people” at the counter. When the restaurant, in its defense, tried to present Scott as an unruly and uncouth patron, witnesses came forward to vouch for her civility. The case made national waves as the press followed the proceedings. Scott won the case, but rather than pay out the $50,000 for which the Powells had originally sued, the restaurant folded and paid a considerably lesser sum of $250. The Powells donated the proceeds to the NAACP.

In 1950 the DuMont network offered Scott the opportunity to host her own fifteen-minute television show in an effort to better compete with formidable corporations NBC and CBS in the relatively new medium. The show was unprecedented, featuring an African-American woman in full regalia: drenched in diamonds, draped in gowns, wrapped in fur and seated at the piano, playing and singing a mix of popular standards, classical favorites, and Negro spirituals. Why white viewers did not vehemently object to this ostentatious display of wealth and elite standing from an African-American woman is a question I cannot answer.

The Hazel Scott Show, however, was short-lived. It premiered July 3 and was canceled by September 29 due to a lack of sponsorship. In an unfortunate turn of events, during the run of the show Scott was named in Red Channels, a publication devoted to outing Communists and their sympathizers. Apparently Scott’s involvement with the progressive Café Society over a decade earlier had aroused suspicions. When she decided that the only way to clear her name would be to appear before the House Un-American Activities Committee, the die was cast. Her appearance before the Committee on September 22 in an attempt to save her reputation made sponsors too skittish to support the television program. The plug was swiftly pulled on the show.

The marriage to Powell followed suit, although much less quickly. In the meantime Scott continued to perform, record, and tour. Intermittent episodes of mental and physical distress slowed her momentum for the remainder of her professional career. This is not to suggest, however, that Scott was unproductive. In fact, 1955 brought a critical triumph with her recording of Piano Moods with Charles Mingus and Max Roach. The seminal recording marks a stylistic departure for Scott, who abandons her boogie-woogie roots in favor of a more introspective, straight-ahead jazz approach.

In 1957 Scott relocated to Paris amid rumors that her marriage to Powell was over. By the end of 1960, it officially was. Scott’s last two decades reflected an ebb and flow of professional trials and triumphs, punctuated by moments of financial and physical crisis. Scott returned to the States in 1968 and lived there until her death in 1981 from pancreatic cancer.

Having outlined the parameters of her accomplished life, I return to my original question: why has Scott, once the doyenne of Café Society, receded so quickly from the public’s imagination? In blazing her path to popularity she made waves, commanded respect and, in her time, was well known for doing so.

On these more speculative issues, Chilton leaves more questions than definitive answers. In choosing to tell Scott’s story without much editorializing, she leaves us to form our own conclusions. Is Scott forgotten because she relocated to Paris just as Civil Rights was burgeoning as a major political movement in America? (Probably.) Was she hurt by her refusal to accept stereotypical representations of African-American women in Hollywood, which left her without a significant presence in film? (Less likely, but still plausible.) Did her marriage to the larger-than-life public figure Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., overshadow her pianistic accomplishments at the peak of her popularity? (Definitely.) Could government Red-baiting have had anything to do with her obscurity? (Perhaps.)

Any of these occurrences may have influenced Scott’s historical legacy. But there’s also more to it. Consider, for one, conventional narratives associated with child musical prodigies. Early “discovery” of young talent often fills the public with a sense of awe. Over time as the public grows weary of spectacle and the child artist grows older, the novelty of once awesome performances wears thin. The antidote is frequent reinvention. Hazel Scott, even with multidimensional talents, failed to break a mold that cast her as a glamour girl who “jazzed the classics.” Her lack of success here does not represent a lack of effort on her part, however.

Additionally, Scott’s unique improvisational skill is, in some ways, difficult to qualify. Her popularity hinged upon bridging two classical musics, wedding jazz to the Western canon expressed through boogie-woogie. When she returned to the States in the late sixties, the public’s taste for jazz and classical music had waned: R&B and rock had firmly supplanted jazz as America’s popular music.

Luckily, we have Chilton’s biography to help keep Scott’s memory and her music alive.

Maya Gibson was Mellon Sawyer Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis, 2009-2010.
“I’ve never been afraid of any deviation”: Joan Jett’s Electric Ladyland

Review of
Todd Oldham, Joan Jett (Ammo Books, 2010)
256 pages with photos

I like good, strong words, that mean something.
—Jo March in Louisa May Alcott’s Little Women (1868)

Simple music is really the hardest kind of music to play. A three-or-four-chord song is very hard to play and be right on top of when you’re a guitar, bass, and drums sort of band.
—Joan Jett

I wanted that amazing, blistering guitar player, a partner to play off. . . . Zeppelin, the Stones, the Clash, Foreigner—all had that intense, guitar-driven sound. I was well aware that this was new territory for a woman, but that made it all the more attractive. I had listened to Grace Slick and Janis Joplin, and I admired them. But neither of them had the sound I wanted. I wanted to be Robert Plant.
—Pat Benatar, from Pat Benatar (with Patsi Bale Cox), Between a Heart and a Rock Place: A Memoir (2010)

This is a photo book, a sort of coffee table book manqué, many publicity photos of Joan Jett, the hard-rocking rhythm guitarist and lead singer of Joan Jett and the Blackhearts, the darling of the rock world in the 1980s, many photos of Jett in performance. What is especially striking about most of the photos is how they feature Jett by herself, strangely isolated and uncontextualized, almost like a model in a series of studies. There are, early on in the book, many photos of her with the members of the Runaways, her first band and, as nearly everyone knows, the first all-girl hard rock band and probably the most successful, at least outside the United States, especially in Japan where teenage girls went crazy over them. Their big hit was “Cherry Bomb” (1976), which of course Jett still performs today.

Hello Daddy, Hello Mom
I’m your ch, ch, ch, ch, cherry bomb
Hello world, I’m your wild girl
I’m your ch, ch, ch, ch, cherry bomb

Other Runaways’ songs such as “Neon Angels on the Road to Ruin” expressed the same kind of adolescent sexual defiance. As Jett herself said, “The Runaways were five suburban girls who represented basically what teenage girls were like in America, and people didn’t want to know. Mothers and fathers did not want to hear that their daughters smoked and drank and entertained thoughts of sex. We were just telling the truth, and we got nailed for it.” It can be said that the Runaways were the exact opposite of the March sisters of Little Women fame: the Runaways were the romantic revolt against bourgeois girlhood, the artistic revision of domestic independence. The Runaways were newfangled reformers.

The group did bother many people at the time, and their critical reception in the United States was mixed. Women as singers in a male band was an old tradition in popular music and common in 1930s swing bands, where the men were called cats and the girl singer was the canary. Women as songwriters/singers had arrived by the time the Runaways made their appearance in the mid-1970s with performers like Joni Mitchell, Carol King, and Laura Nyro. All-girl singing groups have always been popular in both black and white gospel music and in 1950s and 1960s rock and roll with such performers as the Supremes, the Shirelles, the Ronettes, the Shangri-Las (whose two innovative hits—“Leader of the Pack” and “Walking in the Sand”—and whose attitude was an influence on rock women like Jett, who came later). These groups themselves were variations of earlier all-girl singing groups of the 1930s and 1940s like the Andrews Sisters and the Boswell Sisters. And American popular music has always had divas, from Sophie Tucker and Ruth Etting to Judy Garland and Doris Day to Loretta Lynn, Patsy Cline, and Tammy Wynnette to Aretha Franklin, Dionne Warwick, and Nina Simone to Lauryn Hill and Madonna, and all the black women blues singers such as Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey, Ida Cox, Memphis Minnie, and Koko Taylor, and let’s not forget folk singers like Barbara Dane, Joan Baez, and Odetta. But all-girl bands have always been considered a novelty, gimmick music whether they were the International Sweethearts of Rhythm (swing) or Josie and the Pussycats (bubblegum). Billy Wilder’s 1959 movie “Some Like It Hot,” probably the most
band's musical and performance mock-macho energy varied. When the band arrived in Sweden, thousands of girls met Jett and company at the airport sucking pacifiers. It is hard to know whether the band, in the end, was simply male dreams of jailbait or female infantilism.

The Runaways existed from 1975 to 1979, and have produced in their wake one Hollywood movie, two documentaries, and at least one autobiography by an ex-band member, lead vocalist Cherie Currie, who is now a chainsaw artist. Jett started the Runaways in Los Angeles with drummer Sandy West when she was only fifteen. The name of the band itself might be considered the female equivalent of J. M. Barrie’s the Lost Boys. Jett was to enjoy her greatest acclaim as a musician in the 1980s with her male band, the Blackhearts, and with such hits as “Bad Reputation,” and “I Love Rock and Roll.” Most of Joan Jett milks and markets the mythology of Joan Jett as pioneering pop icon. As Jett is now over fifty and made her reputation not only with a youth-driven form of music but with a persona that emphasized her own youth so vividly, it might be thought that this book is partly about the prevention of the onset of “oldies act” disease. The way to do that, ironically, with a book such as this is to make the past seem current while making the performer seem timeless by having lots of photos of her where she is detached from everything except the mirror-like fantasy of her own image. While the photos show Jett maturing as a performer, she doesn’t seem to age. The earlier reference to Barrie is not accidental; a performer like Jett is constantly trying to channel her inner Peter Pan, certainly not her inner Wendy. There is nothing wrong with having youth as your stock in trade, as your shtick, as long as you’re young. Aging women hardly succeed at this better than aging men; indeed, our culture finds aging women more ridiculous and more menacing. (Consider films like Sunset Boulevard or Whatever Happened to Baby Jane? or the fact that many believe that Hillary Clinton cannot possibly run for president in 2016 as she would be nearly seventy years old, although we have had men who ran for the office who were older. The biggest concern is not that Clinton would be too old but she would look too old.) Essentially, Jett made rock as GRRL! Music, and how long can you be a grrl.

There are three interesting observations to be made about Joan Jett. First is that she, like so many rock musicians, is an autodidact: “...I go to take a guitar lesson [at the age of 13] and the guy, he’s got sheet music there. So I said, ‘I wanna learn how to play rock and roll,’ and he taught me how to play ‘On Top of Old Smokey.’ And that was really the one lesson. That was it. I left, and I bought
one of those, ‘How to Learn Guitar Chords’ books—it’s not sheet music, it just shows you diagrams of where to put your hands on the guitar and how to play it and what chord it is. I went home, and I learned how to play chords from a book. And I put on my records, and I tried to sit there and learn how to play from my different records. I tried ‘All Right Now,’ Deep Purple’s ‘Smoke on the Water,’ and Black Sabbath’s ‘Iron Man,’ ‘cause it was big, slow chords, so I could try to figure it out.” Second is that Liza Minnelli was an important influence: “It all started when I was 13, and I saw the movie Cabaret. It changed my life. I knew I wanted to do something in the arts. Seeing Liza Minnelli made me think, god, I hope I can do something like that one day!” It is worth noting that in many ways Joan Jett’s rock persona looks much like Liza Minnella in Cabaret, that Minnelli’s film’s character is, in some respect, Jett’s affect. Pat Benatar, in her autobiography, Between a Heart and Rock Place (2010), also identified Minnelli’s impact on her career. As a result of seeing her perform in a concert in Richmond, Virginia (“I was not a huge fan of hers but I loved Cabaret”), she was inspired to resume her music career (she had been a classically trained singer in high school). About Minnelli, she thought at the time: “I’m a better singer than she is. Sure, she’s a great performer, but with practice, I can definitely do this.” The fact that Minnelli was a source of inspiration, a kind of muse or at least example, for both women, shows how much sheer theatricality, the construction of artifice, was part of their conception of music. Third is the fact that Joan Jett is not an autobiography or a memoir in any conventional sense. Jett reveals nothing about her personal life, does not tell the reader her real name (although it is easy to figure out that it is Joan Larkin). Todd Oldham put the text together from interviews that Jett had done over the years; so in effect the book is a combination of an artist’s extended ruminations on her art and its significance, combined with a fanboy’s creative vision of presenting his idol with absolute purity. I found that, despite the fact that many questions I wanted to have answered were not, I liked the book better than many conventional autobiographies. I learned from Joan Jett what I needed to know about Jett. She owes her reader and her fans an explanation of the why and how of her art as she sees it—and nothing more.

Gerald Early is Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and director of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis.
It is possible to hear pianist Thelonious Monk play, let alone watch him, and not have an immediate visceral reaction? His right foot slides on the floor in time, his stretched fingers hit the keys with deliberate clumsiness, a hat crowns his head, beard pointing purposely forward. The piano discovers new horizons: pitches are bent, overtones collide and defy the most rigorous tuning. Even the pauses swing. A few more motives and the pianist gets up, listening to his sidemen and accompanying them with a few dance steps. The High Priest of Bebop is performing, and he’s performing more than music. More than a jazz musician, Monk was, and continues to be, a character. The name itself, Thelonious Sphere Monk, seems unfit for the banalities of everyday life. Perhaps for this reason, most writers have been more interested in adding their contributions to Monk’s myth than in attempting to discover the man underneath the hat. In his new biography of the pianist and composer, Robin Kelley strips away the veils of fantasy to reveal Monk the family man, the workingman, and the African-American man. The title promises a story about an American original. However, Kelley is a historian of the African-American experience, and his words brilliantly reveal what makes Monk’s story both original and common.

This book is a labor of love, the culmination of over fourteen years of research and a lifetime of admiration and study of Monk’s music. Kelley benefited from the support of Monk’s family, who granted him countless interviews and shared tapes, photographs and other documents. He also interviewed numerous musicians who had worked with the pianist as well as his manager, his road manager, some of his record producers, and several others involved in Monk’s professional life. Finally, Kelley did an impressive amount of archival research. He dug both deep and wide, examining press clippings from the United States, France, Italy, Germany and Japan, foraging through financial and civil records, record company logs, even Monk’s grade school notebooks! This is not, however, an authorized biography. Throughout the book, Kelley is a sympathetic narrator who approaches social and personal flaws with compassion but without any attempt to conceal or excuse them. Take for example his descriptions of the San Juan Hill neighborhood in Manhattan. While addressing the many problems that afflicted the neighborhood (San Juan Hill was famous for its eruptions of racial violence and its often insalubrious housing stock), Kelley also brings it to life as we share in the sounds and smells of a community composed principally of migrants from the American South and the Caribbean. His descriptions carefully avoid either romanticizing the neighborhood’s diversity or sensationalizing its ills. Kelley takes the same balanced approach when dealing with the narcotic addictions that have plagued the lives of many musicians. In Kelley’s writing, drugs are only one aspect in these musicians’ lives. While acknowledging their often-fatal consequences, he avoids making them a central element of his narrative and steers clear of any moralizing aspirations, a refreshing treatment compared to many popular musicians’ biographies.

This is not to say that Robin Kelley does not have an agenda. On the contrary, he is a man on a mission. His is a corrective history aimed at destroying most of the myths that have circulated about Monk. He carefully reveals the historiography of Monk’s mystique, tracing it back to promotional material crafted by Monk’s first promoter Lorraine Gordon, then known as Lorraine Lion, wife of Blue Note Records owner Alfred Lion. Blue Note had offered Monk his first recording contract, and Lorraine was
in charge of marketing these recordings. She picked up and amplified descriptions of Monk that were already starting to circulate in the jazz press. She presented Monk as the original bebop pioneer, the man who paved the way for Dizzy Gillespie and Charlie Parker. admittedly, Monk had a hand in this debate, often boasting that he had formulated most of the harmonic techniques used by modern players. Lorraine portrayed Monk as an elusive, withdrawn genius, an original man who could go for days without sleep, had an unusual sense of fashion, and whose music was strange and abstract. The myth grew from there, often hurting Monk's career rather than helping it. The elusive genius was transformed into the unreliable original, and critics went from praising Monk's abstract aesthetics to attacking his supposed lack of technique.

Kelley exerts much energy dispelling these myths. He demonstrates that Monk was in fact a skilled pianist who mastered the works of Chopin and Rachmaninoff at an early age and who later rubbed elbows and earned praises from some of New York's best stride pianists. His careful descriptions of Monk's professional activities reveal a generally reliable professional. Kelley carefully explains that Monk's occasional lapses and irrational behavior were often due to his ongoing battle with bipolar disorder, the disease that would eventually force the pianist into retirement.

Kelley carefully explains that Monk's occasional lapses and irrational behavior were often due to his ongoing battle with bipolar disorder

As Kelley points out, Monk's virtuosity manifested itself in occasional flashy runs or dazzling stride piano passages. More importantly, it underpinned his unique approach to the piano keyboard. No matter what piano he used, Monk's sound was as recognizable as his melodies and voicings. Monk's technique was an integral part of his aesthetic, something carefully crafted and developed through years of practicing and performing. Thelonious Monk was indeed an original, but describing his originality through words is as tricky as the music itself. Kelley tries his best without involving much technical jargon, but ultimately this is a lost battle. Yes, Monk used space; yes, his chord voicings were unusual and often sounded dissonant; yes, his sense of time and choices of tempo challenged many musicians; and yes, his compositions often used asymmetrical forms. Yet, Kelley's descriptions of the music remain vague. Those who are not familiar with Monk's music will probably miss what made it so surprising. Meanwhile, musicians will be left wishing for actual musical examples and more thorough analysis. This is, of course, unfair criticism. Kelley set out to write a biography, not a work of musicology aimed at the restricted audience of the musically literate. Yet, Thelonious Monk illustrates the particular conundrum facing those wishing to write about music.

The book is at its most successful in dealing with Monk's early life and long uphill march towards public recognition and financial stability. In a way, this is a family history. In narrating Monk's life, Kelley conjures up a broad cast of characters: family members, close friends, fellow musicians, club owners, record executives. Together, these characters bring a whole community to life, or maybe several communities since, if Monk's family and professional life often intersected, they seemed to have rarely overlapped. As such, Thelonious Monk is more than a biography; it is a description of Monk's world. We accompany the Monk family as they join in the Great Migration in the 1920s, traveling by train from North Carolina to New York. Monk's original sense of wonder quickly gives way to the difficult realities facing migrants in the city: families crowded together in small tenements, racial violence and discrimination, strenuous working conditions. We travel with five-year-old Thelonious to Batavia, New York, for summer camp. We share in his joy and
pride when he becomes the Batavia Fire Department’s mascot, even as we wince at the very idea of a child serving the same function as the fire station’s dalmatian. Later, we stand with Monk as his oldest son faces overt racism at school and as he deliberates over how best to engage with the growing civil rights movement. All of these descriptions give depth to the story. Kelley goes beyond contextualizing. He brings American history to life.

In his effort to describe Monk’s world, Kelley focuses on the people who were the most important to his subject rather than on those who usually gather most attention from jazz scholars. We learn a great deal about Thelonious’s best friend James “Sonny” Smith while the book contains minimal biographical information about saxophone legend Charlie Parker, who played with Monk only on rare occasions. Not only does this focus make sense in reconstructing Monk’s world, but it also gives Kelley a good reason to pay attention to a slew of jazz musicians who have otherwise been largely ignored by jazz scholars. There is something refreshing about seeing drummers Art Blakey and Frank Dunlop treated with the same level of attention. Throughout his career, Monk mentored and worked with an impressive number of musicians, and his biography is a good source of information for those seeking to learn more about pianists Elmo Hope and Bud Powell, bassists Wilbur Ware and Oscar Pettiford, or saxophonists Gigi Gryce and Sonny Rollins, to name just a few.

Kelley carefully maps Monk’s career. It is surprising and somewhat disturbing to learn that the pianist struggled for close to twenty years before achieving the level of professional and financial recognition due to him. It is downright distressing to learn that all the attention devoted to Monk in the press in the late 1940s and early ’50s actually made it difficult for him to find steady employment and provide for his family. Unfortunately, struggle makes for a better story than success. Some critics have argued that Monk’s music lost some of its unpredictability after the pianist signed a lucrative contract with Columbia Records in 1962. While Kelley should be praised for accounting for every one of Monk’s tours, concerts and recording sessions in the sixties, this part of the story, like the music of the same period, lacks much of the tension that characterized the pianist’s early career.

Unfortunately, Monk’s success came at a high price and was short lived. Constant travel and pressures to record new material proved exhausting, and the pianist’s mental and physical health slowly but steadily deteriorated. As jazz moved into new directions in the late sixties, Monk faced increasing calls to renew his repertoire from jazz critics who accused his performances of sounding stale, even if his status as a jazz icon seemed secure. By the mid-1970s, Monk essentially stopped performing altogether. He lived the rest of his days in seclusion at the house of Baroness Nica de Koenigswarter until he passed away in 1982. Monk once declared that the loudest noise in the world is silence. Kelley’s thorough research and engaging biography promises to keep Monk’s voice resonating.

Jerome Camal is a Ph.D. student in music and American culture studies at Washington University in St. Louis.
In 1915, having lost the woman who had inspired nearly all his work since their first meeting in 1912, Austrian expressionist painter Oskar Kokoschka abruptly sold his great painting, *The Bride of the Wind*, to buy a horse and enlist in the Austro-Hungarian cavalry. After suffering serious wounds (a bullet to the head, a bayonet to the lung) on the Russian front, Kokoschka began a lengthy rehabilitation during which he learned only gradually that his former mistress (the beautiful and brilliant Alma Mahler, herself a composer, and widow of the great Gustav Mahler) had not only broken off their relationship, but aborted their child, married a rival (architect Walter Gropius), and, thinking that Kokoschka was dead, ransacked his studio to destroy or confiscate any incriminating correspondence left behind, including sketches bearing her likeness. Completely devastated and unable to paint, Kokoschka did an extraordinary thing—amazing even by the standards that artists have followed throughout history when deprived of their muse: he decided to recreate her. Kokoschka commissioned a dressmaker to fabricate (according to Alma’s precise anatomical measurements) a life-sized doll who would revivify his anima, his soul mate, his beloved Alma. Although apparently unsatisfactory as a long-term solution, the doll (accompanied by a young servant girl whom the artist costumed as her French maid!) was successful as a means of allowing the artist to eventually heal his emotional trauma and return to work.

Although Francine Prose does not include Alma Mahler as “serial muse” to an inordinate number of distinguished artists from nearly every field of artistic endeavor, *The Lives of the Muses* is a fascinating study of nine women and the artists they inspired. Ranging from Hester Thrale, the eighteenth-century muse who was indispensable to Samuel Johnson, to the late twentieth century and Yoko Ono’s considerable and highly controversial influence upon ex-Beatle John Lennon, this book is much more than an intriguing and illuminating series of vignettes about alluring and beautiful women: it is an attempt to pry loose and comprehend secrets behind the mystery of creative inspiration itself.

Along the way, Prose’s witty, imaginative, and accessible study mines the history of the muse going back to the original nine muses of Greek antiquity. In her introduction, she reminds us of perhaps the most famous muse of all, Dante’s beloved Beatrice, whom the poet encountered in Florence in 1274 when both were just nine years old, yet whose captivating essence inspired so much of his poetic work, including *La Vita Nuova*, a love poem begun after his muse’s death and upon which the poet labored between 1292-1300.
Throughout this journey into the vortex of the creative process, Prose is not content merely to present biographical detail; she asks difficult, provocative questions: why have muses historically been female? And if they have, why shouldn’t we consider the very notion of the female muse a “quaint, even suspect anachronism…which reinforces the destructive stereotype of the creative, productive, active male and of the passive female, at once worshiped and degraded, agreeably disrobing to model or offer inspirational sex?”

*The Lives of the Muses* is a sustained meditation on the nature of inspiration and creativity over centuries. Examining Hester Thrale’s influence over the erudite Johnson in the 1760s, Prose argues persuasively that the muse is not one thing but many and that her roles have changed dramatically over the centuries: “Every historical period re-creates the muse in its own image. Each era endows the muse with the qualities, virtues, and flaws that the epoch and its artists need and deserve.” It is no coincidence, then, that Hester Thrale was possessed of a “wicked high energy” that was a blessed relief for the much older, manic-depressive author of the famous *Dictionary and Lives of the Poets*. Witty, cerebral, a brilliant conversationalist, and herself an intellectual prodigy who translated Racine and *Don Quixote*, wrote in Italian, and studied Latin in an age when women were not usually formally educated, Hester emerges as the perfect muse for the dyspeptic, Augustan genius. Trapped in an unhappy marriage with a husband who did not understand her, Hester also had to endure the deaths, one after another, of eight of her twelve children. Yet the very unhappiness that shadowed her personal life also drove her closer to literature—and to the great man who embodied the literary spirit of his age—Johnson. Although there is no evidence that their relationship was sexual, there was certainly an erotic tension in their communications, tinged with Johnson’s strange, masochistic longings: “I want always to be sensible of your rule, my Patroness, and I want you to hold me in that slavery which you know so well how to render pleasant.” When after her husband’s death, Hester suddenly became free and married her children’s Italian Catholic music tutor, Johnson (who had for a time held permanent lodgings in their Southwark apartments) was enraged by jealousy: “If I interpret your letter right, you are ignominiously married, if it is yet undone, let us once talk together. If you have abandoned your fame, and your country, may your folly do no further mischief.”

Although they never reconciled, Hester was able to take her role as muse and metamorphose it into a literary memoir after the legendary man’s death. She may have been the first muse to capitalize on her proximity to greatness, and the first edition of her *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson* (1786) was a remarkable success, selling out in a single day. Unlike today, however, she was able to write a revealing, “tell-all” book without disclosing her subject’s darkest secrets; only after her death in 1821, among her possessions was an artifact found labeled “Johnson’s padlock, committed to my care in 1768.”

While the relationship between Hester Thrale and Samuel Johnson was based largely on a dynamic intellectual companionship, the same cannot be said of most other muses throughout history. As Prose observes, most muses traditionally serve as “instruments that raise the emotional and erotic temperature.” It is rare when a muse demands nothing in return from her artist, but such was Alice Liddell, the ten-year-old girl who inspired Charles Dodgson (Lewis Carroll) to create *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking-Glass and What
Alice Found There (1871). Although in 1932, Alice was still trading on that “increasingly mythologized and fetishized” July afternoon in 1862 when, as a ten year old, she prompted the mathematician to invent a world of fantasy for her, Alice was the muse “content to inspire without being thanked,” never seeking either to marry her artist or to become one herself.

The same cannot be said of the other muses treated in The Lives of the Muses, many of whom either attempted to control or compete with their artists. Charis Weston, Suzanne Farrell, and Lou Andreas-Salome all wrote books about their artists; and Lou not only withheld sexual favors from the artists she lived with (Nietzsche, Rilke) but even wrote “rigorous and even unfriendly critiques about the work she helped inspire.” Others, such as Lee Miller, emerged from the shadows of the artist she inspired (photographer Man Ray) to become a significant artist herself, while the tragic fate of Elizabeth Siddal demonstrates how a muse may be crushed by the artist, and then simply swallowed up and disposed of. Lizzie Siddal was created by her artist, the Pre-Raphaelite Dante Gabriel Rossetti, as a reincarnation of Dante’s departed muse or the lady of Arthurian legend. As such, she was required to play a specific, carefully orchestrated role; when she proved too independent, or disobedient, or sought to become an artist herself, she had to be eliminated. Thus, Lizzie Siddal was truly alive for the poet only when she either was a passive object admired for her beautiful coppery hair, or was dead. Indeed, even after her death from a fatal overdose of laudanum, the poet did not leave his muse alone, but insisted on exhuming her body to retrieve a manuscript of his poetry he had conveniently buried with his beloved. Even then, he needed to be reassured that her beautiful hair was still red-gold.

If Lizzie Siddal is perhaps the clearest example of a muse sadly lacking in agency, Gala, wife of the Surrealist painter Salvador Dali, is an example of a muse able to control her artist. Prose concludes that “Gala and Dali were geniuses at public relations and promotion, adepts who complemented each other’s skills, and who formed, as a couple, the perfect artist and muse for an era about to discover the magical—indeed, phenomenal—ways in which the lofty aims of art could serve, and be served by, the baser interests of commerce.” In the end, the commercially successful “Gala-Dali” phenomenon diminished both muse and artist; and by encouraging the aging and increasingly infirm artist to sign blank sheets of paper, she enhanced his celebrity at the expense of his legacy. In that sense, Andre Breton’s famously spiteful anagram of the painter’s name: Avid A. Dollars, proved all too accurate.

The logical next step from Gala-Dali in the early decades of the twentieth century is undoubtedly the union of Yoko Ono and John Lennon in the 1970s; “Its exterior trappings—popping flashbulbs, rock stardom, drugs, absurd amounts of money, and semi-constant litigation—were tailor-made for their era.” At a time when women’s rights and traditional gender roles were being questioned, John and Yoko actually reversed roles for a time with the former Beatle serving as house-husband and full-time father, while his
ambitious wife became a combination of avant-garde artist and business tycoon; as Yoko claimed of her new role, “My old attitude of not wanting to get into money just wasn’t going to do.” This coupling, more than any other, raises the question: who was the artist, who the muse? Certainly, John saw Yoko as more than his muse; he saw her as his spiritual double, his anima, “me in drag” (336). The debate still rages, of course. Was Yoko the evil queen she was portrayed as in the media, the woman who demonically seduced John and robbed him of his great gifts, systematically destroying the Beatles in the process? Or were these attacks a thinly disguised form of racism against an ambitious, sexually assertive Japanese woman who did not fit the submissive role society had consigned her to? There have been many instances throughout history of artists demanding increased acknowledgment of the role of their muse, but John Lennon’s insistence that he and Yoko were peers was disturbing to many of his fans who heard him maintain: “I’d love her to have the A side of a hit record and me the B side. I’d settle for it any day.” And this was compounded by the fact that their most fully collaborative work (sadly, John’s last) was Double Fantasy, an album which Prose persuasively dismisses as “dull, without surprises, or anyway, pleasant surprises; it’s neither strong nor moving nor fun.”

Although there may be nothing specific which unites these nine very different women other than the fact that they all greatly loved and were loved by, their artists, Francine Prose’s The Lives of the Muses is a magnificent journey which takes us through time and across cultures, probing deep into the alchemical process of what makes artists create.

*Henry I. Schvey is professor of drama and comparative literature at Washington University in St. Louis.*

There is a multiplicity and malleability of human consciousness—a dynamic and ephemeral quality of constantly shifting layers of awareness—which a certain kind of attuned and interior-oriented fiction may capture better than any other art form, and certainly better than busy lived experience allows. Our encounter with the concrete world around us is constantly mediated by layers of perception and prejudice, augmented by strata of personal and shared history and by anticipation of presumed or desired futures, and tinted by emotional overlays which are no less influential for being so fleeting, so that our experience of a moment may be thought of as a complexly composed projection through a thick stack of shifting transparencies. The rich intricacy and the plasticity of the projection is something we may recognize upon reflection but seldom clearly perceive in day-to-day life, and the influences and nuances of some of our own layers are inevitably invisible to us—self-awareness has its limits, of course, and creates its own corruptions. The complexity of anyone else’s projection is all but beyond our reach. Portraying that layered, elusive consciousness and offering us access to someone else’s stack of transparencies may be one of the things that give fiction its distinctive value.

That portrayal is often at the heart of the work of Francine Prose, the 2010 winner of the Washington University International Humanities Medal. In Prose’s novella, “Three Pigs in Five Days,” from her 1997 book of two novellas, *Guided Tours of Hell*, Nina is an American travel writer in Paris, sent there by Leo, her lover and editor, to write a story for *Allo!*, Leo’s “newsletter for American Francophile tourists.” The fact that Nina’s five days among the hotels, bistros, museums, and attractions of Paris are indeed a guided tour of a certain hell is indicative of the shifty irony and the trap-door comedy that characterize the book.

Everything in the novella has a lovely slippery quality to it. Prose captures, first of all, the essential instability of being a tourist abroad, navigating a half-familiar city in a half-familiar language.
But Nina’s trip is also haunted by the uncertainty of her past, present, and future with Leo. Their relationship had, up until recently, clarified and consumed her ambitions. “That anything could feel like that,” she thought, after their first night together, “had focused Nina’s attention and convinced her that her whole life, prior to that moment, was a ripped magazine she was leafing through until her appointment with Leo.” The last time she was in Paris, together with Leo, they had slept and mostly not slept in the “hotels the famous dead had slept in, Oscar Wilde, Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Edith Piaf.” This time he has spontaneously and inexplicably sent her off alone and put her up in the Hotel Danton, with its peeling wallpaper and a black-and-white television that only seems to show programs involving pigs being slaughtered. The hotel turns out to be a former brothel, newly purchased and not yet renovated by Leo’s former lover, and haunted by the ghost of a girl who jumped out the window, perhaps of Nina’s room. Her lover seems to have sent her on the inverted, nightmarish version of their earlier, romantic venture.

But then, just as the television is bringing her the demise of the third pig, there is a knock at her hotel door and here is Leo. He hasn’t ditched her at all, he says. He tells her that she has to leave a day before him to keep from losing their frequent flier miles—doesn’t she remember? He explained this to her. But wouldn’t she remember? In his presence, in a few short pages, everything both in Paris and in Nina’s mind is recast or called into question. Some of this involves Leo’s lies and manipulation, although neither the reader nor Nina can be certain how much; some involves the violent weather of a passionate but shallow love affair; and some of it can be attributed to the Paris of the book, which is highly unpredictable, saturated in pertinent histories, and seemingly in sync with Nina’s sensibility to the degree that perhaps only a foreign city skimmed across the surface of ever can be.

But before and after Leo joins her, Nina finds herself subject to a dream-like malleability and prescience, although Prose carefully keeps the book from ever slipping over the edge of the uncanny into the fantastic. When Nina is mistaken for someone else—a different writer on a better assignment—she is granted access first to the Rodin Museum, closed to the public for a special event, then to the artist’s studio, and finally to the dark room behind a secret panel where the museum keeps his erotic drawings. Later, she and Leo are twice more guided through layered depths—into the Catacombs under Paris and then through the prison cells of The Conciergerie, the last stop on the way to the guillotine for prisoners during the Revolution. (These are among the stops on Leo’s “Paris Death Trip,” the article he has decided he is writing for *Allo!* Each phase of the trip also turns out to be in the pursuit or the psychic company of famously star-crossed couples, including Rodin and Camille Claudel, Sartre and de Beauvoir, and, especially, Orpheus and Eurydice. Dante and Beatrice preside unmentioned.

“No wonder every new day presented a new ontological challenge,” Nina thinks, late in the book, “as you kept trying to see the world as it really was, while the world’s face kept changing, and sex kept you from seeing at all, kept your eyes from focusing unless you had the beloved beside you, covering you with kisses and signs of physical devotion.” Or perhaps especially then. Across this nimble, funny, unpredictable book, Prose’s trust in the rich instability of character renders the changing face of Nina’s world in beautifully realized nuance and complexity.

Everything in the novella has a lovely slippery quality to it.

Marshall Klimasewiski is the Director of the Writing Program and Writer in Residence in the English Department at Washington University in St. Louis.
Are you sure you want to do this?” Angela Argo asks her 47-year-old, happily married, or seemingly so, creative writing professor Ted Swenson, right before they have sex in her dorm room—or something that passes very much for sex—in the middle of Francine Prose’s Blue Angel. There are only a few times in our lives when that question is so utterly real, so compellingly immediate and profound in the choice that it offers, when the question is so much like holding the dice of fate and deciding whether one actually wants to throw them and bet one’s whole life, such as it may be, on the outcome. The person posing the question is trying to give us a way out, knowing that we won’t take it, knowing that, in posing the question, it is already too late to ask. Undoubtedly, it is a sign of how much power the supposed victim Angela has in this scene that she poses the question, as she “pulls him across the room, steers him round, pushes him down on the bed.” It should be the other way round: he should have been asking her the question, leading her like a middle-aged lecher to bed.

And so Swenson falls, as he does literally in one of the novel’s flashbacks, losing his balance in public because of an inner ear infection. The obvious comic irony is that Swenson, the white male sex harasser, as at the novel’s end he is accused of being by his dean and the female faculty of the Woman’s Alliance, is the good guy here. He loves his wife, worries and frets over being a good father, and wants to be a good teacher. Indeed, his lapse of professional judgment with Angela happens, in part, because he is so excited about her talent as a novelist. After years of slogging through workshop after workshop with talentless, indulged, bratty students, he finds, at last, someone with true ability. He fumblingly and misguidedly encourages her, but he is the innocent who is ultimately consumed by the unquenchable fires of her ambition. Swenson becomes not simply every middle-aged college teacher or every middle-aged man, but, in a sense, every middle-aged person who had success when young, watching youth rapidly recede from his grasp, watching the promise of his own abilities disappear, his own luster fade. So, he imagines himself the outsider in order to save face. Swenson’s novel about his activist father, Phoenix Time, made him famous briefly. Euston College, some higher educational backwater in Vermont, “nobody’s first choice,” as the narrator tells us, had once courted him passionately when he was a rising young star writer. Now he is suffering from writer’s block as he tries to get going on a novel with the ridiculous title of The Black and the Black, some sort of racial reworking of Stendhal’s The Red and the Black. (Literary critic Lionel Trilling told a young Norman Podhoretz, sometime in the 1960s, I believe, that young people are no longer attracted to novels like The Red and the Black, which Trilling found puzzling. Perhaps this is a bit of an inside joke for Prose that Angela at least claims to love The Red and the Black as much as she does Jane Eyre.) And Swenson now feels trapped at Euston, unable to leave and unable to write. As he comes to Angela’s defense in class when the other students, aware of Swenson’s partiality, brutally attack her work, the narrator gives us this interior view of Swenson, his anxiety, his sense of failure:

Talent isn’t doled out equally to everyone at birth. Plus, Angela, gifted as she is, works ten times harder than anyone else. How dare these little thugs presume to tell her how to write? [Swenson] knows his anger isn’t pure, or purely on Angela’s behalf. He has his own reasons for being enraged: the hours he’s spent in this hellhole, the pages of grisly prose that have furnished the text for hours of classroom discussion. The years he’s sacrificed! How much of it he’ll have to waste in rooms like this one—pandering to these children’s silly ideas about something that means so much, something he might be doing right now if he weren’t watching time trickle away in the company of his adolescent jailers.

Prose’s Blue Angel, a finalist for the National Book Award, is a satire, in part, about political correctness, in this case, feminist driven sexual harassment regulations that take on the stringent moral contours, the tyrannical, oppressive idealism, of Puritanism, made clear enough when the narrator mentions that Jonathan
Edwards’s portrait is on the Founders Chapel wall. And Women’s Studies is surely getting ribbed when it is mentioned that the Euston English Department’s only tenured woman teaches a course called “Huck as Hermaphrodite: Masks of Gender and Identity in Twain—or Was it Samuel Clemens.” But the novel skewers creative writing classes, small liberal arts colleges like Euston and its two-bit marketing hustle of intimate Sylvan learning that seems like nothing more than a high-priced summer camp, spineless, pretentious deans like the novel’s Francis Benthem, and petted and over-praised middle class students trying to pretend they are punk rockers or are intimately acquainted with the inner city. Even the college’s health services and library get a bit of a kick in the shin from Prose. And so does the bourgeois family with its privileged form of dysfunction and unhappiness.

As an academic myself, I found parts of the novel laugh-out-loud funny, but as the first-rate satire it is, all of it is recognizable but none of it quite real. Things are a bit too fortuitously or viciously stacked against Swenson. The interior narration tricks us into thinking that everyone in the novel should know Swenson as we the readers do. Like good satire, the novel does not offend but rather makes one think about one’s own foibles, about academic foolishness and one’s complicity in it. The few times I have taught creative writing classes, the students were never like the ones in Prose’s novel. They were, in fact, kind and considerate to one another and tried to offer constructive criticism. (I must say that Prose’s examples of student writing are as bad as the stuff I’ve read.) Back in the late 1980s, I guest-taught for a semester at a small eastern liberal arts college, an all-girls school, in fact. There was some real concern about the professors having sex with the students, which I had not expected because I had not thought much about such a matter at either Washington University or the University of Kansas, the other two schools where I had taught. I was much too busy to think about “confusing,” as novelist Ralph Ellison put it, “the class struggle and the ass struggle,” or as the cover of Prose’s Blue Angel so graphically illustrates, the class[room] struggle and the ass struggle. As a teacher, I had heard about romances with students, had even known colleagues who had had such relationships, a few quite frequently. Those relationships struck me as a combination of shooting fish in a barrel and playing chicken. They were too easy and too dangerous. The chair of the English Department at this small college told me she thought the women faculty were jealous because it was largely the male professors who had the opportunity to have sex with the students, as even at co-ed schools, women at or nearing middle age were not as attractive to male undergraduates as men at or nearing middle age were to female undergraduates. (She did not discuss same sex relationships.) During the time I was there, I think the chair wanted very much to protect me from the students. I think a great deal of this anxiety was fueled by the fact that shortly before I arrived a female student and a male faculty member had announced that they were lovers and were going to marry. This struck me as slightly bizarre. I could not, for the life of me, figure out what a man well into his thirties, as this professor was, could see in an undergraduate. She looked like some kid who was trying hard to be taken seriously as a grown-up person in a grown-up love affair. And he looked like the cat that had swallowed the canary, smug and defiant. I also thought this had nothing to do with me. I could not rid myself of the feeling that I walked into some comic opera version of Heloise and Abelard.

In any case, I had a conversation with the dean, and he as much as wanted my solemn oath that I would not “tamper” with the students. As I was only the second black male to teach at the school, I could not help but wonder if the dean was concerned that the exploitive novelty of interracial attraction, some cloud of myth-driven seduction, would either make the students go crazy—the student body was less than three percent black—or make me go crazy. I was slightly amused and somewhat appalled by this notion, if he was entertaining it. I minded that he thought that the young white women who attended his school might not be grown-up people, might just be silly girls playing in adult clothing. Many of them probably knew more things about aspects of a certain life than I did or ever will. And, besides, they had a right to demand something of me as a teacher that went beyond mere instruction.

As Angela yells at Swenson when she finds out he has failed to competently pitch her novel to his editor, defending himself by saying that the editor wanted him, a novelist, to stoop to writing a memoir, to violate his standards as a professional writer: “It’s easy for you to have standards, you and your nice fat teaching job, your tenure forever and ever. You never have to write another word, you’d still have time to write, whereas if I wind up working in a drugstore—and with my parents’ connections, that’s the best-case scenario—I will not have time to write…. I can’t believe you didn’t fight harder for me.” I feel that whatever Angela’s flaws, however manipulative she was, she had a right to say this to Swenson. Any student has a right to say this to any teacher who has professed a belief in that student and does not act on the student’s behalf in the service of that belief. The sex act that Angela and Swenson shared, in the end, despite the fact that it proved Swenson’s undoing, never mattered in the moral equation of their relationship as student and teacher.

As I sat before the dean, it was almost as if he didn’t quite trust the person he had hired, as I had to get some sort of quasi-lecture about my responsibilities to the students in order for the dean to assure himself that I was not a mistake in the waiting. Good Grief, I thought, once you have made a hiring decision, don’t express doubt about it to the new employee on the first damn day! It’s bad form! That disappointed me more than he realized. (What I learned after only a week or two on the job was that most of the young women were terribly lonely and that it is indeed a wretched and foolish thing for a teacher to exploit a student’s loneliness for his own gain, a way of simply compounding misery by providing fake comfort and caring. Better not to care at all than to care dishonestly. Listening to those girls, I learned enough to make the job worth doing and to make being among them worth my time.) I told the dean simply that I had come to teach, nothing more, nothing less. And so I did.

Gerald Early is Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and director of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis.
Review of Bill Minutaglio and W. Michael Smith, Molly Ivins: A Rebel Life (Public Affairs Press, 2009)
306 pages plus footnotes, index and photographs

Molly Ivins was a child of privilege who used her gifts to battle her parents, real authority figures and imagined, for practically every one of her sixty-two years. Her quick wit and impressive writing skill, as well as her oil well-deep pool of personal generosity, won her friends and readers by the thousands. But in the end, although she fought as bravely as her forebears at the Alamo, she died of breast cancer, aware she was unable to forge the changes she dreamed of.

Born in the Houston neighborhood of River Oaks (St. Louisans can substitute Ladue) to wealthy, well-connected parents (her father, an attorney, became president of Tenneco), the six-foot tall, red-haired Ivins did the fancy prep school routine, went to Smith as her mother had done, then earned a master’s degree in journalism from Columbia University. Along the way, she went through an immersion French program in France, spent a year there, worked for several summers as an intern at the Houston Chronicle, drank and danced and flirted with George W. Bush and others at country club functions, crewed for her father on a series of boats, discovering that a deck was the place they could be closest.

Mostly, however, much as she tried, she never could make him as proud as she wanted him to be, the equal of her siblings in his praise. Even taking a job at the New York Times, a job she knew would end unhappily, was done to seek his approbation because even as he hated the Times’ political stance, he admired its position in the journalism hierarchy.

Minutaglio, once a Dallas reporter, now professor of journalism at the University of Texas, and Smith, Ivins’s researcher and assistant for eight years, write more as raconteurs than as biographers, but they had excellent sources among Ivins’s co-workers, friends and family, and they share a great deal of humorous, sometimes bawdy, always interesting information that will be most appreciated by fans and friends.

Ivins took her first newspaper job at the Minneapolis Star-Tribune, though the day-to-day minutiae of a reporter’s life soon bored her. She was bred to be a raconteur, a columnist, someone who wrote in the first person and was free and easy with advice.

This voice began to be heard when she left Minneapolis for Austin, Tex., and a writing job at the Texas Observer, a liberal publication that held many Texas governmental feet to a left-wing fire. Ronny Dugger, one of the paper’s founders, and Kaye Northcott, Ivins’s editor and, in later years, a close friend, helped hone her skill. Austin, the raucous Texas capital whose motto remains, “Keep Austin Weird,” was a perfect place for the young Ivins, who already was showing signs of the drinking problem that would haunt her throughout her life. She hung out with legislators, described them as “the lege,” in her writing, learned many political lessons from Bob Bullock, a veteran political power broker and later lieutenant governor and advisor to George W. There is anecdotal evidence that they also were lovers.

Ivins’s own love life was a tragic one; the love of her life, Hank Holland, a handsome son of the same background as she, was taller, as wealthy, as smart, as well connected. But he died in a motorcycle accident, and serious love apparently left her life forever, though there were relationships, like one with a social activist in Minneapolis, that were personal as well as professional.

She was bred to be a raconteur, a columnist, someone who wrote in the first person and was free and easy with advice.
Ivins was happy and successful in Austin, but when the Times called, she accepted as promptly as almost all reporters do. But her loud story-telling, her love of vulgar stories, the fact that she named her dog “Shit,” and went barefoot in the office, all alienated some Times executives and especially Abe Rosenthal, the managing editor, who exiled her to a one-person bureau in Denver, where the irrepressible Ivins wrote about a chicken competition at a county fair as a “gang pluck.” Rosenthal hauled her back to New York for a tongue-lashing and sent her to City Hall, instructing her editor, Clyde Haberman, not to give her any important or meaningful assignments. When the Dallas Times-Herald offered her a column, it was a way out with at least a vestige of honor.

Molly’s real first name was Mary, but her family nicknamed her “Mole” for her childhood habit of hiding in her bedroom, reading. Mole soon segued into Molly, a woman who collected friends the way people collect bars of hotel soap. Her home was always open; she sucked up bar tabs like a vacuum cleaner. (On a personal note, I interviewed her a couple of times when she spoke in St. Louis, had conversations and a few meals with her and always thought of her as a friend.)

Ivins used her skill with words to skewer the pontifical, like her comment after a Pat Buchanan diatribe at a Republican convention some years ago. “It probably sounded better in the original German,” she wrote. On the debit side, she never finished the big book on Texas and Texas politics she wanted to write, and while she was among the most entertaining writers, she kept most of her writing on the surface. As a longtime newspaper reporter and columnist myself, I regarded her as a gem of the profession, writing rapidly, viscerally and with a style reflective of Muhammad Ali, who would “float like a butterfly and sting like a bee.”

Joe Pollack serves on the Advisory Board of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis.
Most memoirs are like political speeches: they spin their subject or seek to settle scores. Not Norris Church Mailer’s *A Ticket to the Circus*. Her book is like a lively, long letter for an engaging friend. Would we be reading it if she hadn’t been married to Norman Mailer? Probably. Ms. Mailer is a natural storyteller with a fresh voice, one filled with candor and humor.

Her life reads like a movie script: a plucky, big-hearted redhead from Arkansas, months after meeting the love of her life, the flamboyant, sometimes brilliant novelist Norman Mailer, packs up her son and moves to New York to live with him and, during the summers, his seven children from previous marriages. Drop-dead gorgeous, Ms. Mailer modeled for Wilhelmina and acted on stage and in movies. She published two well-received novels and held one-woman art shows of her paintings. She is confident enough to tell of her early embarrassments, such as wearing a satin nightgown to a dinner party at the home of fashion designer Oscar de la Renta. She jokes about how Gore Vidal proposed to marry her once Mailer was out of the picture. Yet the heart of her story is deeper than the bold-faced names in her social circles. She was the ballast of the Mailer household. She banished the chaos and handled his far-flung progeny. She spent her middle years as a caregiver for a dying father, a difficult mother and an ailing husband while undergoing horrific treatments for cancer (gastrointestinal stromal tumor) herself. Her sorrows have been extreme, starting with the date rape by a friend’s older brother. There are her six surgeries and Norman’s numerous infidelities, yet our heroine copes. Like many women of her time and place, she was reared to put other people first.

Born Barbara Jean Davis in 1949, she was the product of a family that was small town Americana. After the earth-quake hit New Madrid, Missouri, in 1811, one ancestor built a houseboat and floated his family down river to Arkansas. Her father’s father was a mule skinner, a fact that Mailer used to delight in announcing at chic Manhattan dinners. Although she was a cherished only child, her early years were clouded by her mother’s rages and depressions so severe that she was hospitalized and given electroshock therapy. As a toddler, Barbara blamed herself for her mother’s absences. When the family moved from the country to Atkins, Arkansas, she writes how exciting it was to have an indoor bathroom with hot water and a toilet.

The center of the Davises’ life was the Freewill Baptist Church where they went to pray three times a week and socialized at church suppers and summer vacation Bible school. The hellfire preachers with their sermons that the world would end at midnight so scared the little girl that she could not close her eyes until after the stroke of twelve. Despite prenuptial nightmares, Barbara married Larry Norris, the first boy she slept with, to expiate the sin of premarital sex. She knew it was a mistake because she wanted a bigger life. After a fling with another man, she vowed to be a better Christian, writing, “The great thing about Freewill Baptists is that you can sin and then rededicate yourself and you are shiny clean and new, like a slightly used car that has been detailed.” The marriage died after her husband returned from Vietnam.

With her toddler in tow, Barbara set out for the bigger town of Russellville. She loved the life she built there, teaching art in the high school and planning to go for her MFA, and dating. In the post-Pill and pre-AIDS era, she writes, “Sleeping with someone was almost like shaking hands.” She “couldn’t resist” a law professor running for Congress, Bill Clinton, whom she says remains a friend.

She wrangled an invitation to a cocktail party with Norman Mailer, then fifty-two, in 1975. She was half his age, with longer legs than the law allows, and for him, at least, it was mad lust at first sight. They had nothing in common except being born on January 31, one minute and twenty-six years apart, and combustible sex. He was separated from his fourth wife, living with his lover and their daughter and seeing a serious girlfriend. Got all that? The other women evaporated.
Barbara Jean Norris became Norris Church after her modeling agency told her to change her name. She proposed “Norris” because that was the name she used on her paintings, and Norman proposed “Church” because he had attended so often. By the time wife number four granted a divorce, Norris had borne Norman a son. She encouraged him to marry his former live-in to make their daughter legitimate. That wedding caused her angst, but she put on a brave face. “He would always have feelings for her,” she writes. “It was something I learned to live with, like arthritis.” He divorced wife number five one day and made Norris number six the next.

While many New Yorkers often wear their power on their sleeves like Boy Scout badges, Ms. Mailer, a good Southerner, hid hers. Nimble-witted, she could hold her own with her literary lion and anyone else. One woman called at three a.m., asking to speak to Norman. His wife said he was sleeping.

“Well, wake him up,” said the caller. “He will be very glad to hear from me.”

“Honey, if he was that glad to hear from you, you would be here instead of me,” she said.

Despite his marital history, Mailer always made Norris feel special, secure and very much loved. For sixteen years she did not worry, but then she began having nightmares that he was leaving her for a woman as old as he and plain. She was devastated when he set her up to discover how he had been cheating for nearly a decade, often with plain, overweight women his age. His explanation: “Sometimes he needed to be the good-looking one.”

Sex between them continued to sizzle. It was only one part of their marriage that was tumultuous. They played one-upmanship in public and fought in private. Once she punched him in the face. While they supported and encouraged each other, Norris wisely refused to let Norman read the final draft of her novel, insisting that she wanted to be able to say she did it herself.

Mailer told her the night they met and repeated it over the years that she was “the nicest woman he had ever met.” Indeed. She is a real mensch. During a trip to Cuba, she gave away all her hats and scarves, cosmetics and toiletries to the maids unable to buy such things in a Communist country. She wished she had brought more to give them. Mailer’s family appreciated all she had done to keep them together. When she was to undergo her first cancer surgery, all nine children, their spouses and their children, along with Norman, his sister and her clan, arrived at her hospital bedside at five a.m. to escort her to the elevator and then to the operating room.

Post-surgical chemotherapy forced Norris to wear a wig on her first book tour. The wig looked so authentic that one woman remarked at a book signing that she must never have bad hair days. The author tells readers in similar circumstances how to find the same wig maker.

As he lay dying of acute renal failure in 2007, Norman joked about their famous Taxi Cab Kiss when she first landed in New York. They were together nearly thirty-three years. Lasting that many rounds with the pugnacious Norman Mailer may be Norris’s second accomplishment. The first is being herself.

Ellen F. Harris, a local writer, is a frequent contributor to Belles Lettres.
The Grand Dame and Her Views of Our Constructed and Contested World

Review of
496 pages

At age eighty-seven, Ada Louise Huxtable is a giant in architecture, a petite woman who has loomed large in a world dominated by outsized male egos. She has, like other women before her, made her mark not by building skyscrapers but by writing about them. As the first architectural critic for a daily newspaper, The New York Times, she defined a new genre of art criticism, profoundly influenced the design of the built environment in New York, and created, almost from scratch, an educated public audience for architecture and design in the United States. Along with Jane Jacobs she became one of the most powerful popular advocates for the importance of architecture and urban design in the 1960s, ’70s, and ’80s, a dark time of urban renewal, crime, and decay for American cities. Her columns, written in direct, trenchant prose, make it clear that she cares deeply about architecture and thinks others should as well. Through her writing she encourages thousands of people to be aware of their built surroundings and gives them agency to interpret them. Her sharp insights and pithy, amusing prose have not only attracted readers but compelled them to pay attention to the world around them in a new way. During her fifty-year career as a critic, Huxtable has amassed a staggering oeuvre of columns and essays, and these have already been anthologized several times.

What distinguishes On Architecture: Collected Reflections on a Century of Change is its decidedly retrospective quality. In this volume she takes the long view, a privilege not usually afforded to the journalist, whose work, she points out, is used to wrap fish the following day. In this look back on her career, she assumes the role of historian, or rather, re-assumes that role. Her formative years in the 1940s and 1950s were spent as a student at New York University’s Institute of Fine Arts and in the architecture and design department at the Museum of Modern Art. That historical and curatorial training is evident in the selection of the columns and essays in this volume. For Huxtable, this book is more than a collection of her work; it is a quotidian history of the last half-century in which she was as much a participant as an observer.

Framing her criticism as a de facto history of the last fifty years of architecture is a bold move, but not unprecedented. Many of the histories of modern architecture that we have, notably Siegfried Gideon’s Space, Time, and Architecture, were published by critics and contemporaries of the designers. Few artistic movements have been as self-consciously active in the construction of their own history as the early architectural modernists. Huxtable is the first, however, to build a history from a group of columns that, as she acknowledges, are more driven by deadlines than the longue durée. The result is what she calls in On Architecture a “rough guide to a movement.” What is this movement? Is it post-modernism, that amorphous and now unfashionable architectural phenomenon, or deconstructivism? No, it is not. She rather pointedly does not give this movement a name, and certainly not either of those names. Her movement is not a new “ism” at all. In fact, she frames it primarily as the declension and resurgence of that most powerful old “ism”: modernism. From her contemporary vantage point she observes that the last fifty years have been notable primarily for the ways that modernism has been questioned, rejected, and, most importantly, reborn. For Huxtable her columns of the last fifty years teach us that modernism is not dead, but simply staging its second act. This second act is no mere decline. She claims that it is “comparable to any of history’s great redefining aesthetic upheavals.”

The grandiosity of this claim is suggested by the size of this weighty tome, coming in at nearly five hundred pages. The selections she has made cover a long span of time, from her beginnings at the Times in the mid-1960s to her present home at the Wall Street Journal, and include longer pieces for the New York Review of Books in between. The first part of the book serves as a general introduction. “The Way We Were” periodizes the unnamed movement in chapters devoted to the sixties, seventies, eighties, and nineties. She sets the scene for each decade by selecting a piece or two that take the pulse of the times. “The Way We Built” similarly surveys each decade by reviewing important building types like the skyscraper and the museum that reflect their sustained role as catalysts for innovation and discourse throughout the period. The remainder of the book is arranged thematically and includes sections treating milestone buildings, the biographies of old modern masters, and the emergence of a critical discourse and response to modernism in buildings, writings, and exhibitions.

In the creation of these categories Huxtable’s primary goal has been to chronicle the ways in which the architectural community, its practitioners, professors, curators, and journalists, have come to terms with the legacy of modernism and reworked it in response to the transformed social conditions and technological advances of the second half of the twentieth century. She includes extensive coverage of heroic figures like Le Corbusier, Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Alvar Aalto, Louis Kahn, and Frank Lloyd Wright. They are no longer active, or even alive, but their work is written about, is exhibited, and shockingly, is old enough to be the object of historic preservation efforts. What had once been so avant-garde is now history, a realization compellingly communicated through the inclusion of a column on the donation of Walter Gropius’ international-style Lincoln, Massachusetts, house to the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities.
Huxtable’s account of the period looks not only back, but also forward, with a section devoted to new work and ideas that challenged these avant-garde masters, especially their insistence on the rejection of history. Of special note is her review of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in 1975, a radical show that resuscitated the school’s fussy, retrograde historicism, the object of modernists’ special scorn. She also includes several pieces that focus on the books and buildings of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown, who rejected the elitism of the avant-garde and claimed that architects could learn from the commercial kitsch of the Vegas Strip and Main Street.

In addition to discussion of these and other provocateurs, Huxtable highlights the work of a handful of practitioners who have, through the innovative quality of their work, refreshed the modernist tradition: men like John Hedjuk, Frank Gehry, Rem Koolhaas, and Christian de Portzamparc. Thanks to them and a handful of others, modernism, now a “computer-aided breakthrough in ideas about space, time, and form,” has “risen again, with a twist.” This twist is, unfortunately, not entirely a positive one. With an almost audible sigh she nostalgically observes in one of her columns that modernism, once a utopian movement, has today been reduced to a style and commodified, its relics trendy collectors’ items destined for slick bars and the set of period television dramas like Mad Men.

The irony is that the separation of the ideals from the forms threatens architecture’s power and relevance in everyday life. While Huxtable shines as the defender of the public realm, claiming historic preservation and urban planning. In this last small section of the book Huxtable shines as the defender of the public realm, challenging the private interests of real estate developers in the name of the aesthetic commonweal. These writings, primarily about the avaricious New York real estate market, underscore the complexity of the forces that shape the built environment, complicating the professional discourse that dominates the rest of the volume.

To be fair, Huxtable is quite clear that the volume is intentionally selective and not intended to represent her entire career. It is successful and compelling as a chronicle of her writings on the world of design in the last fifty years, and, as always, it is a distinct pleasure to read her prose. In the end however, I can’t help but be a little disappointed by this volume as (one presumes) the penultimate retrospective of her work. What makes architecture such a compelling art form, and Huxtable’s criticism so important, is its messy engagement of both the real and the ideal, the confrontation between the designer and the larger context. For the most part this volume separates them out, reflecting an artificial division that threatens architecture’s power and relevance in everyday life.

What is missing from this volume is more acknowledgment of this real-world context. In casting this retrospective as a story about the transformation of modernism, Huxtable has chosen to highlight one strong theme in her critical output at the expense of other, equally compelling ones. The overwhelming majority of the pieces in On Architecture treat the internal culture of the architectural world: its discourse, its practitioners, and the high-style buildings they produced. The contents suggest that architecture is the world of the Museum of Modern Art and a small club of favored designers. What has always made her writing so absorbing, and what likely earned her the Pulitzer Prize, was the catholicity of her definition of architecture. She shaped architectural criticism as a distinctive form of art criticism, engaged deeply with the larger cultural, political, and social fabric of our lives. Although she had a ready-made audience in the professional world of architecture, she went beyond it to construct a larger constituency for the power and perils of design. Many of her columns present architecture as a complex cultural, political, and economic endeavor, involving many actors, including rapacious developers, politicians, and clients. To Huxtable, architecture is a public activity, with serious consequences.

This broad conception of architecture is barely present in On Architecture. It comes through notably in her sensitive and excellent discussion of the intertwined political, economic, and symbolic dimensions of the World Trade Center disaster and the fight to rebuild at Ground Zero. For the most part, however, such holistic interpretation of architecture is tacked on at the end of the volume in a small group of odds and ends. There, alongside a discussion of Danish modern furniture and an autobiographical essay on her deep connection to the Beaux-Arts architecture of Manhattan, is a series of articles that address some of these broader concerns, including historic preservation and urban planning. In this last small section of the book Huxtable shines as the defender of the public realm, challenging the private interests of real estate developers in the name of the aesthetic commonweal. These writings, primarily about the avaricious New York real estate market, underscore the complexity of the forces that shape the built environment, complicating the professional discourse that dominates the rest of the volume.

Paula Lupkin is Lecturer in American Culture Studies at Washington University in St. Louis.

---

3. Ibid.
David Engerman, associate professor of history at Brandeis University, opens his history of Soviet Studies in the twentieth century with a clear and simple statement of its aim: "Know Your Enemy tells the story of the U.S. intellectual mobilization against Soviet Communism from the World War II-era crisis to the collapse of the USSR." Six decades and 339 pages later, the reader will understand just how complex and unwieldy this undertaking inevitably became.

Soviet Studies grew, as the book’s title suggests, out of a need to understand a perceived threat to U.S. national security during the 1940s. Officials from government agencies joined with program officers at the Carnegie Corporation, and the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations, to build an academic field that would serve more than just the immediate needs of policy consultancy. For this reason, emphasis was put on rigorous training not only in the specific disciplines of economics, literary studies, history, sociology, and political science, but in Russian and area languages and culture studies as well. This idealistic vision of Soviet Studies as a serious and rigorous academic pursuit held within it both the potential for great success and the seeds of its ultimate demise, encompassing as it did several disciplines within both the social sciences and humanities.

Engerman does an excellent job in the introduction of summarizing and describing the overarching direction he will take in the book: "Part I describes the origins of the field, showing how the Cold War missions of training and research drew on World War II antecedents. Part II examines the field’s intellectual history from the 1940s through the 1960s, [and] is divided by discipline. Part III traces the impact of campus conflicts and fiscal stringency, which transformed the field.” Once again, the simplicity of the statements seems to run counter to the concrete fact that the historical account, as it is laid out by the author, ranges over several hundred pages, five academic disciplines, scholars critical to Soviet Studies as it emerged and grew as a field, and includes a reference list of 51 organizations and their acronyms, as well as an impressive 88-page section of endnotes. The book begins, as did Soviet Studies itself, with apparent contradictions.

Unlike Soviet Studies, however, the text is cohesive from beginning to end. Engerman is able to strike a good balance between summarizing statements in the book’s introduction, epilogue, and in each of the twelve intervening chapters, and the myriad of details he provides about the history of Soviet Studies itself; the professional trajectories of some of its important leaders, and the importance of various publications, either positive or negative, to the field. For example, Chapter 4, “The Soviet Economy and the Measuring Rod of Money,” was for me, as someone with limited knowledge of economics, potentially the most challenging to read and comprehend. I depended on the opening and closing statements for context and orientation. As I had grown to expect by this point in the book, both were straightforward and easy to understand, and both belied the greater complexity within the chapter itself.

What I appreciated most in this chapter, and throughout the book, was that I was able to learn a great deal within a relatively small amount of text. In the space of less than two paragraphs, Engerman lets the reader know, for example, that Wassily Leontief Jr. was a recipient of the Nobel Prize, the USSR Division’s chief economist at the Office of Strategic Service (the OSS, forerunner of the CIA), and that he worked with one of his favorite students, Abram Bergson, “the prodigy who would set economic studies of the USSR on a course that it would keep throughout the Cold War,” to develop a systemic quantitative approach to the Soviet economy. This is how the book proceeds, paragraph by paragraph, page by page. It is chock-full of anecdotes and details, each backed up by sources, and each deftly woven into the fabric of the text.

Such attention to the details of history demands the reader’s full attention at all times. Indeed, Engerman’s impressive, elegant, and controlled use of his sources elicited in me a feeling of obligation to reciprocate with consistently focused and
active reading. At first, it seemed important to look at every cita-
tion. However, I soon understood that this book was engaging
with or without pursuing every opportunity for learning presented
by the author, who manages to bridge the gap between academic
and non-academic writing without lowering his expectations of
the reader, simplifying his arguments, or omitting details. He
builds this bridge in several ways. First and foremost, he does not
assume that every reader is familiar with the essential terms and
acronyms that he makes liberal use of in the text—hence the list
of 51 acronyms at the beginning of the book and the interesting,
several-page discourse on the term “totalitarian” in Chapter 8. He
also asks essential questions directly in the text, inviting the reader
to ask them along with him: What does it mean to describe Soviet
Studies as a Cold War field? Why is it that in the Soviet case, con-
stant prices would lead to inflated growth rates? How could a
group of scholars (Russian émigré literary scholars) whose subject matter was of such
wide academic and public concern fail to ride
the wave of critical prominence (the so-called
“New Criticism” of the 1950s) outside their
own scholarly spheres? He also dares to
address and analyze the elephant in the room
of Soviet Studies: How could all those experts
in the field have failed to predict the ultimate
fall of the Soviet Union? Engerman uses these
questions not to provide simple answers, but as a means to bring
together the conflicting approaches, viewpoints, and agendas that
permeated Soviet Studies in all of its five disciplines. By the end
of Part II, he has clearly shown that the initial, ideal vision of
scholars from the various social sciences and humanities disciplines
working cooperatively on interdisciplinary projects commissioned
by government agencies and funded by influential foundations
had become unattainable, certainly by the 1960s when distrust of
the government and its military and foreign affairs agendas had
reached a high point.

In Part III, Engerman shows just how self-destructive Soviet
Studies ultimately became in the 1970s and 1980s, with the onset
of the very public debates over Russian and Soviet revisionist histo-
y. The field that entered the Soviet Union’s last decade was sharply
divided in many ways. There were controversies within historical
and political studies of the USSR that resembled “trench warfare”;
there was a growing divide between Soviet policy specialists and
academic Soviet experts, continuing tension between disciplinary
and area scholarship demands, and ever increasing “casualties” and
“attacks” among scholars, even within the same sub-fields. As the
Soviet Union weakened and collapsed, so did the American field
of Soviet Studies, which by the mid-1980s was rent by multiple,
intersecting fissures, etched, according to Engerman, not in ink
but in blood.

And then came the “what-went-wrong debate” that lasted
throughout the 1990s and into the 21st century. At this point in
the book, because Engerman is able to evoke the mood of the past
two decades so well, I began to think more broadly not only about
Soviet Studies but also about what it means to be part of a scholarly
discipline attached to a particular academic department within a
college or university. Because I spend a large part of each day
working with undergraduates in the social sciences and, especially,
the humanities, encouraging them to think about pursuing the
Ph.D. and entering into an academic career, I began to wonder
about the “enemy” in the book’s title. Who exactly is the adver-
sary? According to Engerman’s account, the field of Soviet Studies
eventually became populated by scholars and professionals who
were more interested in defending their turf against attacks from
each other than in their subject matter. The intimation is that for
this reason, perhaps most of all, the actual fall of the Soviet Union
in 1991 came as such a surprise to the very people who should
have predicted this outcome, and why it took so long for members
of the field to readjust and redirect themselves. Engerman’s most
telling example of this inflexibility is that it
took the American Association for the
Advancement of Slavic Studies (the AAASS)
almost a decade to make a name change that
its members could agree on. It became the
Association for Slavic, East European, and
Eurasian Studies in July 2010.

Engerman ends his book with what is
by now a characteristically short, deceptively
simple statement: “But new enemies, in new
times, require new solutions.” Whereas he is referring to the post-
9/11 U.S. context, I was left thinking more generally about the
author, his book, and the reasons for the crisis in the field of Soviet
Studies. On the one hand, the end result of Engerman’s analysis,
which as a reader I grew to trust due to the obviously immense
amount of preparation and research that he put into this book, is
rather discouraging. On the other hand, in writing this very readable
account of the rise and fall of Soviet Studies in the United
States, Engerman embodies the very type of scholar that might
have, in greater numbers, saved the field. He has written a profes-
sional, detached history (he reveals the emotional disputes and
trenches of thought within the various disciplines while remaining
distanced from them himself). He brings together the social scienc-
es and humanities, does not hesitate to use the myriad of scholarly
sources he has collected while still appealing to a broad, non-acade-
ic audience, and exhibits an underlying awareness of the need
to show the current relevancy of his work. David Engerman’s
Know Your Enemy proves to be a good example of how scholars in
the humanities can use their substantial research and teaching
skills to combine a rigorous scholarly analysis of a subject with an
engaging text in order to reach a wide and varied readership.

Mary Laurita, who holds a Ph.D. in Russian Studies, is assistant
de'an in the College of Arts & Sciences at Washington University
in St. Louis.
The Center for the Humanities to conduct an NEH Summer Institute

The Sock Hop and the Loft: Jazz, Motown, and the Transformation of American Culture, 1959-1975

Wednesday, July 6 to Friday, July 29, 2011

The Center for the Humanities will conduct a Summer Institute for schoolteachers entitled “The Sock Hop and the Loft: Jazz, Motown, and the Transformation of American Culture, 1959-1975.” The National Endowment for the Humanities’ Division of Education Programs awarded a grant of $215,175 to fund the institute, which will bring together thirty school teachers from various humanities disciplines including English, History, Social Studies, Art, and Music, to explore two streams of popular music within the larger context of the transformation of American taste and changing ideas about the role and importance of music in society.

This institute is critically important for two large pedagogical reasons: 1) As a way to teach teachers how to use the rise of popular music in the 20th century to teach aspects of the racial and commercial history of the United States; 2) As a way of understanding how these two streams of music and their impact on and response to American taste affected literature, film, fashion, cultural aesthetics, even language.

The institute’s instructors include Gerald Early, director of the Center for the Humanities, Patrick Burke, WU assistant professor of Music, Sowande Mustakeem, WU assistant professor of history, Benjamin Looker, assistant professor of American studies at Saint Louis University, Matthew Calihman, assistant professor of English at Missouri State University, Farah Jasmine Griffin, professor of English and African American studies and chair of African American studies at Columbia University, Ingrid Monson, Quincy Jones Professor of Music at Harvard University, and other noted scholars.

Each year the NEH’s Division of Education Programs offers teachers opportunities to study humanities topics in a variety of Summer Seminars and Institutes. The application deadline is March 1, 2011 (postmark).