Henry Berger Ponders
Norman Podhoretz’s Question:
Why Are Jews Liberals?
This issue of *Belles Lettres* is late. It should have arrived at your door a month ago. I can offer many explanations for the fact that it is late, but, for all that, nothing alters that it is late. This brings to mind that my last name is Early. Now I have no idea how my father, my father’s family, to be more precise, came upon that last name. It was once rumored that his people, some of them, were the tar-brushed, basement relations of Confederate General Jubal Early. One’s self-esteem might be either inflated or withered by such a revelation, depending upon how one feels about Confederate generals and the grandeur of their lineage. At any rate, the rumor was not true. But the name remains. And a burdensome name it is. Even at my advanced age, I still hear jokes—what I suppose people consider witticisms—about it, as if I chose to name myself for their amusement. If my parents had been so inclined, they might have given me the first name of Very (in honor of Jones Very, a poet, prophet, mystic, and nut case whom my parents, not being English majors or even high school graduates, never heard of) and I might have been gifted with the ability to give the world a guffaw every time I said my name and be a walking tribute to a song title by jazz pianist Bill Evans. Fortunately for me, my parents were neither so pretentious nor so heartless.

I fear, of course, that this late issue will resurrect a few of the many so-called clever jokes and puns my name has generated since elementary school. The one I most remember as rather too morbid for my taste was when I was told, at age ten, by some kid that when I died I would be “the late Early.” This, he thought, was hilarious. I balled my fists and asked him if he might be interested in learning about dying right then and there. Surprised that I took such offense, he responded by telling me not to be so sensitive. I told him to make fun of his own name and leave mine alone.

I am not nearly the prideful little scamp I once was, so I won’t respond threateningly when I hear chirps about “Early’s late publication” or other such lame attempts at humor. But be warned that I have heard it all before, repeatedly, in fact, so unless your quip is really original and clever, you might best refrain from expressing it, if you don’t want a baleful stare for a response.

Besides, in this instance, the writing here is worth the wait. Henry Berger weighs in on Norman Podhoretz’s *Why Are Jews Liberals?* I wanted no one but Henry to review this book, and I think you will be as pleased with the results as I am. Former graduate student Jason Vest writes about Obama again, with verve and penetration. (I promise to get him back to pop culture stuff as soon as I can, but he really is good on Obama.) Ellen Harris tells us about the latest biography of the late Lena Horne. And, finally, we have Louis Menand’s address for the 2009 Faculty Book Celebration.

As a child, some kids called me the Duke of Earl, after the old R & B hit, and one kid called me the Earl of Lee. Pretty silly but it is nice to know that people could get such a kick from your name. It sure beats being named Smith.
Podhoretz's Complaint:
The Lamentations of a Jewish Conservative

Review of
Norman Podhoretz, Why Are Jews Liberals? (New York: Doubleday, 2009), 337 pages including notes and index

Norman Podhoretz is a very frustrated, exasperated American Jewish neoconservative. “[I]n continuing to vote for the Democrats,” he laments in Why Are Jews Liberals? “Jews have in the last few decades been voting against their own interests. Jewish conservatives, or neoconservatives, like me, see this as irrational.”

Editor-in-chief of Commentary magazine (once a mostly liberal, now mainly conservative journal) for thirty-five years, Podhoretz and the late Irving Kristol have been the most prominent voices of intellectual neoconservative Jewish opinion in the United States. Both were born in Brooklyn, the sons of non-observant Jewish immigrants, ten years apart, Kristol in 1920, Podhoretz in 1930. Kristol flirted with the left as a member of the anti-Stalinist Trotskyite faction while an undergraduate at the City College of New York. Podhoretz attended Columbia University where he became a protégé of the literary critic and author Lionel Trilling. The three men were members of what was known as the “New York Intellectuals,” a group of East Coast academics, writers and critics, not a few of whom were also Jewish and many of whom had been or were leftists on their way to becoming Cold War liberals before the “great” upheavals of the 1960s.

Podhoretz has recounted his political evolution in several previous autobiographical books, Making It (1967) and Breaking Ranks: A Political Memoir (1979). In the latter account Podhoretz describes himself as a former liberal and, in case his readers might have forgotten, he insists, also a former radical who supported Eugene McCarthy’s challenge of Lyndon Johnson for the Democratic Party presidential nomination in 1968. Podhoretz had become convinced that further American military engagement in Southeast Asia was a major blunder but only because he believed the United States could not win the war. That had also been McCarthy’s original position, but the Minnesota Senator, no radical, had increasingly become convinced (or had been pushed to believe) that American intervention was a mistake from the outset. As Podhoretz made clear later in another book, Why We Were in Vietnam (1982), however, he did not challenge the Cold War ideology of United States foreign policy, which led to America’s “longest war” to date.

Whatever one thinks of Podhoretz’s claims to have been a “radical”—it is never clear what exactly he meant in applying the label to himself as his assertions are just short of unbelievable—it is the liberals or leftists (he uses the labels interchangeably) who receive his attention and the Jews among them who are the cause of his profound grief (tzu rey in Yiddish).

In short, Podhoretz in Why Are Jews Liberals? wants to know why most American Jews “became” liberals and have stayed and voted for the Democratic Party’s presidential candidate in every electoral contest since 1928 (the election of 1980 was the sole exception). Pointing to the relatively high economic status Jews occupy in the United States, a position he says should cause them to become Republicans, he seems, well, “astonished” is perhaps less the word than “vexed” that, in the observation of two political scientists, Anna Greenberg and Kenneth Wald, from whose work he quotes, “Jews do not support groups traditionally allied with the Republican Party such as the National Rifle Association and the religious Right.”

To answer why this is the case, Podhoretz devotes half of his book to a thinly summarized, superficially selective history of the Jews and anti-Semitism from the birth of Christianity to the arrival of the Jews in the New World and their subsequent integration into American society following the Second World War. The ending date of this survey, 1968, just happens to be the year in which Podhoretz began his turn to the political Right and when he says Jews ceased to vote “their interests as Jews.”

The reason for their nearly 2,000 year history of Jewish liberal affiliation and behavior, according to Podhoretz, was the long association of anti-Semitism with the conservative Right and a misplaced conviction, amounting to religious doctrine, that the Left was the historical antidote to and refuge from anti-Semitism. Events and developments, mainly in Europe, “confirmed Jews in their belief that the entire right side of the political spectrum was enemy territory.” This view, Podhoretz says, was accurate until, that is, 1968. Indeed he rapidly scrolls through a list of traditional rationales through the ages of those who were anti-Semites: “religious objections, an assimilable minority—a nation within a nation,” biologically racially inferior, “defilers of Christian, Aryan Culture” and economic bloodsuckers, and Marxist conspirators dedicated to the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism.

Deploring the European Enlightenment (Haskalah) and the French Revolution (“paving the way for Jewish emancipation”) because both events facilitated the illusionary belief among Jews that these events would protect them from the scourge of anti-Semitism, Podhoretz asserts that both developments demanded...
that Jews “give up their sense of themselves as a people whose members were bound together across national boundaries and wherever they might live.” 

Podhoretz then parleys his version of Jewish history to America where he says “it was the conservative upholders of the old order [a.k.a. Wasps] who were hostile to the Jews” and who discriminated against Jews in employment, housing, and higher education. It was no surprise, then, Podhoretz continues, that Jews identified politically with Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the Democrats, the more so in the wake of Nazism, or with FDR’s successor, Harry Truman, whose immediate recognition of the state of Israel in May 1948 solidified support for him and also thereafter for the Democrats for the next forty years. All this, he argues, “made perfect sense in terms both of Jewish interests and Jewish aspirations.”

What does not make sense to Podhoretz is that Jews have continued to be liberals down to and including the recent election of Barack Obama. “[M]ore than three quarters (78 percent) of the Jewish vote went to him, 25 points higher than the 53 percent he scored with the electorate as a whole” and “a staggering 35 points higher than the pro-Obama white vote in general (43 percent). Only with blacks, who gave him 95 percent of their vote, did Obama do better than with Jews.” Podhoretz also writes that a survey by the American Jewish Committee in 2008 found that “most Jews still think that the Democratic Party is more likely than the Republicans ‘to make the right decision’ on every single one of the major issues they were asked about (terrorism, the economy, support of Israel, energy independence, and Iraq).”

It is finally in the last twenty-five pages of the book that Podhoretz attempts to answer the question which is the title of his book. He uses half of that space to refute sociological and theological explanations for the phenomenon that both amazes and infuriates him: “minority group status, a feeling of ‘marginality,’ continuing worries about anti-Semitism from the religious Right,” a concern that Podhoretz repeatedly states in preceding chapters is no longer valid, the affirmation and reinforcement in college “by an overwhelmingly liberal professoriate” of parentally instilled liberal ideas, and “the theory—the most popular by far—of Jewish religious values,” allegedly rooted in the Torah and the Talmud.

The last claim Podhoretz finds the most objectionable. If “the theory that the liberalism of American Jews stems from the teachings of Judaism were valid,” a proposition he dismisses as “preposterous as well as a piece of arrant chutzpah…the Orthodox would be the most liberal sector of the Jewish community.” Instead, not only are “the Orthodox the least liberal of all their fellow Jews”; it is they “who are the most familiar with the Jewish religious tradition, who are the most deeply influenced by its holy books, and whose lives are most shaped by the commandments.”

Most American Jews (and for that matter most Israeli Jews) are not Orthodox or even religious, and Podhoretz does concede that in 2008 “there were precincts in which Orthodox Jews are heavily concentrated where Obama did about as well as [John] Kerry did in 2004 [76 percent].”

That said, however, Podhoretz then provides his own explanation of what Irving Kristol in 1999 called “the political stupidity of the Jews.” Alluding to the past zealous allegiance of some Jews in the 1890s and the first half of the twentieth century to the “religion of Marxism,” Podhoretz, in what can only be called an exercise in mental gymnastics, proclaims that Jews have either transferred or transformed their leftist loyalties into “the ‘Torah’ of liberalism, complete with its own catechism and its own dogmas [drawing a not so subtle parallel with Roman Catholicism] and, Tertullian-like, obdurately resistant to facts that undermine its claims and promises.” The “facts,” as Podhoretz sees them, are that the liberal “agenda”—gender equality, abortion rights, cultural, racial and sexual diversity, the separation of Church and State, the role of government in the economy, reduction of military expenditures, opposition to Israeli occupation policies, and what he argues is a tolerant attitude of liberals towards leftist anti-Semitism disguised as anti-Zionism—conflicts with the Torah of Judaism and is also at variance with the most basic of all Jewish interests—survival of the Jewish people.”

Other than this grandiose explanatory theory, Podhoretz has been making these complaints for over forty years. For him the political playing field has not much changed since the 1970s when he began his migration to the Right and during which time, as the editor-in-chief of Commentary, he launched a campaign against the Left. “I was,” he recalled in Breaking Ranks, “critical of every important aspect of the radicalism of the Sixties: its political ideas, its cultural attitudes, its institutional structures and its intellectual heroes,” much of which, he charged, had then infiltrated and even captured liberalism and the Democratic Party, if in a less revolutionary and strident guise (305-306). “I tried to persuade my fellow intellectuals that radicalism was their enemy and I tried to make the same point in addressing my fellow Jews when the “anti-Zionism of the radical Left was becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish from anti-Semitism.”

Podhoretz maintains that now contemporary liberals, some of them Jews, are guilty of tolerating and collaborating with or are actually themselves anti-Semites who he says are far more numerous in leftist circles than in the ranks of the Right. The author recycles and repeats arguments he made in “J’Accuse,” the essay he wrote for Commentary in September 1982, the title of which he expropriated from the famous 1898 letter penned by Emile Zola accusing the French government of anti-Semitism, the real reason, Zola declared, for the arrest and penal servitude of army officer Alfred Dreyfus.
Reaching back three decades and more into the archives of Commentary to plot the unfortunate political trajectory of his Jewish brethren and seeking to vindicate his personal redemption in neo-conservative causes (it is difficult to separate one from the other in the present book), Podhoretz ends Why Are Jews Liberals? hoping “that the Jews of America will eventually break free of their political delusions, and they will begin to recognize where their interests and ideals both as Jews and as Americans truly lie.”

It is unlikely that most Jews will descend anytime soon to Republican ranks given the party’s continuous march to a conservative, right-wing drumbeat. In mid-October 2009 a Gallup poll found support for President Obama among 64 percent of American Jews. An American Jewish Committee survey in September had 54 percent of American Jews supporting the president’s relations with Israel and just 32 percent disapproving (NYT, Oct. 31, 2009).

Podhoretz’s opinions about why most American Jews are liberals and continue to vote for Democratic candidates as president are necessarily speculative but are far less likely to irritate and upset Jewish liberals than his portrayal of many if not all of them as disloyally unpatriotic, anti-Israeli, susceptible to fellow-traveling with anti-Semites, and acting contrary to Jewish and American interests and values.

To which, the following reply:

1) Yes, there were indeed loud, even shrill, critics of Israel following the 1967 war, an event which substantively and existentially altered (some would say ended) the Zionist enterprise. That some of those attacks have gone over the top and either slid into, given comfort to, or been perceived by some of those on the receiving end of such criticism as anti-Semitism is undeniable. These recriminations and realities do not, however, address or invalidate the substance of the arguments concerning Israel’s actions, no matter who makes them. When and as long as the United States is culpable in those Israeli policies, a posture Podhoretz apparently endorses, Israel and American relations with it are fair game. Waving the bloody shirt of anti-Semitism is not a response.

2) The New Left of the 1960s (“the Movement” in Podhoretz’s words), however disproportionate the number of Jews who were leaders or part of it, myself included, never represented a majority of liberals, not to mention of Jews or of Americans generally. If it had, it would have gained far more lasting political and cultural power than it did. As it was, New Left activists failed to build the necessary coalitions for such an achievement, split apart over numerous strategic and tactical issues, and they were largely left behind or could not deal with—some even opposing—women seeking equality, gays and lesbians asserting their identities, or Black Nationalism. Most Jews who engaged in activism during the 1960s were not radicals or members of the New Left. Even if the last had been the opposite (not easy to imagine), most Americans still have not confronted the substance of the most fundamental criticisms by the Left of what is now a declining American Empire, Podhoretz’s beliefs to the contrary.

3) Race, an issue about which he says little in this book beyond its use against Jews, played a significant role in Podhoretz’s political rites of passage. The subject received considerable attention in Breaking Ranks, which included a lengthy discussion of his 1963 essay “My Negro Problem — and Ours,” again in Commentary. In a response to James Baldwin’s “Letter from A Region in My Mind,” originally appearing in The New Yorker (November 1962) and published the following year as part of the book The Fire Next Time, Podhoretz used the occasion to denigrate liberal integrationists who “thought of Negroes as persecuted and oppressed.” “The stories I knew,” he said, “were all stories of how I and other white children had been persecuted and oppressed by the Negro children among whom we lived and went to school” (Commentary, February 1963). He admitted his continuing “fear” and “hatred” of Negroes as an adult, “the insane rage that can stir in me at the thought of Negro anti-Semitism…and the disgusting prurience that can stir in me at the sight of a mixed couple.”

Chastising as paternalistic the integrationist politics of liberals and damning Black separatists, the former because, he said, integration would take too long, the latter because they were racists and anti-Semites, Podhoretz then authoritatively proposed to “solve the Negro problem” by “a wholesale merging of the two races—miscegenation—the only way color could ever become irrelevant as a political factor in America.” Advancing this idea, Podhoretz claimed in later accounts, made him a radical. Whatever his commitment to the converging of the races, however, Podhoretz soon dropped his obviously contradictory solution to the “Negro problem.” He instead launched an elaborate attack against affirmative action, “quotas by any other name.” If implemented, he warned, it “will inevitably lead to proportional representation according to group,” subjecting Jews (as Jews, not as Whites) to “a new wave of discrimination,” proffered in Breaking Ranks and re-affirmed at the end of Why Are Jews Liberals? In framing his condemnation of affirmative action in these terms, Podhoretz backs himself into the well worn arena of identity politics with which he associates and excoriates liberal. It would be a distortion of history to suggest that the majority of Jews who made it into secular positions in America did so because they were Jews. Only those consumed by conspiracy obsessions believe this.

At the conclusion of what is really a lengthy invitation (plea?) for them to join the Republican Party, Podhoretz admonishes American Jews to understand what is “the great issue, that what liberals believe needs to be changed or discarded is precisely what conservatives are dedicated to preserving, reinvigorating, and defending against attack.” Given the critical state of affairs in the United States at the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it would not be difficult to agree with this description.

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B arack Obama is president of the United States of America.

This fact, no matter how obvious, has not prevented lunatic fearmongers from vociferously doubting its truth as 2009 unfolded. The occasionally stunning displays of contempt against Obama by Orly Taitz, the so-called “Birther Movement,” the Tea Party tax protesters, South Carolina Representative Joe Wilson, Glenn Beck, and Fox News seem peculiarly American in their misplaced passion, prideful ignorance, and proxy racism, so the statement bears repeating, unequivocally and univocally: Barack Obama is president of the United States of America.

This outcome, no matter how inevitable it may strike the nostalgically minded, is, as Richard Wolffe argues in his fine book Renegade: The Making of a President, among the most improbable political victories in American history. Wolffe makes this claim partly because Obama’s election as the nation’s first African-American chief executive is a development that many citizens (including myself) never fully believed could happen until they watched Obama’s January 20, 2009, inaugural address. Some viewers were misty-eyed by the sight, others awed by the symbolism, and yet others unhinged by the reality of a biracial American president. Wolffe, who covered Obama’s campaign from its first moments for Newsweek magazine and MSNBC, knows as well as anyone that in presidential politics expectations can buoy or sink candidates. Renegade recounts how Obama not only survived, but also surmounted, the crushing pressures that confronted his unlikely White House bid.

Wolffe, as befits his journalistic calling, extensively interviewed Obama, his family, his staff, his volunteers, and his voters during the long campaign (21 months from Obama’s official February 10, 2007, announcement on the steps of Springfield, Illinois’s state capitol, through the Democratic Party’s protracted primary process, and onto November 4, 2008’s general election). These conversations, particularly Wolffe’s ceremoniously billed “exclusive” dialogues with Obama, give Renegade a frenetic behind-the-scenes, on-the-trail, near-the-stump, back-of-the-plane intimacy. Obama emerges as a thoughtful, ambitious, friendly, and prickly man who, as Gerald Early (channeling Bill Buckley) noted in this magazine’s pages (“The Singular Plane Intimacy. Obama emerges as a thoughtful, ambitious, behind-the-scenes, on-the-trail, near-the-stump, back-of-the-stamp “exclusive” dialogues with Obama, give

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Education of Young Man McCain,” Belles Lettres, September/December 2008), was riding the express train of history to victory (if not glory) in a contest that lasted far too long.

Wolffe’s campaign-history-cum-candidate-biography is one of several books that publishers, desperate to prop up their ailing print business by capitalizing on Obama’s victory, rushed to press. Chuck Todd’s and Sheldon Gawiser’s How Barack Obama Won: A State-by-State Guide to the Historic 2008 Presidential Election (Vintage), Earl Ofari Hutchinson’s How Obama Won (BookSurge Publishing), Greg Mitchell’s Why Obama Won: The Making of a President 2008 (BookSurge Publishing), Evan Thomas’s “A Long Time Coming”: The Inspiring, Combative 2008 Campaign and the Historic Election of Barack Obama (PublicAffairs), Larry J. Sabato’s edited collection The Year of Obama: How Barack Obama Won the White House (Longman), and Obama campaign manager David Plouffe’s The Audacity to Win: The Inside Story and Lessons of Barack Obama’s Historic Victory (Viking) all purport to tell the same story: how the nation’s first African-American president challenged old-boy politics, entrenched Beltway interests, America’s racial divisions, and the nation’s complacent electorate to win a consequential election that, the pundits continually reminded us, would set America’s course for the next quarter century.

As these books’ similar titles, themes, and sentiments indicate, Obama’s election, even more than his candidacy, has become, in the year since his victory, a watershed event. Critical readers, no matter how true this historical judgment may be, cannot help doubting the back-slapping praise that these books imply about Obama’s presidency, which—despite its first-year successes and stagnations—can too quickly assume an aura of unassailable nobility that the president himself takes pains to puncture. Obama’s somber and sober inaugural address refused the hagiographic sentiment that the just-quoted subtitles suggest, while his resolutely wonkish press conferences seem designed to downplay the historic significance—by now both profound and quotidian—of Obama standing before the White House press corps; discussing how he intends to save the financial system, extend health care to millions of uninsured Americans, and rebuild the nation’s image abroad; answering questions with literate responses that every reporter in the room (save Helen Thomas) seems startled to realize are still possible from the Commander in Chief; and, much to the chagrin of his detractors, being presidential.

Renegade (named after Obama’s Secret Service’s call sign) strikes a different tone than the resolutely admiring—and therefore untrustworthy—campaign profiles that metastasized across magazine covers, news channels, and Internet blogs during 2008, even if, by the book’s conclusion, Wolffe’s professional, personal,
that transcends race, who understands how his biracial heritage media commentators proclaim him to be the black candidate cian. He is also a man, no matter how frequently supporters and pleasant fellow, is also a fiercely intelligent and ambitious politi-
state that places the reader close to the events and to the candidate himself. One of the freshest comments is also the shortest: “Across the nation,” Wolfe writes of Election Night, after Obama’s popular and electoral vote margins are secure, “city streets are crime free and Obama crazy.” This sentence causes the reader to think back to November 4, 2008, to realize that, despite the observation’s implicit hyperbole, it nicely captures the fevered emotions that greeted Obama’s election. Not all those emotions were positive, of course, as anyone who watched John McCain’s supporters booing Obama’s name at McCain’s initially-awkward-yet-finally-gracious concession speech knows, but Wolfe succeeds in depicting that night’s intensity, importance, and joy in only a few words.

This comment also prepares the reader for Renegade’s first major revelation about Obama’s awareness of his campaign’s impact. After the new president’s Grant Park victory speech, watched in person by thousands of Chicago residents and out-of-town citizens braving the nighttime cold, Wolfe reports that David Axelrod, Obama’s close friend and campaign adviser, is in tears, catching sight of several African American children in the crowd. They, too, are crying as they wave American flags. He recalls the earliest days of their quest for the White House, when Michelle [Obama] asked Barack what he thought he could accomplish as president: “I know this,” he told her almost two years earlier, in Axelrod’s conference room. “The day I take the oath of office, the world will look at us differently. And millions of kids across this country will look at themselves differently. That alone is something.”

Obama’s detractors might find this statement arrogant, even elitist (as they seem to find all his statements, even the trite ones), but Wolfe cites it to prove that Obama, while an inherently pleasant fellow, is also a fiercely intelligent and ambitious politician. He is also a man, no matter how frequently supporters and media commentators proclaim him to be the black candidate that transcends race, who understands how his biracial heritage shaped the campaign’s identity. No one, after all, discussed how John McCain’s election would be a victory for older Americans or how Joe Biden’s election as vice president would be a boon to chatterboxes everywhere. Not even Sarah Palin’s bizarre selection as McCain’s running mate was perceived as the stirring triumph for women that Obama’s candidacy was for African Americans, or how Obama’s campaign became a forum for American race relations. Obama, Renegade reveals slowly (but surely), knew that this development would occur even if he publicly downplayed its reality. Wolfe’s book, in other words, substantiates what thoughtful observers knew to be true all along.

Obama’s rise to the White House, Renegade argues better than any other book (save Hutchinson’s How Obama Won, which discusses this point with equal precision), was no accident. Obama’s victory combined many factors, including guile, confidence, luck, and fortitude. This last element is a repeated theme—really, a leitmotif—in Wolfe’s account. He does not fawn over Obama’s toughness or the candidate’s ability to endure sometimes vicious attacks (from McCain and Palin during the general election, as well as from Hillary Clinton and Joe Biden during the primaries), but Wolfe regularly reminds the reader, as one pregnant passage comments, that “a fear of failure and a vaulting ambition were the twin forces that drove Obama onward and upward.”

Ryan Lizza made much the same point in his January 21, 2008, New Yorker article “Making It” by noting that Obama used every available legal political tactic to knock opponents out of his way when beginning his Illinois political career. Chicago, it seems, either hardens its elected officials or destroys them (and, as disgraced ex-governors George Ryan and Rod Blagojevich prove, frequently does both). Obama, in other words, knows how to prevail in political street brawls despite his lofty rhetoric. Renegade offers so many examples of Obama’s ability to recognize, improve, and ameliorate his flaws (a healthy ego, according to Wolfe, being as persistent a problem for Obama as it has been for other presidents) that the reader cannot escape concluding that Obama, even if he stepped onto the national stage at a propitious historical moment, created his own luck as much as the events of his era did.

Renegade’s most gripping, powerful, and lucid chapter is the fourth, simply titled “Failure.” Wolfe examines how Obama and his campaign team, after developing an impressive (and

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nearly unprecedented) ground operation in Iowa that allowed them to beat both Hillary Clinton and John Edwards in that state’s 2008 caucuses, came to New Hampshire too proud of their hard-fought victory. “The intoxicating feelings of triumph and hubris overpowered the workaday sense of caution and humility that had characterized Iowa,” Wolffe notes. “In private, the candidate seemed uncomfortable, unsettled with his own success; in public, he drank deep from the adoring crowds.”

This declaration has the ring of authenticity, not because it unfairly criticizes Obama, but because it analyzes him with so much restraint. Obama fumbled the New Hampshire primary so badly that some commentators, campaign workers, and longtime Democratic operatives wondered if he could clinch the party’s nomination (or even survive until Super Tuesday). David Axelrod—whom Wolfe variously describes as Obama’s best friend, biggest fan, and consigliere—eventually stated the case bluntly, but accurately: “We were still basking in the afterglow of Iowa and Hillary looked like she was working her ass off. She looked like she really wanted it. It felt like we were up at twenty thousand feet and she was at ground level, grinding out the votes. It looked like she was working harder than we did.”

Obama’s reaction to the New Hampshire defeat, Wolfe persuasively argues, saved his campaign and won him the presidency. The candidate did not panic, fire his staff, or indulge in vicious recrimination. Obama instead told Valerie Jarrett, his longtime friend (and Chicago mayor Richard Daley’s former deputy chief of staff), “It’s going to be the best thing that could have happened. We’re going to be fine.” The candidate then addressed thousands of supporters in Nashua South High School, delivering the now-famous “Yes We Can” speech that the Black Eyed Peas’s will.i.am and director Jesse Dylan immortalized in an instantly famous Internet music video. This adult approach, in Wolfe’s eyes, distinguished Obama from all opponents on both sides of the political aisle. It proved to his staff, his supporters, and enough undecided voters that Obama could, in fact, lead the United States of America.

Wolfe, however, does not go easy on the candidate. Obama’s naiveté about the rigors of presidential campaigning occasions this nicely textured analysis: “Obama was failing the test, and he knew it. As much as he had tried to understand what a campaign would be like, he had no idea how intense the attention would be. ‘It’s like a public colonoscopy,’ he told his friend [Marty] Nesbit [a Chicago businessman, real-estate manager, and airport-parking-lot magnate]. ‘It’s more rigorous, more in-depth than I ever imagined.’ Obama’s memorable simile provides perfect counterpoint to Wolfe’s criticism. What, after all, did Obama imagine presidential politics would entail?

While no human being may be able to fully prepare for such exposure, Wolfe suggests that Obama should have known that it was coming.

Obama, at many points, hated campaigning (as Biden, McCain, and Palin undoubtedly did). He became irritable. He missed his family. He longed for relief from the daily grind of fundraisers, stump speeches, and media appearances. He questioned his decision to enter the race. Wolfe’s narrative brings these frustrations alive for the reader, while also emphasizing how Obama was able, on nearly every occasion, to simply push these feelings aside.

Wolfe’s grand metaphor for Obama the politician, the nominee, and the President-elect is his renegade status: he was, after all, an insurgent candidate whom few people expected could win. The general election, early in 2007, looked as if it would pit Rudy Giuliani against Hillary Clinton. Or John McCain against Hillary Clinton. Or Rudy Giuliani against John Edwards. Or Fred Thompson against Al Gore (if Gore, as some Democrats hoped, staged an eleventh-hour coup). The possibility that Barack Obama could rise from first-term senator to president in four years was, in Wolfe’s words, “also preposterous and quixotic, at least in the judgment of the greatest political minds in the nation’s capital.” Renegade reveals that President George W. Bush’s assessment of Obama’s chances, while reasonable, proved wrong as well. Bush, just before Obama’s February 2007 announcement, thought the Illinois senator to be “certainly a phenom and very attractive.” The primary process, however, is “really tough and rightly so. It exacerbates your flaws and tests your character. And I don’t think he’s been around long enough to stand it. I may be wrong. The process may forge a steel that I didn’t anticipate.” Two thousand and eight was not the year of conventional wisdom.

Renegade’s strength lies in how expertly it fuses political analysis, journalistic reportage, campaign exposé, and history lesson. Wolfe also illuminates previously unknown, underreported, or little-known facts, including the revelation that Obama’s ill-advised 2000 decision to challenge Bob Rush, a former Black Panther and four-term congressman from Chicago’s South Side, nearly cost Obama his marriage. The financial, familial, and emotional strains were nearly too much for Michelle Obama: “His daughter Malia was sick with a cold and his wife was unhappy with both his political career and their marriage. She disagreed with his decision to run, was dismayed by his failure to help around the house, and was barely on speaking terms with him.” This image so contrasts with the strong relationship and happy photos of the Obama family now carpeting the Internet that it points out how the Obamas, long before they achieved fame or wealth, struggled with everyday problems.

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Losing decisively to Rush in 2000, however, taught Obama the most significant lesson of his political career. Race, Wolffe argues in Chapter Five, “Barack X,” has always been a factor in Obama’s public life (and, as the first year of his presidency has demonstrated, always will be). Although Obama, while an Illinois state senator, helped reform Illinois’s death-penalty system and helped change the state’s approach to racial profiling, he “was taken aback by racial politics in his days as a street-level activist and was ill equipped to appeal to people as an African American.” Wolfe’s observation also hints at the most controversial—and therefore largely unspoken—truth of Obama’s candidacy: that his biracial heritage and self-identification as an African American distinguish him from the electorate’s largest voting bloc.

Wolffe notes, in perhaps Renegade’s most perceptive passage, precisely what Obama’s racial background means to African Americans after reminding the reader that black voters did not initially support Obama in droves or in the mindless fashion that Rush Limbaugh and Glenn Beck claimed they would because, shockingly to these media racists, black voters are no more monolithic than white voters:

To Obama’s friends and family, the questions posed about his racial identity or his readiness for presidential power seemed to echo their own experience. For years, they had struggled to overcome the notion that this wasn’t their time, or they weren’t quite ready for their elite schools or high-flying careers. They had encountered the refined racism that could not conceive of a person of color in a position of leadership. And they had overcome the defensive crouch that kept African Americans down, adjusting their hopes lower, just in case of defeat or disappointment. Obama’s presidential run was not just a test of his ability to cross the lines that divided voters. He was breaking the rules about what a black candidate could aspire to, and what black voters should believe of themselves and their country. His skills and experience were not unique to Barack Obama. They were shared by many of his friends and a far wider generation of well-educated, professional, younger African Americans.

This analysis echoes the writings of Earl Ofari Hutchinson, Eugene Robinson, Clarence Page, and Ta-Nehisi Coates on this point by staring the complicated political effects of race and American racism in the face. Obama inspired people across racial, gender, and political lines, but to some of them, he was, unlike boxer Jack Johnson, forgivably black by not operating in the same fashion as more flamboyant African-American figures such as Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton. Obama, indeed, has publicly distanced himself from racial controversies as often as possible during his campaign (with the notorious exception of Reverend Jeremiah Wright) and his presidency (with the notable exception of his July 22, 2009, comments about the arrest of Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates Jr.), but he knew, from bitter experience, that his skin color mattered. Those people (particularly Republicans) who hoped that Obama’s transcendent identity would absolve America of its racial sins were, Wolfe’s book makes clear, simply wrong in their aspirations. And, as the Birthers, the Tea Party movement, and Glenn Beck have shown, Obama will never be allowed by fringe elements of the American electorate to fully heal America’s racial wounds.

Renegade, good as it may be on this and other points, has some notable flaws. Wolffe’s repeated use of the word insurgent, especially when the book discusses the Iraq War, uncomfortably associates Obama with fighters whose negative media portrayal—fair or unfair—reminds the reader of the far right’s false allegations that Obama is a secret Muslim who wishes to destroy America. Some members of Obama’s inner circle certainly thought of him as an insurgent candidate, but the term does not correctly characterize Obama once he secures the Democratic Party’s nomination. At that point, Obama has gone from being an outsider to the consummate insider, which Wolfe’s book occasionally ignores.

Chapter Six, “Game Changer,” takes Obama’s well-known love of basketball as an extended metaphor for his campaign’s direction, difficulties, and triumphs. Such sports analogies always run aground, particularly when applied to the consequential aspects of presidential politics, so Wolffe should have resisted their easy seduction more strenuously. HBO’s Bryant Gumbel made these comparisons much more elegantly in his April 15, 2008, Real Sports segment, “The Love of the Game,” anyway, so Wolffe, even if he cannot be charged with conceptual plagiarism, can at least be rebuked for saying what Gumbel said better.

Obama’s presidency, as it nears the end of its first year, seems beset on all sides. Republicans and their surrogates—when not calling Obama a liar, a weakling, a witch doctor, a socialist, a Communist, a Nazi, a Muslim, an Israel hater, Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot, or Idi Amin—seem content to oppose every policy he proposes, every statement he utters, and every idea he advances in a fervent attempt to make Americans forget the damage that they inflicted on the country’s economy, international reputation, and civic life during the Bush years. Some Democrats, not content to let Republicans win the media shoutfest that now passes for mainstream journalism, deride Obama as a smooth-talking

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capitalist; a war monger; a torturer; a bought-and-paid-for corporate shill; or a strange conflation of George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan, and Richard Nixon who happily sells out the common person to keep the bankers happy.

Previously, in these pages, I wrote that, should Obama become president, he would disappoint every person who voted for him and every person who did not (“Dreams Deferred and Deserved: Barak Obama’s Unfinished Candidacy,” Belles Lettres, September/December 2008). This safe prediction has now become reality. Obama’s defense of a bank bailout that allowed corporate executives to retain outrageously plush bonuses while autoworkers saw their contracts shredded, his extension of certain Bush-era security measures and PATRIOT Act provisions, his apparent willingness to compromise universal health care down to the nub in hopes of securing Republican support, and his dispatch of thousands of American soldiers to Afghanistan have progressive supporters enraged at Obama’s betrayal of what they believe to be his core principles. Some of these doubts are well founded, so Obama’s advocates have every right to pressure him to pursue the agenda that he promised during his historic campaign. But the hard facts of governance, as opposed to the airy thrills of electioneering, force Obama to be a pragmatic centrist far more than his critics left, right, and center realize. The magnitude of the wreckage caused by Bush’s administration means that Obama cannot repair eight years of economic, political, and social decline even after a single term in office. His presidency, so far at least, is not what people had hoped, but it is what can reasonably be expected given the challenges that Obama faces.

When we recall the anemic first years of the Bush 43, Clinton, Bush 41, Reagan, Carter, and Ford presidencies, Obama’s freshman effort gains credibility, if not luster. Obama has promised great change, particularly to the health-care system, which he has delivered with the passage of his health-care legislation. But change will not happen all at once, so prodding the president by seeming impatient, while maintaining the inner equipoise that Obama so readily projects, seems the best course for now.

Richard Wolffe is confident that Obama will improve as his presidency continues because Obama has followed this pattern throughout his personal and political lives. Time, of course, will tell. Reading Renegade: The Making of a President not only confirms Wolffe’s talent as a political journalist and election chronicler, but also makes the reader more sanguine about Obama’s chances. As campaign autopsies go, the book maintains the reader’s interest, engages the reader’s mind, and tugs at the reader’s heartstrings by demonstrating how transformative a leader Obama has been and can be. It also gives the reader (at least this reader) some small measure of comfort by thoroughly explaining how an inescapable, improbable, and incredible fact of life came to be. This fact, no matter who attempts to diminish it, remains reason for hope.

Barack Obama is president of the United States of America.

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1. Hanky Panky

Me, The Mob, and The Music is, in part, the story of the rise of Tommy James and his group, the Shondells, a name created by James and his bandmates during study hall at Niles High School in Niles, Michigan, in 1964. “We all liked the way it sounded and the way it looked when you wrote it out. And besides, back then anything with ‘ells’ on the end of it was a potential musical brand name.” James was born Thomas Gregory Jackson in Dayton, Ohio, in 1947, a prototypical baby-boomer with middle class parents whose existence varied between striving and struggling. (He became Tommy James when he signed with Roulette Records, a name change far from uncommon in popular culture, where rebirths and renamings are a standard feature of any act.)

Jackson loved music as a child, listening to and buying the popular records that appealed to teenagers. As he noted about the jukebox in his father’s hotel, “Like most jukeboxes of the mid-fifties, the titles represented a knock-down, drag-out between two generations. Perry Como’s ‘Hot Diggity’ was right beside ‘Long Tall Sally’ by Little Richard. Patti Page was rubbing elbows with Gene Vincent. ‘Papa Loves Mambo’ was next door to ‘Heartbreak Hotel.’”

In this generational war of musical taste, in this transformational moment, the winner was clearly rock and roll, which won the allegiance of youngsters like Jackson, a generation flush with disposable income, leisure, and an excessive bit of self-regard. He listened to the Everly Brothers’ angelic harmonies and Ricky Nelson’s sweetly boyish laments (the reason why most of us youngsters watched “The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet,” a dull program, was to see Ricky Nelson sing at the end of the episodes). Jackson saw Elvis Presley’s path-breaking performances on the Ed Sullivan Show (two in 1956 and one in 1957), which, of course, had a stunningly altering effect on the young Midwestern boy, as rock and roll became, embodied in this rambunctious, black-inflected, southern youth, an art of overwhelming compulsion and propulsion. Jackson’s identity-formation pattern, which had been built on an obsessive consumption of teenaged popular dance music, now shifted to the desire to make such music. His mother bought him a guitar. (The rest is history. Rock and roll guitarist Duane Eddy’s 1958 instrumental smash “Rebel Rouser” inspired more teenaged boys to buy guitars than all the classical and jazz guitarists put together including Les Paul.)

Jackson never formally studied music and never learned to read music, not unusual for a rock and roll musician. But he learned through intense practice, considerable collaboration, and tremendous dedication how to put together the sort of music he wanted to perform. And in this sense he was as accomplished in the musical structures of his idiom as any jazz or classical musician in his. Through the dint of several years as a boy musician with a working “garage” band that played weddings and dances, through his conversations and experiments with his peers, through his incessant listening to Top 40 Radio and record buying (as a teenager he worked for a time in a record shop), he learned what made a pop/rock and roll song work. (In this regard, his musical self-education differed little from lyricist
Johnny Mercer’s.) He also learned the nature of his audience and what appealed to the people who came to hear his anonymous band cover the hits of the day.

Over a period of half a dozen years, Jackson and his band morphed from Tom and the Tornadoes to Tommy James and the Shondells. During this time, Jackson had seen rock and roll develop rapidly from Presley, Buddy Holly, Little Richard, and Chuck Berry to the surf music of the Beach Boys and Jan and Dean, who hit their commercial peak in 1963-64, just as Jackson was working hard to get a national hit. There were the teen dance craze records led by Chubby Checker’s hugely successful cover of Hank Ballard’s “The Twist” and other lesser dance crazes like the Monkey, the Mashed Potatoes, the Crossfire, the Stomp, the Watusi, the Swim, the Jerk, and the Boogaloo. Then, by 1964, came Dylan and the British invasion, led by the Beatles, the Dave Clark Five, and the Rolling Stones with lesser acts like Freddie and the Dreamers, Herman’s Hermits, and Eric Burdon and the Animals also getting a great deal of airplay. So by the time Jackson was 19, in 1966, when he made his first hit record, at least a record that was a huge hit in Pittsburgh, entitled “Hanky Panky,” he had absorbed a great deal of change and innovation in rock and roll and teenaged pop music as both a listener and a performer of covers, grasping with greater confidence the techniques of making simple, some might say simplistic, music that had an infectious beat. (”My Baby Does the Hanky Panky,” so the lyric went, and it was unclear whether the girl in question is performing a teen dance or indulging in a particular brand of sexual behavior or both.) In 1966, Jackson was sitting in the office of Roulette Records president Morris Levy, where he rechristened himself James, and where he began a business relationship with one of the true sharks of the pop music industry.

2. “My Mind’s Such a Sweet Thing”

_Tell it to me slowly._
—The Zombies, “The Time of the Season,” 1968

“Morris Levy looked like the pictures I had seen of Frank Fabiano Sr.’s old boss Al Capone, except that Morris was bigger and scarier. He was thirty-nine years old but he looked much older. He was very imposing and he talked and laughed in a style that commanded attention and even a kind of reverence. But there was something very likable about him. He was an average dresser, not flashy, slightly balding, six foot three, and about 230 pounds. He did not have to be at the head of the table or behind his desk for someone to know that he was the man in the room who ran the operation. I could not take my eyes off him.” So Tommy James describes Morris Levy on first meeting the music mogul as a scared 19-year-old on his first trip to New York. According to James, Levy scared off every other record label, including Columbia, leaving the young performer with no choice but to sign with Roulette, a company that was noted for recording jazz artists like bandleader Count Basie and singer Dinah Washington and pop performers like Joey Dee and the Starlites (famous for the hit “The Peppermint Twist” named after the Peppermint Lounge) and Little Anthony and the Imperials. Before James, one of the biggest rock and roll acts Levy had on his label was Frankie Lymon and the Teenagers. Lymon had a big hit in 1956 with “Why Do Fools Fall in Love?” By 1966, he was broke, a has-been with a bad heroin problem. In 1968, when Tommy James scored a huge hit with “Mony, Mony,” Frankie Lymon died of a heroin overdose in his grandmother’s bathroom. Such are the fortunes of war in the pop music industry.

Morris Levy was one of the tough Jews in this waterfront-district end of the music business where producing hits was not simply a matter of artistic ability or gauging the public’s taste but of sheer muscle. Records had to be played on the radio in order to generate a demand for them, and they had to be distributed to record stores and juke boxes on a national scale in order to score a million-seller. This required schmoozing, coercion, bribery, and outright brutal force. Levy, with his mobster connection, was very good at all four. Pushing rock and roll was a cutthroat enterprise, with more than a few charismatic pirates like Levy, who was willing to eat both his competitors and his own artists for breakfast, as the mood struck him. He ran his operation, in part, the way a dictator runs a country: with fear, dishonesty, iron-clad control with strenuous demands for unwavering loyalty, and whimsical displays of affection in the form of unexpected gifts and favors. In pop music, as in politics, this approach can actually work for a time. Many of the men who ran independent record labels often acted like this. To be sure, Levy also possessed true businessman’s acumen. He was, as James describes him, a fixer, a problem eliminator: “But Morris used more than just muscle, and he worked with everybody in the business. If someone needed a change in their contract, Morris would arrange a deal. If someone wanted to leave one company and go to another, Morris would handle the details. If someone needed money because they were broke or bankrupt, Morris
would arrange the financing. If you wanted a song that Gene Pitney had already recorded, you went to Morris and Morris would fix it." Levy had something else, the ability to sense what the public would like: “Morris thought and reacted to music like the common man. He couldn’t tell you how to make a hit, but he knew one when he heard it, and that’s not as elementary as it sounds.”

It was a combination of Levy’s muscle and connections that made “Hanky Panky,” James’s cover of a song by the Raindrops that he heard covered by the Spinners, a national hit. James knew he could go nowhere in pop music without someone like Levy behind him. Regional hits would have forever condemned the Shondells to the life of a second-rate road band that might occasionally serve as an opening act for a big headliner. Many may settle for that, but no one aspires to it.

James claims he was never paid any royalties for the hits he created for Levy, which, if true, is not surprising. Many pop artists have made this claim, and more than a few have been correct, especially during the early days of rock and roll. Most of the artists were young, inexperienced, and easily intimidated. Of course, to some degree, the owners were the capitalists who were taking all the risks if the artist failed. Naturally, they saw themselves as entitled to the bigger share should the artist strike gold. Artists themselves could be easily seduced by self-assured promises that they will be taken care of, by a “gift” of $10,000 or $20,000 (when they might be owed ten times that amount), or by a new car, or a supply of drugs or easy sex. Belonging is also important. James writes, “I had found a new family and it was Roulette. I was like a lion cub in the den. I might get growled at and slapped occasionally, and I could feed only when the leader of the pride let me, but I was safe and secure.” Every worker wants security or the illusion of it. Moreover, a successful artist’s whims are being catered to, while he is totally absorbed with work; artists live in a bubble of grinding live performances, ego-inflating friends and hangers-on to reduce bouts of insecurity, tension-relieving indulgences of aristocratic pretensions, and occasional sessions of creativity that bring deep satisfaction when they go well. They are not likely to quite understand what is going on with their money or to even have a clear idea of how much money they are actually making or spending. Many record company executives know that many young artists can be conned with the perks of the business: drugs, sex, possessions, and flattery. James knew he was being cheated but was unable to get his money. Levy simply refused to pay him and threatened any lawyers who tried to get him his money. In the end, Levy, according to James, stole $40 million of James’s earnings.

The number of James’s hits makes the amount of this claim plausible. In addition to “Hanky Panky” and “Mony, Mony,” (both very similar dance tunes), James’s hits for Levy through the 1960s and early ’70s include “Say I Am,” “I Think We’re Alone Now,” “Mirage,” “Gettin’ Together,” “Crystal Blue Persuasion,” and my two personal favorites: “Crimson and Clover,” the 1968 psychedelic hit which had the favorite lyric of my teenage years, “My mind’s such a sweet thing,” the Tim Leary anthem of the age, and “Sweet Cherry Wine,” probably James’s most attractive and best-written song. (Joan Jett and the Blackhearts’ 1981 heavy metal cover of “Crimson and Clover” remains, counterintuitively, one of the most lyrical of all tributes to James’s music.) James also had several big-selling albums. As he makes clear, James was not poor, by any means, “We were making great money from radio airplay and concerts.” But the book is a chronicle of an artist who felt frustrated, bitter because he was inescapably aware that he was being cheated.

In effect, this book is two stories: the rise of Tommy James (the decline or fadeout is not really covered), which is a moderately interesting account of a moderately talented singer-songwriter. The other, more compelling, story is of strongman Morris Levy, who is a far more interesting and, in the history of American pop music, far more important person than Tommy James. This may explain why James decided to write the book the way he did, making Levy the central figure in the narrative, the hook, as it were. There is much that is missing in this book: for instance, James gives no account of his relationship (if any) with his son by his first wife, whom he married while still a teenager; there is little about his career once his hit-making days ended; in the 1960s, James was a Democrat who worked for Hubert Humphrey, but he says nothing about his politics as he aged or his thoughts about changes in musical taste over the years. The book, on the whole, is a bit too thin and breathless, reads too quickly. To capture the nuance of the ephemeral, one needs to tell its tales slowly.

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The Divine Heroine of Darkness:
Lena Horne’s American Tale

A Review of
James Gavin, Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne (Atria Books/Simon and Schuster, 2009), 598 pages including index, photos, notes and bibliography

I should have realized that maybe I was more loved than I thought, you know?
—Lena Horne, 1994

The story goes that while shopping in Paris, Lena Horne was asked, “Aren’t you Doris Day?” “No,” she quipped. “I’m Doris Night.” She was not the counterpoint of the sunny blonde singer/actress trilling “Que Sera Sera.” And it is hard to understand how anyone could have confused the two women, which is a bit like confusing day with night. In her first European tour, her major concern was that the French compared her to singer/actress Josephine Baker, “who had conquered the country,” James Gavin writes in Stormy Weather: The Life of Lena Horne, “in the guise of a bare-breasted, banana-wearing, untamed jungle native.” Horne’s act of sophisticated jazz and cabaret songs was nothing like that. And she certainly didn’t think enough of her body to wish to bare it in public (everyone universally thought she had terrible legs and no bust). She managed to conquer France despite being neither Doris Day nor Josephine Baker. Yves Montand, Simone Signoret, and Edith Piaf were among those who raved about her performances. And she loved Paris, where she and her white lover, composer and arranger Lennie Hayton, could walk down the street without hateful stares.

Horne was certainly not Doris Day or Josephine Baker. Neither was she “the black Hedy Lamarr,” as MGM called her. (This sort of racial hype was common in the days of American segregation: black actress Nina McKinney was called “the Black Garbo”; Negro League baseball star Josh Gibson was “the Black Babe Ruth”; singer/actor Herb Jeffries was “the black Gene Autry”; and there were minor actors and actresses known as “the Dark Clark Gable,” “the Black Mae West,” “the Black Norma Shearer,” and “the Black Ronald Colman.”) Miss Lena Horne, as she was introduced in nightclubs and on TV, was sui generis. The first non-comedic African American movie star, coming in the wake of Stepin Fetchit, Willie Best, Louise Beavers, and Hattie McDaniel, Horne made being a Negro woman beautiful in an era of skin bleaches, hot combs, and chemical hair straighteners.

In James Gavin’s well-researched biography, Horne is the queen of fire and ice. She is the haughty lady on a pedestal who transformed herself as she sang. Eyes flashing, she bit off her words with such ferocity and ad libbed with such wit that she dazzled her audiences. She did her best acting when she was singing.

Horne maintained that racial injustice inspired her passion although she had little sense of a black identity, according to Gavin. She cast herself as the victim exploited by white nightclub owners and movie studio heads (many blacks in the entertainment business who were Horne’s contemporaries could make the same claim)—even by the NAACP Executive Secretary Walter White, who promoted an unknown Horne to Hollywood studio heads in the early 1940s. But the person who really took advantage of her was her mother. With only half of her daughter’s looks and talent, Edna Horne Rodriguez belittled Horne for her physical flaws and professional mistakes and shook her down for money and jobs. As her mother lay dying in the autumn of 1976, Horne asked, “Mommy, do you love me?” “No,” she answered. “Lena, I wanted a career. I wanted what you have. I wanted to be glamorous. To be famous.” Horne responded: “Mommy, I didn’t want the career. I never wanted to be a singer. I only wanted you to love me.”
Horne adored her handsome father, Edwin “Teddy” Horne, Jr., a hustler and a gambler who looked out for her from afar. “Horne had always spoken of her father as her great love,” writes Gavin, “yet they’d stayed largely estranged.” She bought him a motel to manage in the black section of Las Vegas. He supposedly faced down Louis B. Mayer when MGM offered Lena a contract in 1941, telling the movie mogul that his daughter would not play a maid or a jungle native. In 1970, when he was dying of emphysema, he told her he loved her.

Born in 1917, Horne had to work especially hard for her career during a time of virulent racism, which Gavin painstakingly describes. After her fabulous face got her in the door, she was smart enough to work hard on her singing and dancing, which were both mediocre. (The dancing never improved much.) She rose to the top by “putting something into a lyric that even the author didn’t know was there,” one musician explained. Like all great singers, she told a story as she sang. Like Billie Holiday and Edith Piaf, Horne was an actress whose greatest role was performing the myth of herself as a singer. She stayed in the spotlight for more than sixty years by updating and refining her repertoire, singing everything from Cole Porter to Lennon/McCartney to Nina Simone, collecting two Grammys for her singing. Being one of the first to integrate Hollywood, Las Vegas, and the high-end supper club circuit was lonely, but Horne’s poise, propriety, and precise diction carried her far.

Those qualities were drilled into her by her paternal grandmother, Cora Calhoun Horne, whom Lena described as “a violent, militant little lady.” The college-educated doyenne of the black bourgeoisie in Brooklyn, she ruled from a three-story house surrounded by an iron fence with pointed spikes. A race woman, she joined the nascent NAACP, the Urban League and the National Association of Colored Women. She saw to it that Paul Robeson won a scholarship to Rutgers University. After Horne’s parents divorced, Cora Calhoun Horne raised the little girl as a lady to avoid the stereotype that black women were wanton. The granddaughter of a house slave and her physician-owner, her motto was never to trust a white man: he’ll exploit and abandon you.

Yet Horne spent most of her life working for white men, taking them as lovers and marrying one. At sixteen, in 1933, she became a show-stopping chorine at the Cotton Club, in Harlem, promoted from the line because of her looks, not her talent. The fabled nightclub maltreated its black performers, who were forced to use the back door. If they drank from a bar glass, the bartenders broke it.

Café Society bandleader Noble Sissle, who had climbed higher on the social scale than Duke Ellington, hired the teenager for her decorum. (Barney Josephson’s Café Society ran two New York nightclubs—uptown and downtown—for the hip and left-of-center. It was there, for instance, that Billie Holiday premiered her famous protest song, “Strange Fruit,” in 1939.) The first of her father figures, Sissle polished Horne’s singing and promoted her. Instead of canceling a big engagement after he was severely injured in an accident, Sissle had Horne conduct his orchestra. The powerful black newspaper the Pittsburgh Courier proclaimed her a celebrity.

Men buzzed around the singer, but her mother, like a duenna, guarded her virtue, causing Horne to do what many daughters of divorce do, run to Daddy, in Pittsburgh. He introduced her to Louis Jones, who saw the twenty-year-old beauty as the perfect wife for a political career. She saw a chance for a stable life. Within months, she felt trapped in an abusive relationship. His campaign foundered, and he resented her work. Leaving her two babies with a neighbor, she fled back to New York.

Told she didn’t sing “colored enough,” Horne wept with relief when she signed with white swing bandleader and saxophonist Charlie Barnet. He saw to it that she was treated with respect, and his musicians walked out of restaurants that would not seat her too. She clashed with the NAACP’s Walter White over her working for Barnet and resented White’s interference. To White, she was “an interesting weapon” in his campaign to see a “dignified” black star on the silver screen. Studio heads listened when White spoke because the NAACP was an organization with some influence among blacks, and black audiences spent millions of dollars a year going to the movies and the 400 race newspapers continued on p. 16
ran movie reviews. White was jubilant when MGM signed Horne to a seven-year contract. Feeling as though she had been a weapon to discredit comic black actors like Clarence Muse and Hattie McDaniel, Horne complained that White had used her.

The racism of Hollywood shocked and hurt her. When her studio hairdresser refused to work on her, instead of making a scene, Horne sat quietly, which impressed her white colleagues. When the MGM financiers ruled that Southern audiences would not accept a black woman in a lead role, MGM head Louis B. Mayer gave her a new contract at $2,000 a week. Some of her scenes were left on the cutting room floor when her films played below the Mason-Dixon line. Horne was heartbroken when she lost the leads in Pinky and Showboat, both about black women who pass. But aside from being obviously black, Horne’s acting chops were not up to the demands of these roles.

By 1943, Horne had made Ethel Waters’s signature “Stormy Weather” her own, a considerable feat, as Waters sang the song at the Cotton Club: “I was singing the story of my misery and confusion, of the misunderstandings in my life I couldn’t straighten out, the story of the wrongs and outrages done to me by people I had loved and trusted,” Waters wrote in her autobiography, His Eye Is on the Sparrow (1950). “I sang 'Stormy Weather' from the depths of the private hell in which I was being crushed and suffocated.” Born to a mother who had been raped at knifepoint at the age of twelve, “Ethel survived things that Lena never dreamed about,” according to singer Bobby Short. However, despite her intimations of religious piety, Waters was a difficult, angry, frequently foul-tempered woman, who was seen by many blacks in Hollywood and New York as an Uncle Tom because she never protested playing stereotypical black female roles of the day. Horne and Waters starred together in Cabin in the Sky (1942), by which time Waters had achieved considerable fame by being the first black actress ever to play a dramatic lead on Broadway when she starred in an adaptation of Dubose Heyward’s Mamba’s Daughters in 1939. Also, by the time of Cabin in the Sky, Waters, once known as Mama Stringbean, had blown up to 250 pounds. Waters hated Horne with a passion, nearly as much as she hated “Hollywood Jews,” as she characterized Hollywood’s power elite. Waters was convinced that “the studio has hired Horne as part of a conspiracy to humiliate her,” writes Gavin. And it was certainly true that Horne was there to supplant the image of Waters as Hollywood’s version of the black woman.

Horne also took the part that Katherine Dunham had made famous on stage for the all-black movie musical Cabin in the Sky, which devastated Dunham. After Horne made it across the threshold, such as she did, she was unable or unwilling to open the door to other black women despite the entreaties of actor/singer/activist Paul Robeson and White.

Where her public saw her perfect complexion and exquisite bone structure, Horne’s mirror showed her only imperfections. Like most beauties, Horne was very insecure, sensing that her only source of power was her looks and that her looks overshadowed her talent. This insecurity made her feel she needed a father-protector. She chose white lovers—bandleader Artie Shaw, director Vincente Minnelli, and Orson Welles, believing they would help her over the color line. This was not unusual for black women in entertainment at this time. Actress/singer Dorothy Dandridge, who supplanted Lena Horne as the black bombshell of the 1950s, did virtually the same.

One black lover was more famous at the time than any of her white ones: the heavyweight champion of the world Joe Louis. Horne paraded around in the mink coat the world champion heavyweight had given her. But the relationship was volatile and the two frequently fought. Louis was married to someone else during the time he and Lena were lovers. He was, like many champion boxers, an out-of-control womanizer. Probably the true love of Horne’s life, or so she proclaimed, was Duke Ellington’s co-composer and arranger Billy Strayhorn, but the relationship was bound to go nowhere in any carnal way as Strayhorn was homosexual. At a screening, she met MGM studio musical director Lennie Hayton, who conducted for Bing Crosby and recorded with trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke. Heeding her grandmother’s admonition, she was deeply suspicious of Hayton, who spent four years on bended knee. After they married in 1947, she began calling him, “Daddy.”

Horne was set to sing the female lead, Della Green, on Broadway in St. Louis Woman with its script by novelist Arna Bontemps and poet Countee Cullen (music and lyrics by Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer). The musical is based on Bontemps’s Harlem Renaissance novel God Sends Sunday, about a black jockey. Walter White and the black activist community thundered “No,” calling the project “sordid” with its depiction of the black sporting world of gamblers, pimps, and prostitutes set in turn-of-the-century St. Louis. (The same objections would return with Otto Preminger’s 1959 film version of Porgy and Bess.) Horne wept as she told the producers she could not do their project. This would not be the last time Horne would back out of a project. Offered to co-star with Nat King Cole in St. Louis Blues, a biopic about black composer W.C. Handy, Horne refused. The role went to Eartha Kitt. Gavin says that Horne was too insecure to act. For decades, she encouraged Broadway creators to write books and lyrics for her; then she would back out. But she felt safe performing alone, especially in clubs where she earned a reported $10,000 a week.

Horne used her fame to entertain WWII black troops at her own expense, becoming a pin-up girl for the troops. (They
could hardly be expected to hang up pictures of Betty Grable or Lana Turner and induce violence from white soldiers and be condemned as well by other blacks for a lack of race pride.) After the war, she hit the lecture circuit and civil rights rallies, speaking out against racism and segregation, but complained of being “used again” for publicity when she headlined a Southern Christian Leadership Conference rally. She attended the March on Washington. She did benefit; she raised money for the cause. She was skeptical of Martin Luther King’s nonviolence, but she was never comfortable leading the charge. She was blacklisted by the Right during the Communist scare of the late 1940s and early 1950s, largely because of her association with Hollywood liberals and leftists (what other Hollywood whites could she have been associated with?), yet in secrecy she schemed assiduously to clear her name, even issuing a statement in October 1951 denouncing Paul Robeson.

Horne took her humiliations out on Hayton, taunting him with “Whitey,” yet he encouraged her to go to a Medgar Ever’s rally in Oxford, Mississippi. When she told him she needed to “work it alone” on racial issues, he moved to their home in Palm Springs; she took up with her married white road manager. Much later, she acknowledged her “terrible coldness.” Hearing singer Aretha Franklin belt out Otis Redding’s tune “Respect,” Horne told poet Nikki Giovanni, “Let me open my mouth again,” especially after her son died from kidney failure in 1970.

She was known for freezing out friends, record producers, conductors, managers, anyone who displeased her. She could be nasty. They all reported, “I never heard from her again” despite their letters and telegrams. Hearing that actress/activist Fredi Washington (who starred in the first film version of Imitation of Life and who had once promoted her for jobs and loaned her nice clothes when she was young) was dying, Horne refused to pick up the phone.

In 1971, Frank Sinatra ordered her to get on his plane to Palm Springs; Hayton, from whom she was separated, had suffered a heart attack and, as Gavin says, Sinatra knew she wouldn’t come unless he ordered her. Hayton died two days later at the age of sixty-three. His widow remarked, “All of the men in my life left me.” The deaths of her son and her husband afflicted her with much guilt.

Horne was offered more. She aged well, and there was in addition a revival of interest in her as a black performer who withstood Hollywood racism. Her live performances were so electric that then New York Times theater critic Frank Rich called her 18-month run (1981-1982) of Lena Horne: The Lady & Her Music “an undiluted triumph,” especially her signature, “Stormy Weather.” She was then sixty-five and still gorgeous. She was empowering older women by doing things her way.

Now she disavowed her old affairs with white men. She claimed that she had married Hayton “because he could get me into places a black man couldn’t... it was cold-blooded and deliberate.” She believed or liked the idea of being a black woman had ever suffered as she had, which Gavin calls pure myth. As she watched the 1996 PBS documentary on her life on American Masters, Horne admitted, “I guess it wasn’t such a tough life after all.”

Gavin’s biography is easily the best available book on Horne, complementing well The Hornes: An American Family (1986) by Gail Lumet Buckley, Horne’s daughter, born in 1937. The most noted of Horne’s autobiographies is the 1965 Lena, co-written with Richard Schickel, who would go on to become a famous film critic and biographer. The book was overwhelmed that year by other noted black autobiographies including The Autobiography of Malcolm X; Yes I Can, the autobiography of Sammy Davis, Jr., a seemingly most honest, trustworthy, and open book by, at that time, a far more prominent black performer; and Claude Brown’s memoir of growing up in Harlem, Manchild in the Promised Land. Gavin’s book is certainly on par with Donald Bogle’s first-rate biography of Dorothy Dandridge, published in 1997.

Lena Horne died on May 9, 2010, at the age of 92.

Ellen Harris is a frequent reviewer for Belles Lettres.
The Exile and the Fall of the Kingdom: The Anguished Heroism of Roger Maris

Review of
Tom Clavin and Danny Peary, Roger Maris: Baseball’s Reluctant Hero (Touchstone, 2010), 422 pages including photos, index, and bibliography

1. The Record

* I thought the pressure on Roger was tougher than the pressure on me.  
  —Henry Aaron, who broke Babe Ruth’s career home-run record, on Roger Maris, who broke Ruth’s single season home-run record

* Once he does it, no one will expect him to go out and do it all over again.  
  —Roger Maris, on comparing his breaking Ruth’s single season home-run record with Aaron’s breaking Ruth’s career home-run record

New York Yankee right fielder Roger Maris hit 61 home runs in 1961. Had he not done this, it is unlikely that Maris would ever have come to the attention of the general public beyond being a good ballplayer who played several years with a powerhouse team that was entering its twilight phase, a light about to go out. (Maris played on the last pennant-winning Yankee teams of the 1960s.) He may have been a much happier man had he only hit 59. The 61-home-run season always gave Maris something of the appearance of being a freak, someone who did something that was more odd and unexpected, downright bizarre, than it was awe-inspiring or praiseworthy or exceptional. Only three other men have hit more than 61 home runs in a season: St. Louis Cardinals first baseman Mark McGwire, who hit 70 in 1998 and 65 in 1999; Chicago Cubs outfielder Sammy Sosa, who hit 66 in 1998, 63 in 1999, and 64 in 2001; and Barry Bonds, who hit 73 home runs in 2001. McGwire has confessed to using performance-enhancing drugs during his career, although he strenuously denies that this enabled him to have his record-breaking home-run seasons. The other two men have never admitted using steroids, although both are suspected and the evidence against Bonds is particularly strong. As a result, Maris, who had been a neglected figure in the annals of baseball records, suddenly re-emerged as a hero, pure and unfallen, because there is no doubt that he never took performance-enhancing drugs during his career. At that time, anabolic steroids and testosterone treatments were confined almost exclusively to the marginal athletic world of weight lifters and bodybuilders and a select number of Olympic athletes from Soviet-bloc countries. Things changed in baseball when players began to undergo rigorous off-season training programs as salaries improved and as they began to lift weights, something that ballplayers had been fervently discouraged from doing for conditioning purposes until the 1970s because it was feared that it would make them “muscle bound.” (When I was a teen playing baseball in the late 1960s, coaches told me repeatedly I would “ruin” whatever abilities I had if I lifted weights, something I was sorely tempted to do as I lacked size in my upper body and was completely dependent on my large hands to generate any sort of power. I used a chest expander instead, to little avail.)

As with everything else in the United States, with the advent of the chemically enhanced power hitters of the 1990s led by the brash, uncolored steroid user Jose Canseco, hitting home runs suddenly became a moral issue. Maris, a throwback to an imagined simpler and purer time in that lades out the sentimental syrup of nostalgia as if a return to childhood innocence were the cure for all of our country’s cultural distemper, became a hero again, our Galahad in armor, pure and clean. His was now the only record that was legitimate, just as Hank Aaron’s career home-run mark of 755, set in 1976, became the legitimate record, even though Bonds surpassed it in 2007. Maris could only have wished that people felt this way back in 1961. Everyone seemed to be conspiring against his breaking the record then.

When Babe Ruth hit 60 home runs in 1927, he had had two seasons in which he had hit 50 or more (1920 and 1921), and four seasons when he had hit 40 or more (1923, 1924, and 1926). He would hit more than 50 again in 1928. Maris, on the other hand, had never even hit 40 home runs in any season before he hit 61. The most he had hit before was 39 in 1960. The most he hit after 1961 was 33 in 1962. For
remarkable. Stan Musial, as good a hitter as he was, never did it. Frank Robinson, one of the great hitters of all time, hit 40 home runs only once. Ted Williams, who hit over 500 home runs in his career, did it only once. Willie McCovey, another great home-run hitter, did it only twice. And explanations abound for Maris’s 61 home runs: he hit in front of Mickey Mantle, who hit 56 home runs in 1961 (Babe Ruth hit in front of Lou Gehrig in 1927, who hit 47 home runs and was the second best hitter in the league behind Ruth); the American League had expanded to ten teams in 1961, and the pitching was diluted as a result, although nearly all of Maris’s home runs came against experienced Major League pitchers and not recent minor call-ups; the 1961 season was expanded to 162 games from 154 to accommodate expansion while maintaining a balanced schedule, giving Maris eight extra games to break the record, which, as it turned out, he needed since he was unable to break the record in 154 games. (Ruth partisans point out that Aaron hit 755 home runs but he played in nearly 750 more games than Ruth and had about 3,000 more plate appearances. In other words, he had more chances, just as Maris did, although in point of statistic fact Maris actually wound up with only seven more plate appearances in 1961 than Ruth had in 1927, not much of an advantage.) The idea of what constitutes a season cast the greatest stigma on Maris’s achievement, although lengthening the season was not Maris’s doing. Indeed, if it had been up to the players, the season would have been shortened, as the grind of games was (and is) brutally fatiguing. Most thought it was already too long at 154 games and shortening the season could have achieved a balanced schedule as easily as lengthening it. (It was lengthened for—you guessed it—revenue.)

Achieving athletic greatness is in part an act of stoicism: the athlete must accept with immaculate indifference the conditions under which he or she must perform, good or bad, advantageous or not. Nothing is ever completely uniform. Baseball seasons are not the same and neither are the factors, the mixture of fate and will, accident and agency, that govern careers. The expansion of the season led Baseball Commissioner, former sports writer, and Babe Ruth confidante Ford Frick to declare in July 1961 that Maris (and Mantle, who also had a shot at breaking the record) had to do so in 154 games and that if the record were broken after 154 games “a distinctive mark” would be placed in the record book next to the number of homers,” write Tom Clavin and Danny Peary in their new biography of Roger Maris. Most of Maris’s teammates thought the ruling was fair, as did many sportswriters who did not like Maris especially and did not want to see him break the record. By and large, most baseball fans wanted Mantle to break the record, especially Yankee fans who felt that Mantle was the true Yankee, having never played for any other club; Maris had only arrived, via a trade, one year earlier. This made matters doubly hard for Maris, beating out the dead hero (Ruth) and the living blonde god (Mantle). Maris did not...
endear himself with Yankee fans when he told a reporter before his trade from Kansas City, “I wouldn’t want to join the Yankees because I don’t believe I’d be happy...They get on their ballplayers a lot and try to make them do things just the way they want it. I don’t go for that sort of thing.”

2. The Man

The beat writers realized from the start that this was a different sort of guy.

—Sportswriter Jim Ogle, who co-authored Maris’s 1961 autobiography, Roger Maris at Bat, remembering Roger Maris’s arrival in New York

I wrote negatively about Maris for one reason—he didn’t help my career. But should I have punished him because he didn’t tell me funny stories about his childhood?

—Journalist Maury Allen, author of Roger Maris: A Man for All Seasons (1986), remembering how he wrote about Maris during the outfielder’s New York years

At the end of the 1954 season, Roger Maris, a minor league outfielder with can’t-miss stats at Keokuk in the Cleveland Indian farm system, became Roger Maris. According to Roger Maris: Baseball’s Reluctant Hero, “Everyone in Keokuk knew his name was pronounced like Morris, but public-address announcers and hecklers on the road pronounced his name Mare-ass or a similarly uncomfortable variation. ‘They used to call him Roger Mary-Ass,’ remembers [roommate Dan] Osinski. ‘He just hated them making fun of him.’ This was Roger’s explanation for his desire to change his name.” But the authors see something more to this. Maris’s father, mother, and brother also changed the spelling of their last name. Some relatives think the name change reflects the divide in Roger Maris’s extended family, particularly his mother’s dislike for the Hibbing, Minnesota, branch, the dislike between and among members of the Marich clan and the Maras clan. Maris was born in Hibbing on September 10, 1934, but as he gained fame as a ballplayer he frequently claimed Fargo, North Dakota, where he grew up and became a star high school athlete.

The authors make much of Maris’s relationship with his older brother, Rudy, who was also a star athlete and hoped for a career as a professional. The two played together, and Roger always deferred to Rudy, convinced that his older brother was the better athlete although Roger had extraordinary speed and quickness, strength, determination, and true competitive grit. He bristled at intimidation. Rudy contracted a mild case of polio in the early 1950s, which put an end to his hopes of an athletic career beyond high school. Maris would continue to tell anyone that his brother was the better athlete and would have succeeded with far greater distinction at sports in adulthood had he been able to do so. As Roger continued up the ladder of professional baseball, fewer people believed this. Whether this modesty was motivated by guilt or was a tactic to help both brothers deal with Rudy’s possible jealousy is difficult to say.

Maris was an inward person, private, wary of strangers. He was not a self-mythologizer. He was not larger-than-life. He was a plain, stolid Midwesterner, a bit too honest for his own good. He also could be stubborn: he told virtually every manager and coach he played for from his high school days through the minor leagues to the majors that if they would not play him as he thought they should, he would go home. It was not an idle assertion of ego. It was not so much that he felt that he could walk away from baseball whenever he pleased, although he did feel this way for a time, but rather that he wanted a career on his terms. This type of persona did not make him a crowd pleaser or a reporter’s ideal, which would hardly have mattered had he spent his major league career with clubs like Cleveland, where he started, and Kansas City, to whom he was traded in 1958. But once he was traded to New York at the end of the 1959 season, his temperament proved to be a problem, especially because he was a star. He won the Most Valuable Player Award in 1960, setting the stage for the record-breaking year of 1961, when he would win the Most Valuable Player Award again.

Much has been chronicled about 1961 and how Maris (and Mantle, while he was reasonably healthy) chased Ruth’s record:

In 1962, President John F. Kennedy welcomes the thrilled Roger to the White House in honor of his home-run record, and the two autograph a baseball for charity. After he retired from baseball, Maris proudly displayed this photo in his office. (National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, NY)
opening day) could see more dimensions of Maris’s skills as he was, because of a hand injury, no longer capable of hitting many home runs. All the players on those Cardinals teams felt that Maris made the difference in their pennant drives. Maris appeared in seven World Series in the 1960s, more than any other player during that decade, which says something about his luck but also something about what he brought to a team as a player. When Maris left the Yankees at the end of the 1966 season, a fallen team, they were not to win a pennant again until 1976. He himself was a diminished and tired player, angry at the Yankees, at their fans, at baseball. The Cardinals revived him. He achieved the Great American athlete’s dream: a second shot at glory.

Roger Maris: Baseball’s Reluctant Hero is a good biography and timely, as there is much discussion about the meaning of baseball’s home-run records in the light of the steroid era of the 1990s. We might wish to make Maris a bit too heroic as we deplore our own age perhaps more than we should, but doubtless Maris was an extraordinary athlete who defined his time as much as Vince Lombardi, Wilma Rudolph, Bill Russell, or Floyd Patterson. He even in some ways challenged its presuppositions in his refusal to conform as a Yankee or a star. I was lucky to be a fan of baseball during the 1961 season, and I remember the Maris–Mantle home-run chase, not vividly, but not dimly either. It was my first good baseball time. I was pulling for Maris all the way. I liked his face, strained and drawn, the crew cut, the sad eyes. He looked like the last soldier in a lost war. From my boyhood perspective, he looked like he needed the record a lot more than Mantle did.

Gerald Early is Merle Kling Professor of Modern Letters and director of the Center for the Humanities at Washington University in St. Louis.

how hostile the press became toward Maris as they hounded him day after day for quotes and how unhappy Maris became, trying to avoid the press as much as he could; how many Yankee fans booed him and how he complained about them; how the tension and pressure caused him to lose his hair. He chained-smoked five packs of unfiltered Camels a day in an effort to cope, a habit that surely contributed to the cancer that killed him in 1985.

The 61 home runs, an incredible achievement, overshadowed Maris’s skills. He was a complete ballplayer: he could run, throw with strength and accuracy, field his position with grace, hit for power, and he could have hit for a higher batting average (as he did in the minor leagues) if he had not decided to become a dead-pull hitter in order to hit more home runs. He spent his last two years playing with the St. Louis Cardinals pennant winners of 1967 and 1968, where appreciative fans (he was deeply moved when fans wildly cheered him when he was introduced on opening day) could see more dimensions of Maris’s skills as he was, because of a hand injury, no longer capable of hitting many home runs. All the players on those Cardinals teams felt that Maris made the difference in their pennant drives. Maris appeared in seven World Series in the 1960s, more than any other player during that decade, which says something about his luck but also something about what he brought to a team as a player. When Maris left the Yankees at the end of the 1966 season, a fallen team, they were not to win a pennant again until 1976. He himself was a diminished and tired player, angry at the Yankees, at their fans, at baseball. The Cardinals revived him. He achieved the Great American athlete’s dream: a second shot at glory.

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World Series MVP Bob Gibson, a delighted Roger Maris, and Lou Brock celebrate a world championship for the St. Louis Cardinals in 1967. (National Baseball Hall of Fame Library, Cooperstown, NY)
This is a talk about a world on which the sun is going down. The earth being round, that means that the sun is also coming up somewhere else, and that’s part of the story, but today I am mostly going to admire the sunset.

About a year and a half ago, I wrote a review of a book by Nicholson Baker. The book was called *Human Smoke,* it proposed the thesis that World War II was unnecessary, that it happened because the Allies were bent on a war they could have avoided. Like most thoughtful people accustomed to seeing two sides to every issue, I thought this argument was ridiculous, and I wrote a piece saying so in the most anti-inflammatory manner I could manage, which is the way I think you ought to respond to inflammatory arguments.

Every new book first appears as a paperbound galley and with a thing called a publication date, or pubdate. The term is a misnomer. If the publication date means the date of the production of the finished book, that happens well before the pubdate; and if it means the availability of the book in bookstores or at online retail sites like Amazon, the so-called lay-out, that also happens, in the case of almost every book not written by Dan Brown, before the pubdate. What the pubdate is used for is the timing of reviews and other press coverage. If your review comes out around the time of the pubdate, that means that the book is pretty much guaranteed to be available in bookstores for anyone who still wants to buy it after reading what you have said about it.

My review of Baker’s book was finished a week or two after the pubdate. In my experience as a reviewer, that is usually close enough. A review that comes out within a few weeks after the pubdate counts as an on-time review. For one thing, not every magazine and newspaper publishes its review of the same book on the same day. And there are times when you want to wait until other reviews have appeared before you publish yours, so you let the pubdate go by. You especially do this if you think that your review is likely to run against the grain. You want the balloon to get up in the air a ways before you shoot it down. Or vice versa: you see that a book has been subjected to reviews of ignorance and superstition, and you want to come to its rescue. I think that this is even a good rule for movies, though very few magazines will run a review of a movie after it opens.

This calculation is all just part of the magazine business. You don’t put Sarah Palin on the cover the week after everyone else has had a Sarah Palin cover. You would rather kill your Sarah Palin story, even if it’s paid for. My own feeling is that readers are more likely to read your review if they have already heard about the book or movie or whatever it is that you’re writing about. First is sometimes too early, particularly in the case of an author who is largely unknown, which is often the case with nonfiction. You want to let other publications create the buzz you can then exploit.

I think we assumed that Baker’s book would get negative reviews, and since we were publishing a negative review too, we didn’t want to be late. So I produced my piece. Before submitting it, though, I did something I think I had never done before. I went online to check out the Amazon listing. *Human Smoke* had been available for purchase for several weeks, and I wanted to see what its sales rank was. Baker has a devoted readership, and has written bestsellers; I was curious to see whether an unconventional and controversial book like *Human Smoke,* which had none of the stylistic features of Baker’s usual stuff, was selling well just based on name recognition.

I can’t remember what the sales rank was because I discovered something much more interesting. When I logged on to the Amazon site, I found that there were already about twenty customers’ reviews posted there. Writing a review for an online site,
whether it’s of a book, a restaurant, a new model car, or anything else, and it does seem as though every commodity that can be reviewed is reviewed online, is not the same as writing a review for print publication. There is a difference that exceeds the difference between the technologies.

Kinsley’s eyes, because it speeds the writing process.

Kinsley subscribes to a definition of good magazine writing that is usually attributed to A. J. Liebling, who wrote for the New Yorker between 1935 and 1964, the year he died. Leibling’s definition of good writing is contained in the famous remark he made about himself: “I can write better than anybody who can write faster, and I can write faster than anybody who can write better.” Among the things that Kinsley thought that magazine writers fussed too much about was fact checking. He used to say that magazines don’t need fact checkers; they already have fact checkers. They’re called writers. It’s not that writers don’t make mistakes, but when you make a mistake, you publish a correction. I think the Internet appealed to him because it is the kind of place where you not only can post a correction as soon as you want, but can actually correct the piece itself. On the Internet, you can also be in a race to post the first piece on a topic and then measure the result. In the print world about the closest you can measure the outcome in this sort of race is a weekend. It is more usually a week. Online, you can measure who is first by the minute. One of the ideas behind Slate was that by putting commentary out within hours, Kinsley would eat the print magazines’ lunch.

The increased relevance of speed, in a medium where it really can cash out for you, means the decreased relevance of expressive finesse. Formal sophistication is not valued in online writing in the way it has traditionally been valued in print. In print magazine writing, you usually want there to be a turn somewhere in the piece. A really good piece has two turns. Online writing aspires to a much higher rpm—it has a very fast zero-to-sixty—and it is therefore not equipped to make a lot of turns. It also encourages an unbuttoned diction that is fun to read but also easy to read. No one likes to look at a computer screen for very long. The whole body just wants to scroll down. When expression is bolder and when there are fewer curlicues, skimming is easier.

The switch from print to digital can actually make slow writers into fast ones. I have a colleague at the New Yorker whose job is to produce one short piece for the magazine almost every week. He is a wonderful professional writer who has long been known within the business for a paralyzing writer’s block. He keeps an air mattress in his office in case he has to spend the night before deadline in order to finish his piece, which is only around a thousand words and which he has all week to write. He was recently asked to contribute, in addition to the magazine column, a blog on the magazine’s website. This he produces regularly and effortlessly. I once had lunch with some editors from the New York Times Magazine. When we parted, they turned to me and one of them said: “We say to you what we say to every writer we like.” Then they all said in unison—it was a little tacky, I have to admit—“Write faster.” And those were print guys. On the Internet, you really can write faster.

So it was not that surprising to find a lot of customers’ reviews on Amazon for Baker’s book. People obviously do write these with the speed and in the style of e-mail, and since that is the protocol of composition, it is also the protocol of reception. I scrolled down the reports, reading the way one does online—skipping the obvious cranks, skimming quickly through the pedants who have to tell you everything they know, sorting the wheat from the chaff, the fluff, and the blather. At the end, I realized that if I was a person who had not read Human Smoke,
after spending a few minutes scrolling through these readers' opinions, I would have acquired a pretty accurate idea of what the book was about, what its strengths and weaknesses were, where the areas of debate were likely to be, and whether it would or would not be worth my while to click and order myself a copy. These were all issues I had tried to address in my own review. I realized, in other words, that in the contemporary economy of authorship and readership, the magazine reviewer is no longer necessary.

Of course, I already knew that books and other things are reviewed and written about online. That was not what struck me about this experience. What struck me was that even though none of the customer reviews I read was particularly well written, and none had anything original or surprising to say (although some customers were quite knowledgeable about World War II, and some thought they were quite knowledgeable), and none would have ever been accepted for publication in any magazine I knew of, in the aggregate, the reviews did capture the essential features of Baker's book.

At one level, the customers' reviews were just the digital equivalent of a show of hands: How many like Human Smoke? How many hate it? The customers award stars; the stars get averaged. But they were more than that. For although no single review was reliably comprehensive or even reliably accurate, and though none of the reviewers seemed to consider disinterestedness an important factor in their reports, as a body, they met Matthew Arnold's criterion for criticism: they saw the object as it really was. Of course, someone interested in the book might still read a print review for the critic’s sensibility, his scholarly two cents, his way of turning a phrase—for the inimitable je ne sais quoi of his prose. But it was clear to me that the pure review function of magazine writing was obsolete.

I think that the reason Internet reviewing works has to do with the wisdom of crowds, the law of large numbers. If you have twenty random people offering their opinions of something, a consensus will emerge that is going to be pretty close to an accurate gauge of the thing they are opining about. No one opinion is going to be stand-alone "correct," but that is not the point of customer reviews. It's the same when you read online customer reviews of a restaurant you are interested in trying. Partly because of the relatively unmediated character of online writing, its proximity to the e-mail style, it is immediately obvious which reviewers are cranky obsessives about having the water glasses refilled and which are easy graders who give every waiter an A. You distribute the individual views along a curve and arrive at the mean. I did that, in the case of the Nicholson Baker book, and I saw that it works. The whole elaborate editorial dance around the pubdate, the magazine game as I had been taught to play it, was essentially beside the point.

The reason people give for the demise of the magazine world is a little different. It has to do with advertising. Magazines are powered by two sources: circulation and advertising. It is not the case that more of the first brings more of the second. The Condé Nast empire was founded on the theory that niche marketing is a more reliable source of revenue. Once, great general interest goliaths stalked the continent: Life, Look, the Saturday Evening Post. Where are they now? In the tar pits of history. They all perished when a large electronic meteor crashed into the culture, wiping out whole species of print organisms. That meteor, of course, was television.

The newsweeklies, perhaps because Americans still have to wait to see the dentist, hang on, but barely. BusinessWeek, once one of the most profitable magazines in the country, was sold earlier this year in a fire sale. Its print revenues dropped by half in the last three years, and last month it was purchased by Bloomberg for a mere five million dollars. Newsweek's ads were down 29.2 percent in the first nine months of this year. Newsweek has been laying off staff for a year. The magazine promised advertisers a minimum circulation of 3.1 million readers in 2007. In January 2010 that will drop to 1.5 million, by more than half. Meanwhile, the magazine is trying to reconfigure its DNA. People don't read print magazines for news.

They don't get their news from newspapers, either. According to a Pew survey taken in 2008, 35 percent of Americans say that they get their news from newspapers. Forty percent get their news on the Internet. Seventy percent get it on television. The shrinkage of print newspapers is a parallel story.

In the magazine world, the idea behind niche marketing is that you can get advertisers to pay a higher rate by delivering to them a specific demographic, and as long as the demographic is not diluted, you can develop a stable long-term relationship between magazine and advertising agency. The problem advertisers have with general interest magazines is that half the readers are men and half are women; some percentage are well-off professionals and some equal percentage are graduate students; they
represent all age groups; and so on. If you are an advertiser who is paying on a circulation base of, let’s say, one million readers, and you have a product for, let’s say, women with significant disposable income, then you are paying to reach readers you have no interest in reaching. You want to advertise in a magazine read by women with disposable income, because you are getting more for your advertising dollar in those pages.

The New Yorker was founded as a niche magazine. Its first editor, Harold Ross, famously explained that the magazine was not edited for the little old lady in Dubuque. This remark is often taken to be directed at potential readers, but it was directed at potential advertisers. Ross was telling advertisers like Bonwit Teller that they would not be wasting part of their dollar reaching readers who not only had no interest in what they were selling, but also lived where there was no Bonwit Teller store and lacked the means to buy from Bonwit Teller even if they did. In the 1950s and into the 1960s, the New Yorker actually made it difficult to find the phone number of the subscription department. They didn’t want new subscribers, some of whom might be indigent graduate students. They had a circulation well under 500,000 and they wanted to keep it that way. The business plan worked brilliantly. Between 1957 and 1964, the New Yorker sold more ad pages than any magazine in America. In 1965, it sold 6,092 pages of ads, beating its closest rival, which was BusinessWeek, by almost 1,300 pages.

It is unheard of for a magazine to sell six thousand pages of ads today. A good year is a thousand pages. In 2008, the New Yorker’s ad pages were down 26 percent. They have fallen even more this year, a year when Condé Nast’s monthlies lost over eight thousand ad pages. That is the equivalent of five or six entire magazines. The New Yorker, like all the Condé Nast books, depends on upscale advertising, and that is the advertising that went away during the recession. Magazines that reach a more downscale readership did better over the past year. Overall, American magazine advertising fell 27.2 percent in the first nine months of 2009 compared with the same period in 2008. And print magazines had already been in financial decline before there was a financial meltdown. The question everyone asks is, When the advertising comes back, will it come back to print?

I don’t know the answer to that question, and I don’t even know how to know the answer, but I do think that there is a trend. One way to characterize the transformation of the media is as democratization. I started writing for magazines in 1979. I started reviewing, in the form I’ve been talking about, in 1985. In those days, there were maybe six or seven places where serious book reviews appeared. These included the New York Times and the Sunday Times Book Review, the New York Review of Books, the TLS, and then the smaller opinion magazines, such as the New Republic, the Nation, Commentary, and Dissent.

The New Yorker in those years gave less attention to books. The magazine also rather ostentatiously ignored things like pulp dates. The first review I wrote for them was in 1990. I reviewed a biography of William S. Paley, the chairman of CBS. I finished the review, and it entered the long precisionist process that once was New Yorker editing. Weeks went by. The pulpdate passed. The piece was still being disassembled and reassembled galley by galley. The book came out and other places published their reviews. My piece remained in the shop being fact checked. William Paley died. More galleys. Finally, six weeks after Paley’s death, long after everyone had run the obituaries, my review came out. It was six thousand words long and in the end was virtually unchanged from the version I had submitted many months before. I know that my mother read it, anyway.

But the New Yorker could make a difference with a certain kind of book. And it, along with the six or seven other papers and magazines I named, dictated the terms of reception for new books. The Times Book Review in particular had enormous power to make a book—as the Sunday Times used to have enormous power to make a Broadway show and, to a lesser extent, a movie. If you published a review in one of those six or seven publications, you were one of a handful of people who guided the public conversation of the book. Apart from the letters column, no one else could really be part of that conversation.

As far as reviewing is concerned, that has all changed—except in the case of specialized scholarship, where the venues are scarcer and the reviewers have much more power, at least over the untenured. There, of course, money is not at stake, merely careers. And the situation of journalism has changed not only for reviewing but in every other respect as well, from political opinion to first-person confessions. The oligopolies that dominated those domains of discourse are toppling. Even the online magazines, like Slate, are struggling. There is too much free content, but what matters more to the journalistic economy,
people in the retail end of intellectual and literary culture, have the same education-
al background, the same general intelli-
gence, and the same intellectual curiosity
as professors, except that they did not
attend, or did not complete, graduate
education. And this fork in the road does
a lot to explain the mutual incomprehen-
sion of journalists and academics.

Journalists are very suspicious of aca-
demics. Anti-pretentiousness is a feature
of the journalist mentality generally. The
fundamental premise on which all jour-
nalism rests is that a cat can look at a
king. If you know any journalists, you
know that belief has lifestyle implications
that go way, way down. Unlike academ-
ics, journalists do not think theoretically,
and they are epistemological fundamen-
talists. They subscribe to a simple corre-
spondence theory of truth. They tend to
be absolutists about freedom of the press, as well, because it
means that in their work they run dangers that are real. They
are innately skeptical of the principle of academic freedom,
because they think there is no reality check in academia.

Journalists want something academics have but journalists
can never have, which is job security. And academics, or some
academics, want something that journalists take for granted,
which is a non-captive audience. Journalists are right about
the reality check: win or lose, they are in the game. Academics
can never be sure.

For me, the difference between the magazine world and the
university world has never been a problem. I see both jobs as
dedicated to the same task, and that is the duty, in the deathless
words of Howard Cosell, to tell it like it is. The rest is faith: that
readers will care, that truth will be served, that the world will be
a better place. Congratulations to all you faculty authors. And
write faster.

Louis Menand is professor of English at Harvard University. His
latest book is The Marketplace of Ideas: Reform and Resistance
in the America University, published by Norton.
Acclaimed Author Francine Prose to Receive the Third Washington University International Humanities Prize Nov. 30, 2010

The Center for the Humanities and Washington University Libraries will present the third awarding of the Washington University International Humanities Prize to author Francine Prose. The prize is given to a distinguished scholar, writer, or artist whose career merits special recognition for sustained excellence and commitment to truth. The medal, which accompanies the prize, will be given on Tuesday, November 30, 2010, at Graham Chapel on the campus of Washington University. Prose will also deliver a keynote address.

The International Humanities Prize is generously supported by Dr. David and Phyllis Wilson Grossman. The first recipient was Turkish novelist and Nobel Prize winner Orhan Pamuk; the second was the best-selling journalist and critic Michael Pollan.

Francine Prose has been a prolific and much-honored author of both novels and nonfiction books. Her fictions include *A Changed Man*, *Blue Angel*, *Hunters and Gatherers*, *Bigfoot Dreams*, *Primitive People*, and *Guided Tours of Hell*. Among her nonfiction works are *Sicilian Odyssey*, *Gluttony: The Seven Deadly Sins*, and *Caravaggio: Painter of Miracles*. Her stories and essays have appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, *The Best American Short Stories*, *The New Yorker*, *The New York Times*, *The New York Observer*, and numerous other publications. She is a contributing editor at *Harper’s*, writes regularly on art for *The Wall Street Journal*, and is a fellow of the New York Institute for the Humanities.

Her most recent book is *ANNE FRANK: The Book, The Life, The Afterlife*. As she traces its transformation from the jottings of a young girl in a red-and-white checked journal to international bestseller, Prose reconsiders how Anne Frank’s diary—and its copious interpretations and misrepresentations over the past sixty years—has both shaped and been shaped by forces beyond its purview. The fame of the diary grew exponentially after it was adapted into a Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play and Oscar-winning movie. “How astonishing that a teenager could have written so intelligently and so movingly about a subject that continues to overwhelm the adult imagination,” says Prose. Richly detailed and thoughtfully presented, *ANNE FRANK: The Book, The Life, The Afterlife* is a graceful and compelling reconsideration of one of the most beloved and important books to ever be rescued from obscurity.

Francine Prose’s Humanities Prize keynote address, “How to Begin,” will look at how some of the greatest writers began writing some of our most important classics of literature.

The third awarding of the Washington University International Humanities Prize will be the culminating event of the annual Faculty Books Celebration, which will take place on Monday, November 29th, and Tuesday, November 30th, 2010. A schedule of the other events will be available in August.
The Center for the Humanities will conduct a NEH Summer Institute

The Center for the Humanities will conduct a Summer Institute for schoolteachers entitled “The New Negro Renaissance in America, 1919-1941.” The National Endowment for the Humanities’ Division of Education Programs awarded a grant of $208,576 to fund the institute, which will have 30 elementary, middle school, and high school teachers from various humanities disciplines including English, History, Art, and Music, participating. Geographically, the teachers represent 12 states. Nine teachers are from St. Louis. The institute’s instructors include Gerald Early, director of the Center for the Humanities; Harper Barnes, a local writer and critic; Patrick Burke, WU assistant professor of music; Sowande’ Mustakeem, WU assistant professor of history; Joseph Thompson, WU lecturer in African and African American studies; Donald Spivey, professor of history at the University of Miami; Maya Gibson, Mellon/Sawyer Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for the Humanities; Katharine Capshaw Smith, associate professor of English at the University of Connecticut; Amina Gautier, assistant professor of English at St. Joseph’s University; and Matthew Calihman, associate professor of English at Missouri State University.

The institute will cover the rise of African American urban culture in the United States including examinations of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism, the formation of African American historiography, the development of jazz and blues, the influence of radical politics on African Americans, the impact of World War II, the impact of African American athletes such as track star Jesse Owens and boxer Joe Louis, the attempt to develop a school of African American creative writing, and African Americans and film.