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Notes of a Common Reader
The Human Comedy, or the Rise and Fall of Herman Cain

Giddypap, you fool.

—Marlon Brando’s character to his horse
in the 1970 film, *Burn*

Part One: I Know It’s Cold Outside . . .

To be sure, the Republican Party will not nominate businessman Herman Cain to run for president in 2012. This was a certainty before his astonishing fall from favor, even when Cain was enjoying his false spring of popularity in October, making the October 24 cover of *Newsweek* as the “anti-Obama” after having risen in the polls to overtake Republican favorite Mitt Romney, who, clearly, is not such a favorite with a large number of the party faithful who are committed to a search to find the not-Romney.

I attended the Sarah Palin/Glen Beck “Defending the Republic” event at the Family Arena in St. Charles on October 7 with my daughter Rosalind, who was covering it for *St. Louis Magazine*, and discovered that Cain, even then, was all the buzz among nearly 5,000 persons who attended. Rosalind talked to several people who said they were, at least at that time, supporting Cain or found him to be an attractive candidate. (There were fewer than a dozen blacks at this event, as far as I could see, and so clearly Cain was making inroads among white conservatives in much the way Obama had among white liberals in 2007.) At the time of Cain’s height of popularity, the conservative Drudge Report website was running a banner headline asking if we—the American people or perhaps only the American conservatives who are regular readers of the site—were ready for this, with a photo of Cain next to a photo of Barack Obama; that is, were we ready for the extraordinary possibility of two black men opposing each other as the major party candidates for the presidency. To think that for two hundred years, no black man came close to be a serious presidential contender. Now seemingly credible black presidential nominees appear to be emerging from the electoral ether, as it were. The fact that Cain has evaporated so quickly is a sign that it is not easy for anyone, and especially a black person, to be a credible candidate.

I wondered if conservatives, having been jealous of the Obama fever that infected white liberals four years ago like a form of pornographic lust, wanted their own version of mad infatuation with a black political savior (saving them from the specter of the shallow, fake Romney as the standard bearer of the Republican Party). But even during Cain’s Indian Summer, people who really knew politics did not think he would be the nominee. Since World War II, businessmen, who have never held any sort of elective office, find it difficult to become president: think of Ross Perot and Steve Forbes, as two obvious examples. The businessman who runs for president is usually trying to be something like, whether or not he realizes it, the ghost or the reincarnation of Herbert Hoover, the last American president who did not hold an elective office before becoming president, which he did in 1928, and who championed not just business methods—he was a successful engineer and business owner—but efficiency and economic modernization, who felt that the federal beast could be tamed and made rational. Cain is running on these same themes—a bit threadbare now, although they probably weren’t as tired when Hoover articulated them and Hoover himself had a great deal more experiential credibility to back up his claims: he had been a successful secretary of commerce and probably the more impressive humanitarian/organizer of his age. Hoover was the archetypal technocrat/businessman as idealized American leader. Things did not work very well for him as president, which may be why we have never elected another person with quite his claims of expertise—the closest being former Georgia governor Jimmy Carter in 1976, who was also unsuccessful, although a number of us seem to wish for such a person.

Cain is the latest such figure for the American public to dream upon, made interesting, unique, vaguely exciting, because he is black. The *Washington Post*’s October 21 article, “For Herman Cain, No Steering Clear of Race,” tells us that Cain frequently opens his rallies by telling his overwhelmingly white audience that they are not racists because they vehemently oppose Barack Obama, as Obama’s supporters and liberals generally accuse them of being. It would be absurd for Cain to say such a thing if he were white; it has meaning for his white supporters because he is black and because such a statement is meant to de-politicize race, as Cain’s presence is meant to do. Of course, the very act of de-politicizing becomes politicized and is, in itself, political. That is what makes Cain so richly and tellingly ironic as a political figure. It is so with all blacks that profess themselves conservatives. And so it is because both Cain and his white supporters wish to transcend race, that his audience is attracted to the fact that he is black, as a way to absolve their political hatred of Obama, to assure themselves that they hate Obama only for what they see as his horrendous policies and poor leadership and not because his skin color makes his unpalatable politics all the worse; and Cain needs this audience.

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as a way to use the de-politicizing of race to his own political advantage, to set himself as a sort of heroic figure among white conservatives because he defends them at the cost of being ostracized and criticized by liberals and blacks because of his race. Cain too, like all black conservatives, plays the victim card, which he says he so despises, for the white conservatives who are constantly lamenting about the blacks who are so cruelly treated because they abandon the Democrat Party “plantation,” as it is commonly called in their circles. It is a complicated dance, certainly not flattering for either side but not entirely dreadful either, this courtship of the minority group outsiders, the apostates, by a political faction that historically never liked the minority group.

I could not possibly imagine many people voting for Herman Cain or even being interested in him if he were a white man with the same résumé and claims to our attention. The same was true four years ago for Barack Obama. (At the time, the white man who was, more or less, Obama in 2007 and early 2008 was John Edwards.) Cain, as I have noted, is very aware of this, as are Cain’s supporters. Conservatives would never vote or believe they would vote for any black person because the person is black because conservatives are, perforce, color blind and would not insult a Negro by thinking him interesting because he is a Negro, as a liberal would. Conservatives would not be drawn to the idea of voting for a black for “redemption” or as “a symbol,” as Wall Street Journal editorial writer Jason Riley, an African American, pointed out in his October 7 op-ed on Cain, as most white liberals in 2008 did in voting for Obama. Certainly, conservatives would not be drawn to Cain for “diversity.” The problem for them with Obama is that they feel he is an “Affirmative Action” president. They wouldn’t want to elect another. The conservatives’ Negro must be more worthy, better, more qualified than the liberals’ Negro. Except of course the debate among the conservatives, when Cain was a live possibility, was whether Cain was the conservatives’ version of an Affirmative Action candidate.

Part Two: Come On In, I’ll Keep You Satisfied

This “CEO of Self,” as Cain refers to himself in This is Herman Cain, his perilously superficial campaign biography, ballyhooed “common sense” (something that conservatives seem to have or think they have in uncommon quantities and liberals seem to have forsaken in a pretentious, effete quest for “nuance” and “complexity”), leadership, and firm, dare I say, “decisive” decision-making. (All presidents must make decisions. Even avoiding a decision, as Obama is sometimes accused of by his opponents, is a form of decision-making, a negative capability of sorts and, if done skillfully, something of a gift, like leading from behind, which is the way my late stepfather, a cop, always wanted to approach a crime scene when an armed perp was still lurking on the premises.) Cain says, in true businessman style: “Is America ready for real results? Is America ready for common sense solutions? Is America ready to rekindle the spirit of America? And is America ready for a real leader, not a reader?” When he asks himself how he would “guide this nation toward renewal,” he answers, “I’ll do what I did when I put Burger King’s Philadelphia region on the right track: I’ll do what I did when I helped restore Godfather’s Pizza, Inc., to profitability.” The command affect of the business leader is greatly admired in America, combining Vince Lombardi and Cecil B. DeMûlle. You might call this the bluster of banality.

One reason Cain was not going to get the nomination even before his collapse as a viable candidate, was that he was wrong about the way he thought his race could help him in the election. In Iowa, he has been sending mailers touting the fact that he would get more of the black vote than any other Republican candidate since Eisenhower in 1956 who got 41 percent, as the mailer claims. (The Washington Post story of November 24 begged to differ, saying that Eisenhower received only 39 percent of the black vote.) A recent NBC/Wall Street Journal poll spoke otherwise about how much of the black vote Cain could have attracted. At this point, Obama would get 93 percent of the black vote in a head-to-head match-up with Cain, about the same as he did against McCain in 2008. There is no evidence that Cain could have polled better than any of the white Republicans vying for the nomination and he may even have wound up polling worse if he had gotten the nomination. He had no network in place to try to attract black voters. “I have never, ever seen him with a black person on the campaign other than that security guy,” said black Republican Party activist Raynard Jackson. Cain suffers from being seen by most blacks as a race traitor, not simply because he is a self-identified conservative and Tea Party supporter, which is certainly significant as most blacks think the Tea Party is racist: its members hate Obama because he is black and they cannot stand having a black man in charge.

The Tea Party has responded to this by saying, in effect, that conservatives, Democrats, and the civil rights leadership have used the charge of racism to discredit any sort of political criticism of Obama on the grounds that if it is “too harsh,” whatever that means in the context of ideological conflict in American political history, it is invalid because of its motivation, its “pathological” or “hegemonic” underpinnings, so to speak. How harsh is too harsh when one is dealing with political policies one does not like? How passionately expressed should be one’s political hatred when dealing with one’s political enemies? An interesting question. Remember when Democratic Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill called Ronald Reagan “[the] evil in the White House at the present time. And that evil is a man who has no care and no concern for the working class of America and the future generations of America. . . He’s cold. He’s mean. He’s got ice water for blood.” That sort of cheeky, red meat talk is out of bounds now, seemingly. “I have to damn near accept that Obama is infallible and has angelic intentions in order not to considered racist,” a white conservative told me recently, partly tongue-in-cheek and partly in vexation. (Liberals would have us believe that only right-wing rhetoric inflames the unstable; the lefties occupying Wall Street are as sober as a convention of bishops.) Conservative radio
host Rush Limbaugh has been particularly vitriolic in criticizing Obama to match what he felt was liberal vitriol in attacking George W. Bush. Obama is “the man-child,” “unqualified,” “in over his head,” “out to destroy America” and the like, in effect, an Affirmative Action president. Interestingly, Bush’s candidacy, many blacks felt, was white Affirmative Action at work: the mediocre “legacy” kid gets admitted. Limbaugh, as do most of the Tea Partiers, thinks that the left is being hypocritical, which is probably true. But for true political believers, being concerned about hypocrisy is something akin to bothering about the petty moral hobgoblins that afflict and affright little minds. But would white conservatives hate Obama as much if he were white? That is hard to say. They certainly wouldn’t like Obama if he were white.

Blacks dislike and distrust Cain because they think he is a tool of a conservative white movement that can only be described as being akin to the Bourbons of the post-bellum South who fought for “White Southern Redemption” or the return of power to the white elite through an insidious form of identity politics. Stanley Crouch’s New York Daily News column of November 21 gives voice to something like this: the Koch Brothers are financing the Tea Party and, indirectly, Herman Cain, to set up smokescreens for them to do their dirty deeds in the world undercover, “destroying whatever gets in the way of [their] ruthless profit-making machine.” If Cain cannot get any sympathy from Crouch, who is nobody’s black leftist or ardent liberal, then I suspect he was facing an uphill battle with most blacks.

Best-selling black conservative economist Thomas Sowell, in his November 10 column, defended Cain from accusations of sexual harassment by saying how small the settlements were in the cases against Cain. He also suggested that this was likely an attack that was launched by Democrats—all conservatives feel that the sexual harassment allegations are re-mindful of the Clarence Thomas confirmation hearings—because “[a] prominent black conservative who offers an alternative view of the world is a serious danger politically.” In general one might ask, a danger to whom, as political conservatism, popularly understood, has so little purchase among blacks. Black conservative blogger Jesse Lee Peterson defends Cain in a November 22 post on the black conservative website Booker Rising. “An evil, politically motivated high-tech lynching” is what he calls the sexual harassment allegations, echoing Clarence Thomas. Once again, it is implied that Cain is a real threat to liberal interests because he is a conservative black man. But this rests on the premise that if blacks were to hear “the truth,” as it were, they would suddenly awaken and, I suppose, leave the Democratic Party in droves. It rests on the premise that, as Cain said (and he was roundly criticized by blacks for it, and not without justification) blacks have been “brainwashed” by white liberals and leftists. (This sounds dangerously close to the sort of belief that white segregationists had that blacks were not “troublemakers”) and were only being stirred up, brainwashed about being oppressed, in the 1950s and 1960s, by “outside agitators.”

Although these white segregationists of the time were not about to put their theory about “obedient, satisfied” black people to the test by actually having them vote.) This is the white conservatives’ version of “What’s the matter with Kansas?” In this case, what’s the matter with Negroes that they should vote against their interest by voting for Democrats? But you don’t win voters by calling them stupid.

Cain’s biggest problem with black voters is being a black man attacking the first black president whom African Americans supported in unprecedented numbers. For most blacks, this makes him even more disgusting than a white Republican attacking the president. To their credit, I don’t think it was very important to the whites that supported him whether Cain polled well with blacks, although Cain may have been thinking that if he didn’t make this case with them, his unique advantage of being black would have been lost. Most Republicans are resigned to the fact that they will have to win the election without the support of blacks which they have never had in any significant number for years and for the most part have never really courted, in part, because, in the past since Nixon, they never wanted black support and, in part, because they really don’t know how to wrestle it away from the Democratic Party now. (Black conservative Ron Miller offers some useful advice to the Republican Party about reaching out to blacks in his book, Sellout: Musings from Uncle Tom’s Porch.) White conservatives would love to win in 2012 and at least wrest some black voters from Obama but it is not, I suspect from what I read in conservative publications, a primary or even important objective. They are counting on a shift in white independents to defeat Obama. The fact that Cain wanted to sell himself in this way—my skin color is a racial and post-racial asset—simply underscored both his and his party’s weakness. Mr. Cain’s race gave him no purchase with blacks, which he

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admitted at times, and his policies wouldn’t have either, as long as white conservatives and Tea Partiers liked them. On that ground alone, blacks would have opposed Cain.

Cain also could not withstand opposition from within the Republican Party:

Younger, more intellectually inclined conservatives such as the *National Review* crowd, the *Weekly Standard* crowd, the *Commentary* crowd, and conservative bloggers like Jennifer Rubin of the *Washington Post*, David Frum, and Jonah Goldberg thought Cain was simply another anti-intellectual, populist amateur who made conservatism something like a No-Nothing Party. They desperately want conservatism to have intellectual substance and they want the Republican Party to be a party of ideas, as in-house liberal Daniel Patrick Moynihan called it back in the early 1970s. This is what might be called the Harriet Miers syndrome: Cain is not being rejected by this important segment of the conservative chattering class because he is a RINO (Republican in Name Only), which he isn’t, but because he is without intellectual pedigree. He is a philistine, bible-thumping businessman with degrees from Morehouse and Purdue who has no idea where Central Asia is and who has probably never read Russell Kirk or Richard Weaver or not even one of William F. Buckley’s bad novels. (He’s a leader, not a reader, as Cain describes himself, as if reading and leading were mutually exclusive activities.) On the other hand, African American commentator John McWhorter said, “Herman Cain has as much right to be a dumb Republican as any white person.” Even before the latest allegation of a long-term affair with Ginger White, Cain was losing traction because conservatives were beginning to think he did not have a grasp of the issues. Even former boxer Mike Tyson was making fun of Cain’s 999 plan.

In some ways, I admire Cain’s spirit and his ambition, that he wants to lead the conservative movement. He reminds me a bit of some of the small black business owners I knew growing up: “Boy, you better forget all that protest shit and go out and earn yourself some money. That’s what’s wrong with black people anyway. All they know how to do is protest and whine and say they want the white man to go teach ‘em black history and give ‘em stuff. Black folk better learn how to make some money. Then, you tell the white man to go fuck himself ‘cause you own property and got a bank account just like him. Remember, any fool can make money.” Cain always struck me as an egocentric cock hound and a glib hustler, “getting over on” whites, gaming them, which is why he became a conservative (which seemed both accidental and opportunistic but never ideological or especially principled) and which is why he ran for president: because it was a good way of “puttin’ on ole massa,” by playing the game of not being that victim-hustling kind of black, of being better than “those other blacks,” a game black people of all stripes occasionally find themselves playing. Having grown up knowing several black men like Cain, I learned to like them, despite their limitations and hypocrisy, and to be wary of them. I was a fatherless boy and there was something about their cynical masculinity that I felt was a kind of strength, a “realistic” way of perceiving the world as a nexus of scheming, throat-cutting women, overbearing and patronizing whites, and race-hustling, radical blacks. Cain was a self-proclaimed “black conservative” outsider who wanted to dramatize “coming in from the cold” as an epic American story. It didn’t quite work out because he was never really prepared for the possibility of his own success. He was madly in love with his desire for success. The moral is: It’s tough to get inside from the cold.

In *Sellout*, Ron Miller makes an important point that black conservatives do not follow the herd in his consideration of the overwhelming support blacks give the Democratic Party: “In my view, something’s amiss when over 90% of a particular demographic group votes the same way because generally, you won’t find 90% of any group of people that thinks or acts the same. No one would be so presumptuous as to claim that all women (43% for Bush) or Asians (41% for Bush) or Hispanics (35% for Bush) or labor union members (40% for Bush) share the same beliefs.” Frequently, people in a group who don’t follow the herd are seen as rebels, sometimes as heroic, always interesting. Perhaps it is time to look at those blacks who don’t follow the herd a little more seriously and less polemically. From time to time, on some lower frequency, about something, they might speak not only to me but with me. As my mother used to say, always follow the herd to trample your enemy, but never follow the herd off a cliff.
Call Me Caulfield
The Story of J.D. Salinger’s Unknown Life

Review of
Kenneth Slawenski, J. D. Salinger: A Life (Random House, 2010), 450 pages with index, notes, and photos

If you really want to hear about it, the first thing you’ll probably want to know is where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like, and how my parents were occupied and all before they had me, and all that David Copperfield kind of crap, but I don’t feel like going into it, if you want to know the truth.
—J. D. Salinger, The Catcher in the Rye (1951)

J. D. Salinger wrote a masterpiece, The Catcher in the Rye, recommending that readers who enjoyed the book call up the author; then he spent the next twenty years avoiding the telephone.

In “On Literary Biography,” the opening essay collected in his final volume of criticism, DuCé Considerations (2007), John Updike surveys a wide range of literary biographies, from Dennis Kay’s 1992 biography of Shakespeare to Leon Edel’s renowned work on Henry James.1 As a writer known to make liberal use of his own biographical material in his work, Updike maintains a skeptical view of the genre, noting the ways in which a biography—such as Jeffrey Meyer’s 1994 biography of F. Scott Fitzgerald—can forever limit the ways in which a reader interprets the fiction.2 Despite the lingering suspicion that colors his feelings toward the genre, Updike grants the ways in which a biography can enhance our appreciation of a writer’s work. “The biography becomes, then, a way of re-experiencing the novel, with a closeness, and a delight in seeing imagined details conjured back into real ones, that only this particular writer and his vast autobiographical masterpiece could provide,” Updike writes at the essay’s midpoint. At their best, such as in Blake Bailey’s wonderfully lively biography of John Cheever, literary biographies can reignite interest in a writer whose legacy has diminished and capture the contradictions of the life that are central to the fiction. Of course, these books also occasionally appeal to our lesser instincts, as they promise to provide all the lurid details that are often only hinted at in the fiction. Biographies promise to uncover all the carnage in its fullest glory. How bad of a drunk was Fitzgerald? How many homosexual affairs did Cheever have? Was Shakespeare an unfaithful husband? Was Shakespeare even Shakespeare?

Considering the mixed impulses that often induce readers to consume literary biographies, it is hard to imagine a more attractive (and perhaps impossible) subject for a biography than J. D. Salinger, the reclusive novelist most known for The Catcher in the Rye (1951).3 Fifty years after its publication, The Catcher in the Rye remains probably the most widely read American novel to be published after the Second World War, and Holden Caulfield continues to be the voice for confused adolescents everywhere. In A New Literary History of America (2009), Gish Jen observes how “like James Dean, Holden Caulfield is for many the very picture of the postwar rebel. Young, crude, misunderstood, he stands up to conformist pressures, is drawn to innocence, et cetera. Never mind that Holden is white, male, straight, sophisticated, rich, and a product of the 1940s; he personifies anguished resistance to ’50s America—indeed, for many, America’s truest self.”4 If Salinger had never written anything but The Catcher in the Rye, his reputation would have been secure, but he achieved almost mythic status in the decades following his decision to stop publishing in the mid-sixties (his last published short story, “Hapworth 16, 1924,” appeared in the New Yorker in 1965). Over the course of the past forty years, the meaning behind Salinger’s silence has been the subject of countless debates, and his legacy has only grown as a series of increasingly outlandish rumors have surrounded him and his most famous work. He has, over the past forty years, been rumored to have written countless unpublished manuscripts; he was (briefly) suspected to be the writer Thomas Pynchon; and he was even made into a fictional character in W. P. Kinsella’s novel Shoeless Joe (1982), which was the basis for the popular Kevin Costner film Field of Dreams (1989).5

With this year marking the fiftieth anniversary of the publication of The Catcher in the Rye, it seems as opportune a time as any to reconsider Salinger’s life and his place in American letters, and it should not be too surprising that a new biography would appear to commemorate this moment. Kenneth Slawenski’s J. D. Salinger: A Life is the third attempt to chronicle the life of the famously reclusive writer, and the first to be published since his death in January 2010. Slawenski, the curator of Salinger website DeadCaulfields.com, is an obvious fan of his subject, allowing his enthusiasm for Salinger to ignore some of the more unsavory aspects of his life. Despite his tendency to downplay the more disagreeable aspects of Salinger’s personality, Slawenski supplies readers with the most comprehensive view of Salinger thus far and presents an engaging portrait of Salinger’s personal life.6 There are, however, no major revelations in the book: Slawenski has no answer to what exactly Salinger was working on for the last forty-five years of his life, and his work remains unauthorized, meaning that Slawenski faced the same limitations that have plagued the previous attempts to

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write Salinger’s life. Nevertheless, this new biography should be a welcome development for critics of post-WWII American fiction and fans of Salinger’s fiction, as it provides a detailed account of the writer’s life and career and dismisses some of the myths that have surrounded Salinger’s legacy. For a writer who had not published anything since 1965, Salinger nonetheless could not prevent his name from appearing in the headlines, and his image had been somewhat tarnished in the years just before his death. For instance, Salinger was revealed to practice a series of seemingly bizarre health habits (most notably, drinking his own urine) and pursued a series of increasingly hostile lawsuits (including a 2009 case brought against the Swedish writer Fredrik Gotling, who had published an unauthorized sequel to The Catcher in the Rye). These events contributed to the notion that the creator of Holden Caulfield had become something of an angry crank in his old age. Furthering Salinger’s troubles in 1998, the novelist Joyce Maynard published At Home in the World, a salacious account of her relationship with Salinger—an affair that had occurred when Maynard was a freshman at Yale and Salinger was fifty-three. Two years later, Salinger’s only daughter, Margaret, released a memoir of her father entitled Dream Catcher.7

In many ways, Slawenski’s book appears as a corrective to the less-than-flattering image of Salinger that has surfaced in the wake of The Catcher in the Rye. While Slawenski noticeably downplays some of the charges brought forth in those books, he provides a largely reliable account of Salinger’s life and career. While the book follows Salinger’s life up until his death in 2010, the chapters that deal with Salinger’s youth are the most engaging and illuminating. Born in 1919 to Miriam and Solomon Salinger, J. D. Salinger (or “Sonny” as his parents called him as a child) grew up as the beloved only son (his older sister, Doris, was born in 1913) in an affluent New York home. Salinger’s mother came from an Irish-Catholic family in Iowa, but after marrying Sol Salinger, who was Jewish, she appears to have largely cut ties with her family, going as far as refusing to talk about her family to her children—a reluctance to discuss the past that would become a recurring theme in Salinger’s life and work. Despite the ambiguity surrounding his mother’s family, the Salinger home seemed to be a largely happy and stable one, and Sonny enjoyed a largely privileged childhood. As Sol Salinger rose in the ranks of J. S. Hoffman & Co., a business that specialized in importing cheese and meat from Europe, the Salinger family moved through a series of fashionable Manhattan apartments, and the young Salinger enjoyed a particularly close relationship with his mother. “Sonny could do no wrong,” Slawenski writes of Salinger’s childhood. “This put Solomon in the precarious position of attempting to discipline him while trying not to invoke the wrath of his wife which could be considerable. By most accounts, when a crisis arose in the family, it was usually Miriam’s judgment that prevailed, leaving Sonny largely unrestrained.”

By all accounts, Salinger appears to have been an outgoing child, and he even had ambitions of becoming a Hollywood actor, an ambition that his only son, Matthew, would later fulfill. Even though he enjoyed his mother’s seemingly limitless confidence in his abilities—a close relationship that Slawenski contends contributed to Salinger’s later obstinate behavior—the young Salinger was, much like Holden Caulfield, a poor student. After he was expelled from McBurney Academy in 1934, his parents enrolled him in Valley Forge Military Academy, the school that would later provide the model for Pencey Prep in The Catcher in the Rye. Slawenski reports that while Salinger espoused some of the rebellious attitudes that Holden expresses in the novel, his time at Valley Forge was largely happy and successful: “Whatever his inward rebellion against the authority of the place, it did indeed provide the discipline necessary for him to apply himself. His grades improved markedly. He developed a small circle of close friends. He became involved in campus activities, including intramural sports and, uncharacteristically, the glee club.” According to Slawenski, military school was largely a positive experience for Salinger, and he left Valley Forge with a newfound discipline that would serve him well both as a writer and as an officer during World War II.

After Valley Forge, Salinger briefly attended New York University, and after a stint working for his father’s company in Europe he enrolled at Ursinus College, a small liberal-arts school located in rural Pennsylvania. Leaving Ursinus after a semester, Salinger returned to Manhattan and enrolled in Columbia University, where under the tutelage of Whit Burnett (founder of Story magazine) he began to seriously pursue his career. He published his first story, “The Young Folks,” in Story in 1940 and then decided to leave college. Following the initial success of “The Young Folks,” Salinger struggled to get his work into print, and it would be nearly a decade before he would become a fixture at the New Yorker, the magazine with which Salinger would become closely associated. “When considering Salinger’s career, especially during the early years,” Slawenski notes at one point, “it is important to distinguish between ambition and confidence. Certainly, Salinger had abundant self-confidence, but on the occasions when his confidence ran dry, it was ambition that kept him going. In 1940, his ambition was directed toward recognition and literary success. In years to come, the goal of his ambition would change, but the instinct itself would never desert him.”

Slawenski’s consideration of Salinger’s youth is illuminating (the image of a young Salinger participating in the glee club is especially amusing) and helps diminish some of the innuendo that has recently surrounded his legacy. Nevertheless, the biography is at its most engaging when it deals with Salinger’s early short fiction. J. D. Salinger: A Life provides a thorough and highly useful account of the stories that Salinger published throughout the 1940s, a body of work that consists of more than twenty short stories that appeared in various magazines but were never collected in book form. Indeed, Slawenski devotes a great deal of the book to recounting the plots of these stories, and in doing so he makes a compelling case that these early works remain an essential component of Salinger’s oeuvre that deserve to be republished in book form. In considering “Slight Rebellion Off of Madison,” the first story to feature Holden Caulfield (which Salinger composed in 1943 but was not published until three years later), Slawenski traces the development of...
Salinger’s craft that Holden’s emergence signals. “[Salinger’s] previous sketches had been directed toward the shortcomings of others, but in ‘Slight Rebellion’ he aligns so closely with Holden Caulfield as to cast his own spirit within the character,” Slawenski observes of Salinger’s nascent relationship with his most famous creation.

“Rather than keeping personal issues at arm’s length, he now graduated to embracing them as a means of bonding with his characters and readers alike, presenting qualities all the more human because they are his own.” And while Slawenski frequently conflates Salinger with his characters, a tendency that limits his reading of the fiction, he does make a persuasive claim for how Salinger’s own struggles with his spirituality shaped the development of his fiction. In providing detailed summaries of many of these forgotten stories, Slawenski makes a compelling case for the importance of these stories, demonstrating how they foreshadow the spiritual concerns and narrative style that would blossom in his mature work, The Catcher in the Rye, Nine Stories (1953), and Franny and Zooey (1961).

Beyond the readings of the early stories, the book’s most gripping material addresses Salinger’s experience during the Second World War, when he served in the Fourth Infantry Division as an agent for the Counter Intelligence Corps. Indeed, the book’s longest chapter, entitled “Hell,” is devoted to covering Salinger’s experience during the war, and the war becomes the prism through which Slawenski views much of Salinger’s later life. Salinger’s unit encountered some of the worst violence of the European front, going through both the D day invasion and the Battle of the Bulge.

Outside of a few letters of Salinger’s that he cites, Slawenski is limited by the absence of much primary documentation, and he is instead reduced to giving a somewhat less satisfying military history. Nevertheless, Slawenski makes a fairly compelling argument for how the war affected Salinger’s psyche and imagination. For Slawenski, the violence that Salinger experienced during war becomes the pivot that pervades and shapes Salinger’s subsequent fiction, and Slawenski illuminates how Salinger worked through his war experience in his most successful stories, “A Perfect Day for Bananafish” (1948) and “For Esmé—With Love and Squalor” (1950). In the summer of 1945, Salinger, who was still serving as an intelligence officer in the postwar army, admitted himself into a hospital in Nuremberg for treatment for would-be diagnosed today as post-traumatic stress disorder. “Unlike many such veterans, Salinger was able to do something about the horror he had witnessed and the effect that it had upon him,” Slawenski writes of Salinger’s volume. “He eventually re-discovered the power to write. He wrote about and for all of the soldiers who could not find the words themselves. Through his writings, he sought answers to the questions that his service experiences had exposed, questions of life and death, of God, of what we are to each other.”

While this argument somewhat flattens out the meaning of Salinger’s postwar fiction, it does usefully lend new light on The Catcher in the Rye, suggesting the ways in which Holden’s fixation on innocence and his reticence about the past were shaped by the trauma that Salinger had experienced during the war. In particular, Slawenski cites the closing lines of The Catcher in the Rye as evidence that the novel bears witness to the horror that Salinger had witnessed in combat. “About all I know is, I sort of mis everybody I told about. Even old Stradlater and Ackley, for instance,” Holden declares in the novel’s closing lines. “It’s funny. Don’t ever tell any-body anything. If you do, you start missing everybody.” There are, of course, problems with the reading of the novel, and Slawenski tends to align Salinger too closely with his characters. Nevertheless, his careful detailing of Salinger’s experience during the war and the sense of loss that underscores Holden’s closing words begins to suggest how The Catcher in the Rye reflects the historical and personal trauma that Salinger witnessed on the European front.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the second half of Slawenski’s J. D. Salinger: A Life is less satisfying than the first, as Slawenski details Salinger’s heyday during the late 1950s and early ‘60s and then his subsequent retreat from the public eye. Slawenski dutifully chronicles the success of The Catcher in the Rye and Franny and Zooey, but his affinity for much of Salinger’s later work clouds his treatment of this period of Salinger’s career. After noting the criticism (much of it warranted) that greeted Franny and Zooey, Slawenski rather needlessly asserts the book’s value: “Today, Franny and Zooey is widely regarded as a masterpiece. It has been revered by generations of readers who have embraced it as a story suffused with empathy, humanity, spirituality. To modern ears, the mockery and scorn of its contemporary critics have the tinny echo of concepts long since passed away, while Franny and Zooey remains timeless.”

As this passage suggests, a whirl of hero-worship lingers over the second half of the book, and Slawenski frequently appears too fond of his subject—to the detriment of his biography. This is particularly true of Slawenski’s treatment of Salinger’s marriage to his second wife, Claire Douglas, who was the mother of his two children. “The life that Salinger had built for himself and Claire in 1955 has often been regarded with scorn, used by detractors as demonstration of his eccentricity and an accusation that he abandoned or even abused his wife,” Slawenski writes of Salinger’s second marriage, a relationship that their daughter Margaret Salinger depicts at times as resembling that of a cult leader and a devotee. “An understanding of Salinger’s nature and devotion to his craft reveal a grayer truth,” Slawenski argues, although he never reveals what that “grayer” truth might look like. He concludes:

Living in Cornish [New Hampshire] itself created solitude. The town was remote and sparsely populated. Little had changed in decades, perhaps centuries. Isolation is often the exchange made for living in a place of unspoiled beauty, and S.J. Perelman described their property as a “private mountaintop overlooking five states”—testimony that the beauty of Salinger and Claire’s Cornish home was, even by Perelman’s high standards, beyond compare.

This analysis, however, largely avoids the subject and is characteristic of Slawenski’s too-gentle treatment of Salinger. Later in the book, Slawenski dramatically downplays the Joyce Maynard affair, noting only that although Salinger had “proceeded cautiously” with the affair, the relationship quickly “disintegrated and Maynard was back at home with her parents, cast away, she decided, by a man who had used her callously.” Slawenski’s Salinger remains a serious spiritual seeker, moving between different aspects of Eastern and Western religion, as well as a man riddled with contradictions, but Slawenski does little to animate these tensions, and Salinger remains, sadly, a rather two-dimensional figure during the second half of the book.
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2 Updike cites Meyers’s work on Fitzgerald—in which he demonstrates what a “nasty drunk” Fitzgerald was—as an example of a biography that perhaps unfairly limits our reading of the fiction. He goes on to cite Michael Sheldon’s unflattering biography of Graham Greene, in which Sheldon depicts Greene as “an insincere Catholic, a faithless husband, a sexual masochist, a sadistic prankster, a burnt-out talent, and, in two veiled and hedged charges that mark some sort of sensationalist low point in literary biography, the actual murderer of a dismembered woman found in Brighton in 1930 and, in collaboration with his close friend Kim Philby, a traitor to England and the free world!”


5 More disturbingly, The Catcher in the Rye gained notoriety in the early 1980s when Mark David Chapman claimed it had inspired his murder of John Lennon, and a few months later the book was also found among John Hinckley’s possessions after his assassination attempt on Ronald Reagan.

6 The previous biographies have been relatively slight works. Ian Hamilton’s In Search of J. D. Salinger (1988) remains most notable for the legal war that Salinger initiated in an attempt to block Hamilton from publishing excerpts from his unpublished correspondence. Paul Alexander’s Salinger: A Biography (1999) is a disappointingly slim book that adds little to the portrait of Salinger that emerges in Hamilton’s book. Alexander’s book follows Salinger’s life up until the late 1990s, whereas Hamilton’s work concludes with the publication of Salinger’s final work, the long-short story “Hapworth 16, 1964” in 1965 and the trials that surrounded the publication of Hamilton’s book in the mid-1980s. Despite the additional material, Alexander has little to say about Salinger’s post-1965 life, and the book as whole adds little to our understanding of Salinger.

7 Of the two books, Maynard’s At Home in the World offers the more scandalous portrait of Salinger. Salinger contacted Maynard after reading her essay “An Eighteen-Year-Old Looks Back on Life,” which had appeared in the April 23, 1972, issue of the Sunday New York Times Magazine, and soon he was whisking the young Maynard back to his Cornish, New Hampshire, home. Maynard’s book offers embarrassingly candid descriptions of Salinger’s sex life and of his adherence to Christian Science and macrobiotics. Maynard’s account of their brief relationship, which ended abruptly ten months after it had begun, presents an image of a controlling Salinger who was ill-equipped to deal with reality. “One day Jerry Salinger is the only man in my universe,” Maynard writes of her reaction to the relationship’s dissolution. “I look to him to tell me what to write, what to think, what to wear, to read, to eat. He tells me who I am, who I should be. The next day he’s gone.”

Margaret Salinger’s memoir presents a similarly disheartening portrait of her father, her book depicting Salinger as a man who was ultimately incapable of dealing with the reality of other people. While her account of her father’s life is at times sympathetic, Dream Catcher portrays Salinger as a controlling and emotionally abusive husband to Margaret’s mother, Claire (whom Salinger married in 1955, the second of three marriages) and a detached father.

8 “Over the years, Miriam and Sol’s story has been repeatedly embellished,” Slawenski observes of the confusion that has surrounded Miriam Salinger’s background. “This began in 1963, when the literary critic Warren French repeated a claim in a Life magazine article that Miriam had been Scotch-Irish. In time, the term ‘Scotch-Irish’ transformed itself into the assertion that Salinger’s mother had actually been born in County Cork, Ireland. This led in turn to what is perhaps the most commonly repeated story told about Salinger’s mother and father: that Miriam’s parents, supposedly Irish-Catholic, were so adamantly opposed to her marriage to Sol, because he was Jewish, that they gave the couple little choice but to elope. And upon learning of their daughter’s defiance, they never spoke a word to her again.”

9 The truth, according to Slawenski, is a bit more complicated. Miriam’s father died before she and Sol were married, and her mother had moved, along with Miriam’s younger siblings, to Michigan, where she later remarried. Nevertheless, Miriam severed all contact with her family and refused to talk about them to either of her children.

10 “I often wondered how his wives and lovers, intelligent young women, so full of promise, could become like the mythological Echo, ‘wasting away,’” Margaret Salinger observes of her father’s romantic partners in Dream Catcher. “Although on reflection it seems to me that their backgrounds left them vulnerable perhaps to unusual or extreme degree—certainly my mother’s childhood is an ode to the agony of the unmoored, the child adrift and at sea—the trajectory of their entry into my father’s world could not be more typical of standard cult entry.”

continued from p. 9
It might seem absurd on its surface to trace so shocking and vast a cataclysm as World War II to a single individual. It might seem still more absurd to trace that horror to a single woman, but to exclude her would be sexist. The truth is that one can feel at least the stirrings of such a claim after reading Oliver Hilmes’s solidly research biography of one such candidate, Cosima Liszt Wagner. He succeeds, for me at least, in moving some of the (obviously indirect) responsibility for that global carnage away from her second husband, Richard Wagner, and placing it more fully on her. It was she who made Wagner’s legacy a lasting institution. The festival inaugurated in Bayreuth in 1873 was conceived to celebrate his astonishing, revolutionary, and enduring achievements in opera. With the passing of time, however, the enterprise evolved. A weltanschauung grew up there that bore little resemblance to the thought and philosophy of the living man.

Wagner’s widow survived him by more than half a century. It was she who took the lead in shaping his heritage, and Hilmes is painstaking in identifying the many steps—some quite Machiavellian, some simply heartless—that she took to achieve that end. By the time she was approaching ninety, in 1923, she was welcoming Hitler to the Wagner home (called Wahnfried). He spoke at a “German Day” proclaimed in the town of Bayreuth, where he “fulminated against parliamentary democracy, the Weimar republic, and everything deemed to be un-German.” One of the most telling photos in the book is the final one. It shows Winifred Wagner (Cosima’s daughter-in-law) welcoming the new chancellor to the festival.

This lengthy and thorough biography, enhanced by Hilmes’s access to previously unavailable letters from various key actors in the Wagnerite drama, provides a full view of Cosima Liszt Wagner and of her entourage. It offers as well a splendid chance for twenty-first-century students of history and politics to adopt a more Olympian perspective on the vast array of personalities and events that revolved around this dynamic and determined woman. The time is ripe for a more dispassionate assessment of the extensive horrors that we can trace to the Wagner heritage.

This review intends to examine the mind-set of another era, culture, and nation. Its approach is the Roman playwright Terence’s: “Nihil humanum mihi alienum est” (Nothing human is alien to me). What that announces is a radically tolerant view; it is thus at odds with our modern tendency to genuflect at the altar of political correctness.

The Wagner marriage; the unification of Germany

It is indisputable that Richard and Cosima’s domestic union hewed with remarkable fidelity to the rise and unification of modern Germany. The year 1871 was crucial. Their marriage had been decided upon soon after the 1869 birth of their first son, Siegfried. They had already conceived two children, Isolde and Eva, “out of wedlock” while Cosima was still legally married to Hans von Bulow. (He had been Wagner’s formerly devoted musical acolyte. Yes, the tale is rife with soap-operatic melodrama, and Hilmes does it justice.) A son and heir made it vital that the first marriage be dissolved, and so after Bulow’s grudging divorce, Cosima and Richard were married in August 1870. It is significant that their union coincided with the first month of the Franco-Prussian War. When the French capitulated in January 1871, Bismarck traveled to Paris and declared the first German Reich. The moment was of extreme psychic importance for Germans, for they had been among the last European nations to form such a unified community. As Hilmes puts it, “The Germans now had their united empire and their Kaiser.”

Inhabitants of a newly fledged kingdom are at once proud and inordinately sensitive. And the Germans’ pride was especially intense, for they had long been mocked by the rest of Europe for their backwardness and fragmentation. A sense of inferiority was a way of national psychic life. To appreciate this is to understand better the seventy years that grew from that moment of realized unity. It would prove a grievous wound to its national vanity when Germany lost the Great War, its first war on the international stage, and when it was in turn subjected to a vindictive peace at Versailles. (Hitler would retrace Bismarck’s route seventy
The progressive spirit of the age—A double-edged sword

The rise of German nationalism was but one of many winds of progress blowing through Europe. England, for example, saw the gradual enfranchisement of wider and wider sectors of its public through the Reform Acts of 1833 and 1867. Similarly, as Hilmes notes, Jews in Germany were being emancipated and their religion authorized, a process that began after the 1848 revolution and gathered speed in the 1860s. What that means is, just as the German Volk was coming together with a new sense of unity and long-deferred entitlement, dogging its heels was a parallel rise in Jewish rights. And of course with their rise came the Jewish people’s characteristically remarkable drive, skill, and achievement. The all-too-natural result? Well, first of all, envy. Then, just as naturally, resentment. The bottom line was anti-Semitism, and of a most virulent order.

In a letter to Wagner’s royal patron, King Ludwig, for instance, Cosima referred to her own “profoundly well-justified fear of a race that has caused the German people much harm.” Those words voice not simply a conventional, institutional prejudice (traceable ultimately to the Gospel of Matthew) but a shared, intense judgment of the Jewish people as enemies of Germany. Hilmes confirms that “Jewish assimilation was a thorn in her flesh”; and he goes further, ascribing to her some responsibility for persuading Wagner to write or republish a series of anti-Semitic pamphlets, including the infamous “Jews and those who did so seemed almost instinctively to gather at Bayreuth, as to a place of religious devotion. In observing this phenomenon, however, it is wise to keep in mind Hilmes’s reminder: “In terms of their narrow-mindedness, their simplicity and their credulity, Cosima’s views were in a class apart from Wagner’s.”

Whence sprang Cosima’s view of the world

How ultimately do we account for Cosima’s mental habits? Much can be traced, Hilmes insists (and verifies with his usual diligent thoroughness), to her childhood. He makes a strong claim for her loveless and fatherless childhood. Cosima and her sister, Blandine, the children of another eminent European composer, Franz Liszt, were themselves conceived out of wedlock. Aside from banishing their Parisian mother (he put his own in charge) and later assigning them to a series of increasingly strict governesses, Liszt, that early incarnation of a rock star, took little active interest in their lives. Here I think Hilmes may exaggerate: a deeply patriarchal society was then the rule throughout Europe. Children were seen and not heard; the father, visible or not, was boss. Cosima’s upbringing was far from unusual, at least among the rich and famous.

More significant in her psychic development, I think, are two further influences Hilmes notes. One is her upbringing as a strict Catholic, which shaped her in lasting and lastingly conservative ways. The church taught her to be self-denying and to make of her life a sacrificial offering. Though she nominally converted to Protestantism to please Richard, the original values she imbibed permeated her very being. Her twig was bent—
firmly and (despite external accommodations) unalterably.

Cosima’s learned instinct was to revere, and it filled her days of marriage with Richard (and the cohabitation that preceded it). It exploded exponentially at his death. She lay prostrate on Wagner’s body for a full day and a half, climbed into his grave at his burial, shore her hair and wove it into a pillow that she laid in his coffin with him. Bayreuth, however, became her phoenix. With it “began the bizarre cult of Wagner that was to characterize the ensuing decades.” That memorial to her dead husband survives to this day, an institutional, bricks-and-mortar testament to her undying dedication.

Second in influence was the tutoring she received as an adolescent from a seventy-two-year-old Polish countess who “brought up the children to despise the values of the post-Revolutionary world.” For them of course that “revolution” was the one in 1789. Cosima imbibed from that tutor (and from her mother, too) a reverence for the French ancien régime. What was old was correct and sacred, and what was modern was to be avoided and despised. She considered, for example, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, who brought to the stages of Europe a very modern, very unpatriarchal vision, “sick.”

But added to that aristocratic snobbery and sense of entitlement I see a third, perhaps unsuspected and certainly unexpected element shaping Cosima: the women’s movement. Its first stirrings can be traced to Mary Wollstonecraft’s 1792 Vindication manifesto, and the movement soon made such strides that Dickens satirized it in Bleak House (1853). Women’s rights became another of those vibrant threads of progress the nineteenth century spun so prolifically. Washington University’s own founder, William Greenleaf Eliot, established one of the nation’s first women’s preparatory schools (Mary Institute) in 1859 and a decade later noted the arrival of a phenomenon he termed the “New Woman” in an 1870 speech. Much as Cosima may have found Ibsen’s Nora Helmer, in A Doll’s House, an abhorrent model of modern woman, the intensity of dedication and assertive independence Wagner’s widow displayed bore a remarkable resemblance to Ibsen’s remarkable, door-slamming creation.

Whatever the varying streams that shaped Cosima’s nature and outlook, her single-minded devotion to her husband led, after his death, to a world view quite at odds with that of the festival’s founder. The steps she took ranged from diplomatic to ruthless. She tried, with eloquent and deferential persistence, to persuade the German parliament to grant the Wagner family an extension of copyright, and she sought to forbid other companies (even various Wagner societies) from performing his works. Worse, she took legal action to remove members of her own family from rights to that increasingly sacrosanct heritage, filing suit against her own daughter, Isolde, in effect disowning her, even though she and Wagner were known to be her parents.

Similarly, she rejoiced at the 1908 marriage of the Wagners’ other daughter, Eva, to Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an extreme anti-Semite and rabid German jingoist whose writings Hitler especially admired. She eagerly welcomed him to the family, and he became, in effect, the inheritor of the Wagner world view that Cosima was creating. It was he who exulted in the chance to meet the young Nazi leader in 1923. Hilmes tellingly sums up the perspective in its early-twentieth-century form: “Politically motivated Wagnerism was not about music, opera, and theatre: Wagner himself was only the name for something else, the ‘spirit of Bayreuth,’ an aggressively Teutonic and Christian doctrine of salvation.”

Other musicians of the era

Surprisingly, but perhaps aptly, in view of that summary statement, the focus of this biography is not very musical. Its detailed reporting of Cosima’s choices of conductor and of other festival employees and its concern with balance sheets leave little room for an analysis of performance practices or other strictly musical considerations. The book is more about mechanisms than music. Still, one might expect that a book about a woman who dwelled near the heart of German musical culture might have more to report about the era’s musical life. Here the book disappoints. Sure, it is useful in the occasional glimpses it permits at a handful of major figures, but there it is barely informative and does not even provide much fodder for gossip. There are the young Richard Strauss (assistant conductor at Bayreuth in 1891), Anton Bruckner (organist at Liszt’s funeral, where, alas, he played only melodies from Wagner, claiming ignorance of any work by the decredent!), and Engelbert Humperdinck (Siegfried’s tutor). Now, the name that recurs most frequently is that of Johannes Brahms,
but it is always in the context of the Wagnerites’ disapproval. Here I would lodge a more serious complaint. Hilmes dutifully provides several letters from various musicians pointing out the dispute between the two camps’ adherents, but we are given neither a clear account of the rivalry’s origins nor an analysis of its substance. Hilmes could have done more to flesh out this intensely partisan debate.

Some final reflections
This intimate portrait of Cosima Wagner has dramatized for me (call me naive, but it has) the vast scope of history and the innumerable social and intellectual strands that bind individuals to individuals and generations to generations. Here is a woman born in 1836 whose life and philosophy still reverberate. The furniture of her mind was fashioned in a France that had died in 1789, its habits but not its memory guillotined. Her married life with Richard Wagner began in 1870 and blossomed, after his death, into an intense and radical expression of German nationalism. The whole world paid the price seventy years later. It is now another seven decades after those horrors, yet we see conditions today that have their roots in a way of life and set of values that died more than two centuries ago.

Yes, Cosima’s baleful influence continues. We see it, to my mind, in the unfair prejudice against even the performance of Wagner’s music. The prejudice exists in many Jewish communities around the world. It is at its strongest in Israel, a nation whose creation was ironically one of the few direct benefits of those horrific years. Yet there we observe an entire people who are paying a continuing cruel price: artistic deprivation.

The emotional motivation for the prohibition is of course fully understandable, but its logic is flawed. As we have seen, Wagner himself was what you might call a run-of-the-mill anti-Semite, standard issue for his time. He was in fact a man who mixed easily with the best artists of his day, Gentile or Jewish, gay or heterosexual. His commitment was to the arts, and to his above all. And he was an undeniable genius. In a lengthy article in the April 26, 2011, New Yorker, music critic Alex Ross refers to “the spell that Wagner continues to cast over the world.” In the piece, he quotes the conductor Christoph von Dohnányi, himself a concentration-camp survivor, who notes, “When I really think about Wagner, I don’t discover anything that had to lead to Hitler.” Dohnányi proceeds to make the observation about a passage from “Die Walküre”: “[It] is not something any fascist could have written.”

No, the truth is, and Hilmes makes the case well, that it was Wagner’s wife’s ministrations and the support of increasingly bigoted hangers-on that are to blame. It is they who made his name one that still, for some, lives in infamy. We have forgotten how far the Wahnfried weltanschauung departed from the spirit of the man himself. Wagner, Hilmes reminds us, eagerly welcomed the spirit of liberal reform that swept through Europe, and especially Germany, in 1848. The young man was politically a radical; musically, his massive Ring cycle (of which “Die Walküre” is a part) was a daring and incomparably brilliant assault on the tired operatic formulas of the day.

To call Richard Wagner the father of the Holocaust is, to be blunt, unjust. In a recent New York Times series on the “10 Greatest Composers,” chief music critic Anthony Tommasini moved Wagner from eighth place to ninth because “he was an anti-Semitic, egomaniacal jerk.” Fair enough. But to go any further than that, Hilmes’s research and analysis suggests, reflects a far-too-selective consultation of the evidence.

She considered, for example, the Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, who brought to the stages of Europe a very modern, very unpatriarchal vision, “sick.”

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The Singer and Her Songs
Nina Simone and the Political Synthesis of Black and White Music

Review of Nadine Cohodas, Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone (Pantheon, 2010), 449 pages including index, bibliography, notes, and photos

In 1984, during a brief return to the United States from an expatriate’s life that took her to France, Liberia, Barbados, and other nations, Nina Simone made a surprise visit to the Newark, New Jersey, home of the writer-activist Amiri Baraka and his family. The musician had known Baraka during the sixties, when she was a favorite among jazz and folk music aficionados, civil-rights workers, and black militants. In the months that followed her appearance at their doorstep, Simone spent a good deal of time with the family. Two years later, in an essay entitled “Nina Returns,” Baraka reflected on her life and career. He told the story of her early immersion in black church music; her study to be a classical concert pianist; her efforts, beginning in the fifties, to juxtapose sacred, classical, jazz, and popular musics; and her creation, in the sixties, of a new black protest music. Baraka also discussed Simone’s current hopes of re-engaging with the United States and of renewing her career in a post-sixties moment. Simone, Baraka thought, still had a “sound and presence that sum up a whole epic of human feeling.” But this summation was no simple or easy feat. She was “clearly a person struggling to come to terms with everything, in no specific order.”

This struggle is the subject of Nadine Cohodas’s new biography of Simone, who died in France in 2003. Cohodas, a journalist, is the author of several other books about twentieth-century African American culture and history, and about race in the United States. She has written biographies of Dinah Washington and Strom Thurmond and histories of Chess Records and the integration of the University of Mississippi. The most interesting chapters of Princess Noire: The Tumultuous Reign of Nina Simone are those that draw on local archival research and Cohodas’s interviews with Simone’s family and friends to recover her youth in Tryon, North Carolina. Born Eunice Waymon in 1933, Simone grew up in a corner of the South in which Jim Crow was a powerful force, though not an omnipotent one. In Tryon, an artists’ community with a number of northern transplants, blacks and whites “lived near each other in checkerboard clusters, an arrangement that fostered, depending on one’s viewpoint, an inchoate integration or an imperfect segregation.” By Cohodas’s account, this social environment was relatively hospitable to both black entrepreneurship and black artistic creativity. Simone’s father, J. D. Waymon, ran a dry-cleaning operation and other businesses and served as an official in the Polk County branch of the NAACP. Kate Waymon, Simone’s mother, became a traveling minister. At the age of four, Simone, already proficient at the piano, went on the road with her mother and began playing musical introductions to Kate’s sermons. Six years later, she was the regular Sunday pianist at St. Luke CME Church, and soon she and several siblings were performing together as the Waymon Sisters. While Simone was still a child, a white woman for whom Kate worked as a domestic servant hired a piano teacher for the local prodigy. Under the instruction of Muriel Mazzanovich, a British immigrant, Simone fell in love with Bach and formed her ambition of becoming a classical concert pianist. As Simone approached the end of high school, Mazzanovich secured for her a scholarship for a summer session at Julliard, an experience intended to prepare her for admission to Philadelphia’s Curtis Institute of Music.

In the end, Curtis rejected her application, but Simone, now living in Philadelphia, continued to prepare for a career in classical music by taking lessons with one of the conservatory’s instructors. To pay her bills, she became a piano instructor herself, first working for an established studio and then opening her own school. Later still, in the mid-fifties, she began playing dates in jazz clubs and other venues in Atlantic City, Philadelphia, and elsewhere in the Northeast, and it was at this time that Eunice Waymon first emerged as the complex and often contradictory artist whom we know. She became the paradox that her new friend Langston Hughes described in a 1960 Chicago Defender article: a “strange” and “different” figure like such avant-garde writers as Jean Genet and Bertolt Brecht and such iconoclasts as Billie Holiday and Mort Sahl but at the same time a familiar figure, “a homey from Down Home.” Recounting the first phase of Simone’s adult professional career, a standing engagement at Atlantic City’s Midtown Bar, Cohodas writes, “Nina’s sets had evolved into a merry-go-round of styles and genres that was rarely

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the same on any given night: folk songs, show tunes, hits, and some that should have been hits, along with her own creations, which sometimes were the extended piano compositions she played that first week at the Midtown.” To this inventory one might add jazz (e.g., Ellington’s “Mood Indigo”), blues (e.g., Richard Jones’s “Trouble in Mind”), and Left modernism (e.g., Brecht and Weill’s “Pirate Jenny”)—all rendered idiosyncratically. Beginning in the mid-sixties, her concerts and records featured protest songs like “Mississippi Goddam,” “Go Limp,” “Old Jim Crow,” and “Four Women”—songs that she wrote or cowrote and that established her connection with the young activists of the era.

Although Princess Noire offers a long and extraordinarily detailed record of the wild variety of Simone’s performances and recordings, it presents little satisfying analysis of the various personal, aesthetic, ideological, and commercial forces that formed her collage repertoire. Cohodas uses a light hand when it comes to interpreting her subject’s artistic life, and, for this reason, I find her book, as a whole, less interesting than I Put a Spell on You: The Autobiography of Nina Simone (1991, written with Stephen Cleary). As part of her effort to explain the tensions within her work, Simone offers a psychoanalysis of her artistic development in which Mazzanovich figures as her “white momma.” Unlike Kate Waymon, Mazzanovich seemed wholly devoted to Simone, and “Miss Mazzy” embraced the worldly music that Simone’s black mother scorned. The singer imaginatively incorporated within herself the woman who had taught her classical piano: “Her hair was silvery and tied up in a bun and when she opened her mouth and talked in her delicate English accent I wanted to pick her up and put her in my mouth, she was so sweet and pretty.” Now Simone’s art comprised two traditions, Mazzanovich’s classical canon and the sacred songs that Kate Waymon sang at home and that Simone had known almost from infancy.

Still, questions remained. Could Simone sustain these traditions as a popular entertainer? And could she simultaneously satisfy her mounting urge to be a protest singer? As it turned out, her protest songs constituted not only a rebellion against Jim Crow but also a secular analogue to Kate Waymon’s Christian witness and a new kind of high-cultural expression no less ennobling than the classical canon that she had studied with Mazzanovich. Earlier Simone had felt that “nightclubs were dirty, making records was dirty, popular music was dirty and to mix all that with politics seemed senseless and demeaning.” Until she wrote and performed “Mississippi Goddam,” she wondered, “how can you take the memory of a man like Medgar Evers and reduce all that he was to three and a half minutes and a simple tune?” Finally, however, Simone felt that her protest songs redeemed her work as a popular entertainer. They gave it an aesthetic autonomy that made it no less pure than her mothers’ sacred and classical vocations. Conceiving “Mississippi Goddam” as a “show tune” for an as-yet-unwritten show—“This is a show tune / But the show hasn’t been written for it, yet”—allowed her to repurpose popular music and to redefine her identity as a popular musician. Simone’s account of the family dynamics within her work may be a highly subjective, retrospective reconstruction, but it is much more analytical than the one that Cohodas offers.

Similarly, Simone’s recollections of her friendships with Lorraine Hansberry, Langston Hughes, Miriam Makeba, and other artists strike me as more probing than Cohodas’s discussions of them. Cohodas certainly examines these friendships—indeed, she quotes extensively from the Simone–Hughes correspondence—but she usually reaches only general conclusions about these connections. While Princess Noire abounds with information about Simone’s personal and creative lives, it will likely disappoint readers seeking a nuanced intellectual biography of the singer, an intricate study of the “epic of human feeling” that she lived.

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Nina talking to the audience during her performance at the June 1986 Playboy Jazz Festival in Los Angeles (UCLA Charles E. Young Research Library Department of Special Collections, Los Angeles Times Photographic Archives, copyright Regents of the University of California, UCLA Library)
Stanley Ann Dunham liked to say that she was named for her father, who expected his first-born to be a boy. “Instead he got me,” she would say and laugh. In truth, her mother, Madelyn Payne Dunham, who admired the gutsy, independent movie star Bette Davis, named her baby rather oddly: for the selfish, irresponsible character Davis played in the 1942 film *In This Our Life*, which interestingly broke new ground in Hollywood in its depiction of its black characters. Ann, as she was known, exemplified the independent woman.

Barack Obama, in his 2008 presidential campaign, seemingly disparaged her as “a white woman from Kansas.” Ann Dunham was much more than that, as *New York Times* reporter Janny Scott writes in her well-researched biography, *A Singular Woman: The Untold Story of Barack Obama’s Mother*. Two decades before Muhammad Yunus won a Nobel Prize for microfinance programs to aid the poor in developing countries, Ann Dunham helped create the largest self-sustaining microfinance program in the world through the Bank Rakyat Indonesia. What she accomplished in her 1,043-page doctoral dissertation was rare in anthropology, where theses may be out-dated after five years. “Peasant Blacksmithing in Indonesia: Surviving and Thriving Against All Odds,” defended in 1992, was considered so enduringly groundbreaking that Duke University published it in 2009, fourteen years after Ann’s death.

That her son sits in the Oval Office can be attributed to her audacity of hope. Noting how bright he was as a boy, she would say, “My son can do anything he wants, even become the President of the United States.” That he is a consensus-builder who keeps his cool derives from his mother and from his years with her in Indonesia. She taught her daughter, Maya Soetoro-Ng, an author and a PhD, that women have choices: they should think about what they want even if it differs from what society expects.

Ann, born November 29, 1942, came to her majority in the age of the birth-control pill and the civil-rights movement, when the lives of middle-class white girls changed dramatically from white gloves and marriage to independence and self-discovery. Ann improvised her life as if she were a jazz musician creating solos. Iconoclastic, she married two non-Western, Muslim men. If the women her age worked, it was usually as schoolteachers. Ann traveled through crocodile-infested waters from village to village to do her field work in anthropology. And “she loved it,” a friend said.

Although she was born in Kansas, by the time Ann entered high school, in Mercer Island, near Seattle, she had lived in seven different cities. Both parents descended from small-town Kansas oil engineers and schoolteachers, and both wanted bigger lives. Madelyn succeeded, becoming one of the first women vice presidents of the Bank of Hawaii, while Stanley jumped from one mediocre job to another. He moved his family around so much, Ann developed into the perpetual outsider. Curious by nature, she became a good observer and a good listener, tolerant and self-contained. She disdained classmates who parroted their parents’ views instead of thinking for themselves. She laughed at status brands. But like the other girls, she was sexually innocent. Stanley and Madelyn, who had been raised Methodist, took Ann with them to the local Unitarian church, which advocated social justice. That meshed well with Ann’s eternal idealism.

After her high-school graduation, Ann wanted to go to the University of Chicago, where Madelyn’s sister was earning her doctorate. Brilliant and charismatic, Barack Obama Sr., aged twenty-four, arrived to be trained as an economist. He was to join the
new ruling elite of independent Kenya. He mesmerized the undergrads with his baritone voice, which sounded like Paul Robeson by way of Oxbridge. Ann, seventeen, never having had a boyfriend, was enthralled. Six weeks into the semester, she became pregnant. Madelyn allowed her to decide what to do. Ann wed Barack in secret in February 1961 and bore Barack Jr., “Barry,” on August 4.

There was little joy in the marriage. Barack’s father wrote Ann’s father saying, “He didn’t want the Obama blood sullied by a white woman.” Worse, Barack failed to mention his pregnant wife and child back home. Ann was devastated.

When Barry was ten months old, Barack left for a faculty fellowship at Harvard, where he took another American wife. Ann took her baby to see friends on Mercer Island. She enrolled in the University of Washington in Seattle but realized that she no longer fit in with her classmates. While they were unhindered undergraduates dancing the Twist at frat parties and attending football games, she was a divorcée changing diapers and worrying about money. She returned to Honolulu, where Madelyn and Stanley made it possible for her to return to college. Madelyn so regretted not having a degree, “she never would have allowed Ann not to go to college,” her sister said. Barry called Madelyn “Tutu,” the Hawaiian word for grandmother, which evolved into “Toot.”

Ann impressed her classmates as being a born intellectual, one with a global view of life. Dressed in a sarong and Javanese blouse, she attended Indonesian Night at the East–West Center with a Javanese grad student, Lolo Soetoro. They had met on the tennis courts, where “she liked the way he looked in his white tennis shorts.” Lolo was handsome and what Barack Sr. was not: affable and patient. He exuded calmness and stability. He was a family man. Like Barack, he planned to help his country as it achieved independence from more than three hundred years of colonial rule. That challenge appealed to Ann. They married.

Were her husbands her tickets to foreign cultures? Did her idealism lead her to men from developing countries throwing off colonialism? As Scott points out, when Ann and Barack exchanged their vows, such interracial unions were illegal in two dozen states. She does not investigate why Ann preferred men of non-Western countries, cultures, and religions, men who came from rigid patriarchal societies that clashed with her feminism. After her second divorce, Ann took Indonesian lovers. “She never looked twice at a white man,” a friend told Scott.

Ann and Barry arrived in Jakarta in 1967. The country was magical. As Scott describes it, there were “shimmering paddy fields, terraced hillsides, luminous green plains carved by rivers and studded with volcanoes.” The cost of living was so low that Lolo and Ann employed a household staff who shopped, cooked, cleaned, did the laundry, and watched the children, freeing Ann to work.

Java was no Bali Ha’i, out of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical South Pacific. Six-year-old Barry was taunted by kids who threw rocks at him. Unfazed, he dodged them. He quickly adopted the Javanese ideal of self-control, which reveals inner strength. He developed the exquisite manners that are important there to maintain smooth social relations. People said Barry was halus, Indonesian for courteous and refined. They admire patience, calmness, and being a good listener.

While embodying those qualities herself, Ann was outspoken against the subservient role of women. “Indonesia is a country of smiling or gentle oppression of women,” she said. The way the wealthy treated their servants angered her.

Lolo took a job with Union Oil of California, and Ann, with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). She studied the language, becoming so proficient that in conversation she could fluidly move from topic to topic. To her husband’s dismay, she refused to be a corporate wife, which made him look bad. She eschewed the clique of ex-pats, making friends instead with Indonesian writers and activists.

Believing that education would be her son’s armor against racism, Ann woke Barry at 4 a.m. every weekday for three hours of English lessons before he went to school. Wanting him to have a better education, she took him home, three years after arriving in Jakarta, to the prestigious Punahou School in Honolulu. In oddly distancing terms, President Obama told Scott, “I think that was much harder on a 10-year-old kid than he’d care to admit at the time.”

A year later, Ann returned at Christmastime with her toddler daughter, Maya, telling Barry she had a special surprise for him: his father was coming for the holiday. Wanting to keep Barack Sr. engaged in Barry’s life, Ann had worked hard to maintain cordial relations with her ex-husband, writing to him about their son’s progress.

After the holidays, Ann stayed on for three years. Lolo would call in tears, while she insisted that she needed a doctorate so she could pay for her children’s education. Again, Ann was the outsider, older than the other grad students, who partied on weekends while she completed her master’s with sixty-three credits and all of...
her course work for her PhD in two years, in December 1974. Professor Alice Dewey— the granddaughter of John Dewey the philosopher and a pioneer on the market system and crafts in Indonesia—chose Ann to train. Dewey instructed her: people are rational. If you understand their point of view, then you can understand what they do and say. Ann proposed to study the economics of the arts as a cottage industry among the peasants. It was an unusual topic to look at from the monetary angle.

Like most women with a career and children, Ann was torn. She wanted Barry, now thirteen, to return to Indonesia with Maya and her. He wanted to stay with his grandparents and attend Punahoa. “I weared of being new all over again,” the president told Scott. Leaving her son behind was the single hardest thing Ann did in her life. She had little choice if she wanted to make more money to pay for her children’s education.

Returning to Java with Maya in early 1975, Ann spent the year preparing for her research for her dissertation. She had to gain permissions from agencies and institutions of nearly every level of government. She obtained twenty-two research permits, lined up government sponsors, and cleared interviews with officials. She studied the crafts, too, “fascinated with life’s gorgeous minutiae.” Understanding the art within its culture, she knew what the designs symbolized on batiks.

Armed with her permits and notepads, Ann left on the back of a motorcycle at five in the morning. Listening to her interviewees, she would touch them and often tear up at their stories. She would leave at seven at night and then translate her notes into English until midnight, providing portraits of the individuals along with her hard data.

She quickly learned that the rural craftswoman’s biggest problem was credit. Money was not only difficult to obtain but interest rates hit the usury level. Farmers, usually men, could obtain credit from the government, but it was reluctant to loan money to craftspeople. She pointed out most of the world’s poor are female. Few scholars had tackled the issue of poor women. Few scholars had tackled the issue of poor women.

In Kajar, she found her thesis subjects: the master smiths who made the keris, the wavy-bladed ceremonial dagger. The keris is more than a weapon; it is a sacred object. Master keris smiths were venerated; they performed a set of rituals in the making of the keris. Ann was enthralled.

Her joy in her work was tempered by missing her son. She wept to friends that she wanted to be with him his last year of high school. She returned to Honolulu in the fall of 1978 and confronted him: his grades were falling and he was leaving his college applications unfinished. Her unspoken fear was that he would squander his promise and turn out like his father. Barry challenged her on that very fear and stormed from the room.

Needing more money for his college tuition, she stopped work on her dissertation to become a community organizer with USAID. The first of its kind, the program was based on the theory that the poor knew what they needed and what to do. Circumstances held them back. To Ann, telling villagers what they needed instead of listening to them smacked of neo-colonialism, so this approach suited her. She saw the villagers as her clients, not her wards.

Ann was uniquely qualified; she had transcended barriers, much as her son would later do. She spoke Indonesian, she lived and ate as a native, and she had a network of connections. She was the only single white American woman living in central Java in her own household in a strict patriarchal culture. The Indonesians allowed her this freedom because she was an outsider they respected. She was “ameliorative,” a friend said. Her style was nonconfrontational yet direct.

This grassroots approach was taking hold at the Ford Foundation. The organization was shifting focus to equality for women, and it sought Ann as a project specialist. Again she was the outsider, the only Western woman in the Ford office of white men and Javanese secretaries. Her colleagues found her tough, sharp, and clear-eyed about the world. While she was extremely empathic about the villagers, she was very hard-nosed about facts and collecting data.

She often flew Barry back to Java to be with him. When he was not there, she paraded photographs of him, saying, “My boy is brilliant.” To her mentor, Alice Dewey, she wrote, “Barry is learning the realities of international finance and politics, and I think that will stand him in good stead in the future.”

Barry was now in Harvard Law School and Maya in Barnard College. Upon his election as the first black president of the Harvard Law Review, the Boston Globe reported on “his unusual path, from childhood in Indonesia, where he grew up, he says, ‘as a street kid.’” Really? The article continued, reporting that his father’s “heritage was to be the major influence on his life, ideals and priorities.” Really? Ann was relegated to the succinct summary: “[His] mother, who is white, [is] a Kansas-born anthropologist who now works as a developmental consultant in Indonesia.”

In a Los Angeles Times interview, Ann was limited to being “an American anthropologist” and “a white American from Wichita, Kansas.” Ann was terribly hurt.

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Upon Barry’s graduation from Harvard Law, Ann’s close male friend prophesied that her son would become president. He’ll be a senator first, Ann said, and then began weeping. It was the only time her friend had ever seen Ann cry during their long liaison. Scott speculates it might be “a mother’s loss compounded by whatever regret she might have had about the years they had spent apart and the distance that almost inevitably was widening between them.” A male colleague believed Ann felt sad that Barry was making “a professional choice” to take on an identity he had not had growing up. “He was distancing himself from her,” he said. Yet, working pro bono and then as a community organizer, he followed her path.

On New Year’s Day in 1985, Ann the inherent list maker compiled her long-range goals. Foremost was completing her doctorate, her “union card” to grants and a good faculty position. Her close male friend, a tall, handsome, much younger journalist, threatened to leave her if she did not complete her dissertation. In 1990 they moved to the East–West Center in Hawaii, where Ann refined her thesis topic to metalworking.

Known for her careful methodology, Ann spent four years, 1988–92, coordinating a swat team of researchers with funding from the World Bank and USAID. She told them repeatedly, “Do not condescend before you understand. After you understand, do not judge.”

Two weeks before Ann was scheduled to go before her dissertation committee, her father, Stanley, died of prostate cancer. She was devastated. “The only thing I’m afraid of in life is to die of cancer,” she remarked to a friend.

As Barry began writing his memoir, *Dreams from My Father*, Ann dreamed of moving back to America to be closer to her children. She joined Women’s World Banking in Manhattan in January 1993 and changed the view of bankers and governments who had preferred big-business male owners over small-business female owners. Within the year, Ann saw to it that Women’s World Banking banded together with twenty-four other microfinance institutions to form an international coalition. Their goal was to influence the upcoming 1995 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing. Ann remarked how the microfinance banks were aiding mostly men, while women were the majority of the poor in the world.

While Ann focused on helping other women, she neglected her own health. She became so short of breath and her belly so swollen, she could barely walk the streets of Manhattan. She saw a gynecologist who suspected uterine cancer and wrote that in her notes but did not tell Ann, “I need to go home,” she said, signing on as development consultant in Indonesia with a Bethesda, Maryland, firm. A Jakarta gynecologist diagnosed appendicitis and recommended an appendectomy. Her post-op recovery was miserable. “I have cancer; I can feel it,” she told a colleague. In September 1995, an oncologist at Memorial Sloan-Kettering in New York told Madelyn and Ann that she had Stage 4 uterine cancer. She underwent a rough chemotherapy in Honolulu.

In his presidential campaign, Barack Obama made much of how his dying mother had been denied health-insurance coverage for a previously existing condition. In truth, Ann’s health insurance covered her final illness. Her problem lay with CIGNA; the insurance company refused her claim for disability payments, which would have paid for her out-of-pocket medical expenses and living costs.

In early November 1995, Maya became alarmed by how her mother sounded during their long-distance calls. She left graduate school at New York University to fly to Hawaii. She found her mother emaciated and unconscious, but alive—as though she had waited for her. Maya sat by Ann’s bedside and told her how much she meant to her. She read aloud a Creole creation myth, and the book concluded with a person transformed into a bird and the bird taking flight. “I told her that she should go, that I didn’t want to see her like that. And she was gone about fifteen minutes later,” Maya said.

President Obama later said that not being there was the biggest mistake of his life.

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In August 2008, the U.S. Army released a field manual for trauma surgeons about to be deployed to the war zones in Iraq and Afghanistan. War Surgery in Iraq and Afghanistan: A Series of Cases, 2003–2007 educated stateside physicians about the types of battlefield injuries they would soon encounter. As one of the principal authors, Dr. David Lounsbury claimed in an interview with Donald G. McNeil Jr. of the New York Times, “The average Joe Surgeon, civilian or military, has never seen this stuff…. Yeah, they’ve seen guys shot in the chest. But the kind of ferocious blast, burn and penetrating trauma that’s part of the modern IED wound is like nothing they’ve seen, even in a Manhattan emergency room. It’s a shocking, heart-stopping, eye-opening kind of thing. And they need to see this on the plane before they get there, because there’s a learning curve to this.”

The book was conceived as a graphic teaching tool, and, as such, it contains eighty-three of the most representative wartime casualties, including cases (and photographs) of soldiers with mutilated genitals, limbs, and faces. The apolitical point was to pass along what doctors had learned at the front—don’t worry about raising blood pressure to 120, for example, since the soldier will most likely bleed out as a result; for victims of traumatic brain injury (TBI), remove a large portion of the skull immediately to compensate for swelling, even if the wound doesn’t appear to call for a hemicraniectomy. Such clinical techniques to stabilize and quickly transport have since saved many soldiers’ lives that otherwise would have been lost.

War Surgery would have been unremarkable outside the medical world and uncontroversial for the larger public were it not for the photographs. McNeil again: “One of the book’s most powerful aspects is its juxtaposition of operating room photographs with those of the war outside the tent. It is filled with random shots—burning vehicles, explosions, a medic carrying a child, another in a Santa Claus hat. It also has portraits of soldiers, often dazed and exhausted; one even has tears on his cheek.” As quickly as the army published War Surgery for the world to see, they panicked and tried to take it off the shelves. Amazon suddenly did not list any copies in stock. Some worried that these pictures of “just what war is” (to borrow a phrase from Civil War soldier and novelist John William De Forest) were unsuitable for general distribution. What had made the images of surgery more grotesque (and therefore off-limits) was how they interacted with other images of the soldier’s daily life: helping civilians, being playful, appearing confused, suffering alone. America and its enemies could suddenly witness real soldiers with real physical and psychological injuries—unpleasant facts that did not bode well for our collective memory of soldiers gilded with honor and glory. Eventually the army relaxed its opposition to War Surgery, and yet the book’s ambivalence underscores a larger blind spot in American myth-making about war. These photographs of soldiers—many of which were taken by David Leeson of the Dallas Morning News while he was embedded in Iraq (for which he won a Pulitzer)—narrate the individual costs of our two wars that the nation largely does not want to hear, stories the army either did not want to tell or did not know how to tell.

What we are allowed to see is one question. I suspect the self-censorship of War Surgery, like the uproar over whether or not the media should photograph coffins of dead soldiers as they return to the United States, originates more from the military’s desire to protect its own than from malicious intent to deceive the nation.
And while full access will always be an ongoing struggle (Vietnam taught us as much), free speech is not exactly the cause célèbre in our current wars. The more useful question for Sebastian Junger in War, his most recent book that reports on his time as a journalist embedded with Battle Company in Afghanistan’s Korengal Valley in late 2007 and early 2008, is, What do we allow ourselves to see? Veteran and novelist Tim O’Brien once described the sensation of death as being in a book nobody is reading, and War Surgery surely now sits on the dusty shelves even of medical libraries because the “average Joe Surgeon” has no pressing need to study war medicine. The average reader has no more reason to pick up Junger’s War, except I think readers will. They have. The book has sold well, which could be attributed in part to an increased sense of responsibility in witnessing the wars we wage and, also, in part to Junger’s distinguished reputation as an author (The Perfect Storm, most notably) and editor at Vanity Fair. Like War Surgery, Junger understands combat through images—of soldiers, gear, terrain. He also directed along with British photojournalist Tim Hetherington the documentary Restrepo, which won the Grand Jury Prize at Sundance 2010. Restrepo is a visual companion to War, and it follows the same group of men and some of the firefight they endure. Both book and film take on an added sorrow in light of Hetherington’s death in April 2011 while covering the Libyan civil war.

Junger internalizes Abraham Lincoln’s sentiment that the dead, be they at Gettysburg or in the Korengal, are “for us the living” to make right. Some soldiers do in fact die in War, yet the ultimate concern of the book is not death or the soldiers whose stories it tells. More often than not Junger writes to try to understand what the American combat soldier can teach “us the living,” what he carries that civilian readers such as myself do not. “Combat isn’t where you might die—though that does happen—it’s where you find out whether you get to keep on living. Don’t underestimate the power of that revelation. Don’t underestimate the things young men will wager in order to play that game one more time.” Much of the game’s appeal is psychological, and War relies (too heavily at times) on external case studies of men subjected to the stresses of war (not a single female voice animates War—a reality of this particular company but certainly not of the larger American military). The result of Junger’s secondary research is an abstraction of the inner life of combat, a reverent accounting that tries to understand how fright, fear, and camaraderie retrofit “normal” mental processes and institutionalize soldiers to kill and be killed. This type of inquiry is not new; Junger joins the rank of others before him, mostly veterans rather than journalists, who also sought to document the psychological and physiological response to modern combat, including most notably S. L. A Marshall (Men Against Fire) and Dave Grossman (On Killing). More recently, Vietnam veteran Karl Marlantes has updated the public’s fascination with What It Is Like to Go to War.

Some reviews I have read of War are aghast at this long tradition of so-called war porn, but this criticism is a bit misguided. Pornography is a dirty word because it takes pleasure in victimization. The subject shows what should not be shown, presumably either out of desperation or depravity, and when the voyeur takes pleasure in the looking, the gaze victimizes all over again. War is at its best when it listens to soldiers instead of offering titillating psychological profiles, and when soldiers do speak in the book, they do not sound desperate or depraved. There are thrilling moments in the book, but no one is thrilled exactly; in Junger’s words, soldiers are witnesses, not victims, oftentimes possessing what comes across as an almost Gnostic insight into the violent lives of human beings. Sergeant Brendan O’Byrne—whom Junger sees “as a stand-in for the entire platoon, a way to understand a group of men who I don’t think entirely understood themselves”—was sixteen when his own father shot him once in the hip and once in the lower back near his spinal column. O’Byrne had been out drinking that night. When he returned home an argument started that lead to a fistfight and eventually gunshots. Instead of turning his father in, O’Byrne told police the shooting was in self-defense. He was sent to reform school and his father was spared prison.

My father wouldn’t have made it through jail—he’s not a violent person. The situation was violent but he’s not…. It was the best thing—but the worst thing—that ever happened to me. My father and I put ourselves in that position to be fucking evil to each other. It’s a tough story but it’s a good one, too. How dare I hit my father—even if he hit me…I’ll never hit that man again. That was my fault—you know? I didn’t have the respect. It’s a story of triumph. It’s a story of going through some hard shit and making out really good. I know bullets can’t stop me now. Fucking bullets are okay.

Junger never pitys. Here, as in the other vignettes from soldiers in the book, Junger tells the story of O’Byrne in an effort to recognize and pay tribute to an obvious truth: that people and their understanding of the world are transformed by combat. This particular soldier was made more magnanimous and selfless, more private and wise. Whatever it was exactly, war altered the memory of his life and taught him something to take back to the world, something that wasn’t all tragedy, guilt, and horror. That being said, the costs always seem to outweigh the insights. O’Byrne cannot tolerate civilian life once his enlistment is up at the end of the book. He longs for Afghanistan, and Junger concludes War thinking about O’Byrne’s curious trauma: “Maybe the ultimate wound is the one that makes you miss the war you got it in.”

The telling word here is “maybe,” because Junger the war journalist can never finally be sure of his conclusions. That perception of war “as soldiers really live it” (the subtitle on the inside flap) is never really his to write. The book subsequently struggles with the separation between combatant and noncombatant, how at times the partition is distinct and other times blurred. There is an ethical crossroads when on one patrol a soldier offers the author an old uniform, “but I turn him down because wearing military clothing seems like such a blatant erosion of journalistic
independence.” He thinks about it and soon changes his mind. “I’ll take the clothes after all. He tosses them to me without a glance.” Like Richard Harding Davis covering the Spanish-American War and Michael Herr in the jungles of Vietnam, Junger can neither fully enter nor fully remove himself from the war. He doesn’t carry a gun, but that doesn’t mean guns aren’t aimed at him. Consequently there is no stable internal distinction in the book between war and peace, soldier and civilian. For readers these lines are easy, and that crucial difference between here and there is always at play in the reading of War. I can close the book and put it, like War Surgery in Iraq and Afghanistan, on my cluttered shelf. Suddenly the images of young men and women at war are no more.

Bob Woodruff, the journalist who covered the war in Iraq until a roadside IED severely injured him and his cameraman, cites George Washington in the foreword to War Surgery: “The willingness with which our young people are likely to serve in any war, no matter how justified, shall be directly proportional to how they perceive the veterans of earlier wars were treated and appreciated by their nation.” Perception is Junger’s constant struggle as well. The great irony of War Surgery, of course, was that it was designed to heal wounded soldiers, not hurt civilian sensibilities. The same could be said of War, which depending on how you look at it is really more a love story than a war story. That love might be difficult to explain and easily misinterpreted, but it nonetheless colors Junger’s mood about the war in Afghanistan and makes him a sympathetic caretaker of the wounds as well as the misperceptions of contemporary American combat soldiers. Casualties from earlier American wars had literary nurses such as Walt Whitman, Louisa May Alcott, and Ernest Hemingway, each of whom in turn struggled with their relationship to and responsibility for the injuries soldiers suffer. Junger’s War deserves to be put on the shelf next to them. Whether or not they are read depends on what readers want to see.

Benjamin Cooper earned the PhD in English from Washington University in St. Louis. His dissertation is on American war literature of the nineteenth century.

Spanish-American War journalist and novelist Richard Harding Davis
Intrigid Filmmaker: Ric Burns and the Shaping of the American Narrative

How to Avoid Putting Docs in a Box

Ric Burns is serving humanity one sound bite at a time. Using spontaneous inflections and gestures to dramatize his encyclopedic command of historic facts, the filmmaker, dressed in jeans and an orange T-shirt over a white one, took two hours from his busy schedule to offer some insights into his specialty: turning crucial histories into documentary films. At Steeplechase Films, the five Emmys on an outer-office shelf, along with dozens of other prestigious awards above the no-nonsense desks, files, and Steeplechase staff say it all: it takes a vision and teamwork to achieve brilliant results.

Burns received two Emmys (editing and producing) for his eight-part documentary New York; two Emmys (producing and writing) for the PBS Civil War series; and an Emmy (outstanding cultural programming) for Ansel Adams. He has received the Alfred I. duPont–Columbia University Award for his New York, Civil War, and The Way West documentaries, along with numerous other awards for outstanding achievement. His range of documentary subjects includes the Civil War, Coney Island, the Donner Party, westward expansion, Ansel Adams, Andy Warhol, Eugene O’Neill, immigration in New York, and whaling in America.

The following interview took place at Steeplechase Films in New York City on October 27, 2010.

I. On Storytelling in history and film

Jan Castro: Ric, when you and your brother [Ken Burns] were growing up, what exactly did your father do as a cultural anthropologist? Did he do field research?

Ric Burns: Our dad was a cultural anthropologist studying a high-alpine village in France, Savaron, Cité Classé, the highest French village tucked up near the Italian border. He had found this place in the early 1950s and took Ken there when Ken was an infant. I was conceived there. That was the only work he ever did as an anthropologist. He was really drawn to the culture of this tiny, high-alpine community which had sustained itself on agriculture for a couple of thousand years—incredible, 1500-year-old stone irrigation ditches. Then in the winter, they would drive their animals down to winter pasture and spend the winter as scriveners and translators. This little community had a highly literate side and an agricultural side.

Because of the impact of the Second World War—young men going off to war and coming back with skills their fathers didn’t have—and millennial rains in the early 1950s which had washed away this stone irrigation system at exactly the moment that the inner structure of their social life was being washed away, these two events were upsetting the patriarchy of the village. Basically, it was a little world in the middle of cataclysmic transformations in the early 1950s, and he wanted to study that.

Savaron had a kind of legendary, Brigadoon-like quality for Ken and me both, in ways that are kind of dark as well as warm. Father never finished his PhD and somehow lost his way in a number of ways, partly because our mother got ill with cancer when we were tiny and died when I was ten and Ken was eleven and a half. So this unfinished, very rich, complicated body of work about this remarkably beautiful, austere place perched on top of a mountain in southeastern France exerted a kind of force...
for Ken and me that was very large and also, in certain ways, troubling. Our father was a storyteller, a voluble talker, sh y in certain ways, and sensitive. He loved to impart what he knew and would give us multichapter histories of the Second World War when I was six and Ken was eight—every night after dinner in fascinating detail: submarine warfare, the Battle of the Bulge—and some way of learning as much as you can about something and finding whomever you can to tell it to at great length got imparted if not with our mother’s milk then with our father’s genial madness. He was a complicated person.

JC: That’s amazing. Your love of narrative, perhaps, owes something to your father’s storytelling.

RB: I think so. It was not anything reflected on at the time, but, you know, film is the most tyrannically narrative medium. It really has to be narrative. Film runs through the gate of a film camera at twenty-four frames a second, or thirty in video, and is projected back out at twenty-four or thirty frames a second. Even though you can stop it and reverse it, it’s a narrow, liquid river of light and shadow and sound moving in one direction. There’s a profound arrow of time moving forward which requires that the data you manipulate—sound, words, images, music—those elements must be arranged narratively, and to the degree that a film doesn’t do that it’s felt as friction, boredom, repetition, lack of clarity. And when it is felt, the whole is much greater than the sum of the parts.

It’s interesting: Ken first and then, through Ken, I, as well, was so powerfully drawn to this most storytelling of all storytelling mediums. Its gift is that; its limitation is that; its beauty is that. Even if you make a hugely long film, it’s still got to move like a freight train or it fails. That freight train is the story.

Film is so newfangled and modern-seeming, but human beings, for a hundred thousand years, have been gathering in a darkened place and staring into the fire and telling stories to each other to ward off the darkness. Film does exactly that. We all have that experience. It’s not even a metaphor. The lights go down in a movie theater. You look at an image on the screen, and it kind of crawls into your nervous system in a primal way. Through that medium—the flickering in the cave—you are taken to a place where you want to have asked and have answered the most basic question: What happened next? It’s astonishing how powerful it is; human beings will always be drawn to it. It’s the main way we make sense of our world, by telling stories about it.

II. On the American vernacular and making The Civil War

JC: How did you initially move from being a literature student at Columbia and Cambridge universities into making The Civil War with your brother, Ken?

RB: In high school, I was a wastrel, an underachiever, and a good drummer in a band called Suzy and the Pimps. Ken was a straight-A student. He then went to a strange little place, Hampshire College (nobody had heard of it), and I went in the other direction, to Columbia and Cambridge. I was sure I was going to be a professor of English literature.

But Ken would farm out chores—writing proposals for his first film, Brooklyn Bridge, or working on parts of scripts for his wonderful film on Huey Long and other projects. I had the great good fortune of being with this incredibly gifted person at exactly the moment when I was going, “You know, I don’t want to spend forty or fifty years writing three books for an audience of two thousand.” That is a great thing to do, but it didn’t fit my aptitude. The good fortune is that my brother had proactively found something that fit him that also, surprise of genetics, fit me in ways that are similar and different. So in the mid-1980s, Ken was thinking about doing a larger film on the Civil War and asked me to come and produce it with him. I jumped at the opportunity and never looked back. That turned into five amazing years from 1985 until 1990 that were formative for me at a very deep level.

I have to say, for all of us, you don’t lose anything. The twelve years I spent in college and graduate school here and in England live inside me warmly and deeply.

JC: How did you conduct the research for The Civil War during those five years? Did you start out with themes, or did any new ones emerge?

RB: It was a pretty closely held proposition. There was Ken and me and Geoffrey C. Ward. Geoff and I wrote the series with Ken. There were a couple of researchers, Mike Hill and, later, Kitty Isley. Lynn Novick, Ken’s [creative] partner today, came in at the end. We assembled a board of consultants and asked them not to review treatments and scripts but to bring us material. From beginning to end, the visuals were there to create contexts and circumstances in which the remarkable language of Americans then—whether it’s Ulysses S. Grant or Jefferson Davis or Spotwood Rice—or Americans now. It’s impossible for me to separate the impact that series had from the distinctive American vernacular of the two dozen American men and women who spoke on camera about it. Shelby Foote was obviously front and center, but many people, when they spoke about the Civil War, spoke about something they knew was one of the most important things they could speak about. So it was a twelve-hour story told around its own campfire. It’s hair-raising to this day. The equivalent casualties today would be 30 million. In the Civil War, 2 percent of our population died.

I’m about to embark on a project for PBS which takes as its point of departure Drew Faust’s extraordinary book This Republic of Suffering, which is about the impact of the number of dead during the Civil War on the culture and psyche of America. The government changed. We didn’t bury our dead. We didn’t count our dead. As a result of that war, veterans offices emerged due to continued on p. 26
the duties the government understood it had: to name and bury the dead, to notify next of kin, to account for, make reparations for those killed and maimed. It’s amazing how present the catastrophe of the Civil War still is. It’s part of who we are still. You don’t have to scratch the surface far to be reminded how that’s the case.

III. New York as a microcosm of America’s heritages and identity

JC: Your love affair with New York includes your eight-part, seventeen-and-a-half-hour, Emmy Award–winning series New York and, more recently, your film Nueva York at the Museo del Barrio. What was your process for exploring the city’s roots and history?

RB: In the early nineties, my colleague James Sanders, architect and writer, and I cooked up the idea of doing a long poem to New York that would go from soup to nuts. We had wonderful researchers, one of whom, Robin Espinola, is still working with me as a producer. Li-Shin Yu cut half the film and also works with me today.

There’s a story at the center of New York about how and why it came to be that very particular, very American experiment in the early seventeenth century. However much people think of New York as the most foreign of American places, it’s really the place where democracy and capitalism—not in that order—came out of the ground to survive most vibrantly, first as a commercial colony and then as a diverse one with no ideology.

New York is a four-hundred-year experiment to see if all peoples of the world can live together in a single place. When the Dutch founded an outpost, a commercial entrepôt for their global commercial empire, it quickly became the most demographically diverse place on earth because the Dutch were not founding Quaker Philadelphia or Puritan Boston but rather a business enterprise that needed workers, had labor shortages—needed to be seen to be open to everyone, even Jews fleeing the Spanish Inquisition in Brazil when they came in 1654. This powerful dynamic—that if you are nakedly, almost monomaniacally commercial, you will become diverse in your constituency.

Capitalism and democracy come boiling out of the ground at the foot of Manhattan in the early seventeenth century. This place becomes the petri dish, a laboratory experiment. How do you create a world that is itself constantly changing—new people, new ideas, new political values, new lifestyles, new problems? A place singularly unbound to any one group or to the past? How do you create a world for all of these people?

New York becomes a model of what the world is going to look like four hundred years later: very small, everybody crowded in together, everybody having to find some modus vivendi. That was the story we wanted to tell.

PART II

IV. Immigration as a two-way journey

JC: Your Nueva York film documents the waves of immigration to New York from Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Mexico.

RB: One of the most jubilant discoveries I’ve made in the last couple of years is staring us all in the face—the longest, largest, and most powerful demographic, political, social, and cultural transformation in the United States since it began is happening all around us. Roughly speaking, the Caribbean and the Southern Hemisphere is moving north. It started in a powerful way in the 1920s, picked up speed with Puerto Ricans after the Second World War. This 150-year migration has dwarfed anything that has come before it. America will become the largest Spanish-speaking country in the world sometime during this century. We’ve absorbed so many different people, nationalities, customs, but we have not become a bilingual nation as a result.

America will become a bilingual nation. This is viewed controversially. Many people feel the American dream is coming to a resounding, cataclysmic end. There’s a sense that these many different Spanish-speaking peoples who are becoming part not only of New York but of the entire United States are bringing with them the vigor and vibrancy of a culture which is changing us as much as they are being changed. I think that rather than be frightened of it, we should see it as the realization that if the American dream means anything, it’s going to be writ large in this true rendering of America as a cosmopolitan place.

The melting pot no longer goes, “everybody comes here, learns how to speak English, and America becomes wealthier per capita as a result.” It’s a vastly more complicated thing. We owe our being to people on the other side of the world, whether they’re Chinese or Spanish or African or Asian. The least attractive aspect of American reality, which we know in our bones isn’t true, is the whole idea of American exceptionalism. It’s founded on the paradox that there is no “America.” We came from other places from the very beginning. The Dutch, the slaves came from someplace else. Everybody. The Native Americans walked over the land bridge at the Bering Straits. We’re all from someplace else. And it was the degree to which we somehow spent hundreds of years imagining an essentialized America that is somehow special and different and set apart from the world—whereas, in fact, what we always knew, in another chamber of our heart, is that America has always been the “coming together” place, not the place that’s set apart.

What’s difficult and sobering about the story, which in our thirty-minute film you can scarcely touch on, is not separate from what’s ennobling. For 150 years, our hemisphere has been our labor pool, our resource pool, our sphere of domination. Only someone who resoundingly has his head in the sand and not in reality will turn away from or deny that America has had a subordinating relationship to places like Cuba, Puerto Rico, other places in the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America—places rich in resources we’ve wanted, labor we’ve needed, and
from which we benefitted tremendously by relationships with powerfully repressive regimes through whom our business interests were the chief beneficiaries.

V. Art that recognizes unseen universals

JC: To go in another direction, your Andy Warhol and Ansel Adams films both dwell, especially the Warhol film, on each artist’s childhood passions and problems. I believe both were strongly supported by their mothers, homeschooling was involved, and one or both were dyslexic or had learning disabilities.

RB: Both were hyperactive, with a little dyslexia in Ansel’s case, severely dyslexic in Andy’s case, with a kind of autism or Asperger’s also.

JC: Are you suggesting these early stigmas were important and contributed to the obsessions each had with making art? You’re recognizing individuals who are a little different.

RB: George Plimpton put it well about Warhol: “You know, Andy liked to say that he’d had thirteen nervous breakdowns by the time he was thirteen years old.” Plimpton recounts how Andy would fixate or stare at something, like a soup can, for a long time. There is something about the temporality of a certain way some people are hardwired. Without attempting to romanticize an unusual kind of hardwiring, people who are more attentive to reality see things that the rest of us don’t see until another form of obsessive-compulsive disorder, which we call art, focuses our attention, and, by bringing a concentration, a density, and sometimes even a tyrannical order, makes us look, listen with particularly acute concentration. Andy Warhol’s films were meant to be shown slightly slowed down; Warhol scholars know with certainty that was the way Andy saw the world. He might be talking to you right now and see a beautiful reflection in your eye that’s meaningless and accidental, but look at that! We have a whole set of social constructs to protect ourselves from an intensity of perceiving. It’s that naked, but in defending ourselves we also block ourselves from an awareness of the world around us. So there’s kind of a zen to Andy Warhol and a zen to Ansel Adams.

Ansel’s photography was not purely realistic. His main breakthrough came when he realized that certain filters could heighten contrasts and darken the sky, make Half Dome jump out in a certain way. It was a higher lyrical truth: the experience of this rock was heightened by the artificiality. Therefore, you could feel—as John Szarkowski, the [deceased former] head of the photography department at MoMA put it—Ansel was creating records not of the outside world but of his experience of the outside world. There’s an inner fidelity which the object you create is meant to honor. It didn’t quite look like that; it felt like that. You only get that through the same double obsessiveness: first, the rapturous obsessiveness of finding the world beautiful in ways that are almost scary. Obsession two is: I have that feeling inside me; I’m going to get it, in some form, outside me so that you, Jan, can feel what I felt. Then you’ve launched this project to build something, paint something, photograph something, and the sounding board is, “That’s it.” So, don’t say they’re disabled. Say they’re alternatively enabled—blighted, obsessed, and fantastically gifted.

All of us understand what the blessing is. Eugene O’Neill would have been better if he’d been a better dad. All of his children either killed themselves or drank themselves to death. But, at another level, he saw something and felt something very, very deeply. He couldn’t not feel it. He was cursed and blessed with that raw sensitivity. He was trapped by it. He then did the thing that was unusual. He made something you recognize, and you’re going to go, “right, that’s my family.” As was often pointed out about Shakespeare, you see in what he wrote recognizable versions of the world you see around you. The greatest artists always do that. Their creativity is in finding the deep pattern, finding the DNA of what it means to be human. They’re scientists of human experiential reality. You go, “aha”—that uncanny feeling that you’re recognizing some deep reality. For me, working on these artists is the deepest thing I can do. For all the danger of art and all the edginess of it, it’s the thing that brings us together.

VI. The Central Park of the mind

JC: So you don’t have a big list of future projects?

RB: I do. I want to do a big film about Shakespeare, surprise, surprise. When Louise Mirrer, president and CEO of the New-York Historical Society, came to me about doing a film about Nueva York for the New-York Historical Society, I thought, I’m on the board, I’m not going to get paid for it, but how can I not do it? As I looked into it, I opened doors which, through my own fault, I had not opened widely enough. It’s worth

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and wrote his magnum opus—the great novel about America—when our attention was shifting from the ocean wilderness to the western wilderness. We have Melville’s response to Hawthorne’s review of his novel in his house in Lenox. The person most important to him, Hawthorne, got it. No human being has ever written like that.

**Moby Dick** is a life-changing experience and is moving the way Shakespeare is moving. The passages that build and roll are so ravishing and the language is so exalted. That must be its own gratification. The pain of doing what he had to do—and he didn’t miss it by much. It is indubitably the great American novel. Imagine what it was like to be living in this country in 1850, 1851 on the eve of the Civil War. The plates were shifting; things were looming. Melville was so aware of it. He knew he had found a natural parable of a society full of enormous promise blighted by enormous darkness.

**JC:** The increasingly widespread quest for whale oil then is a metaphor for the oil industry’s greed for oil today.

**RB:** It’s resonant in a way that can be really surprising. You go whaling in three-masted ships. It’s not quaint and gone. It’s the same old thing.

**JC:** Laurie Anderson was influenced by *Moby Dick*, and she’s one of the many voices in your films.

**RB:** She was. She was the inevitable person to narrate our Andy Warhol film. One of our colleagues, Daniel Wolf, had the idea, and he was so right. She’s one of seven children, trained as a musician, grew up in Chicago. That narration is so demanding to read. She brought to it a real discipline: quiet focus, subtle inside things with inflection and speed. With Laurie, the idea that you had to do something twenty-two times was perfectly natural. Her clinical, idiosyncratic monotone was perfect for Andy Warhol.

**JC:** Do you cast all the voices?

**RB:** Danny Wolf also had the idea of Jeff Koons as Andy Warhol. We had actually tried two extremely gifted actors who

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Continued from p. 27

going around the barn the other way to see what’s on the other side; hopefully, you escape some shadows of your own habits.

**JC:** The cinematography for that film was so fresh—colorful, dramatic, for the most part, not focusing on the experts but on the people on the street.

**RB:** The few places where we shot for that little film—Sunset Park in Brooklyn, out in Queens, or 116th Street in East Harlem under the elevated train, which has had repeated waves of Latino migrations—the camera is seeing something real.

**JC:** Do you work with one composer?

**RB:** He has a huge range.

**RB:** He’s brought such a focus to each project. He’s toured with Turkish bands. Professionally, he’s been in many different circumstances. Like a doctor who knows his patient, he knows who we are. It’s a collaboration at the heart of the project, an alert physical openness not dominated by the brain. Movies are not made on the screen. They’re chains of events made inside people.

**JC:** I have a question about the roles of women both in your films and in your production company. *The Donner Party* was fascinating both for the harrowing story of survival and the odd fact that somehow more women than men in the party survived.

**RB:** The survival rate of the women has been thought about from many different angles: nutritional, gender studies, anthropological. There are some salient sociological realities: nineteen of the twenty-two single men died. So, if you were not part of an extended family grouping, you were not going to make it. There have been insider analyses of the higher survival rate of women that have to do with calorie expenditure during stress. It is thought, in some quarters, that the male response to stress is testosterone-related: to expend calories to try to change the circumstances you’re in. When you’re basically trapped with very little to eat, concentrated calorie expenditure is a disaster. What seems to be connected to higher estrogen levels is an alertness to what can and can’t be changed in the immediate set of circumstances. That quality, statistically found more in women than in men, may be biologically coded. Finally, women may have more subcutaneous fat or stored food supplies.

**JC:** It was surprising to me [from viewing *America, Whaling,* and the *World*] to learn that Melville’s *Moby Dick* was a failure in his lifetime and ruined his writing career.

**RB:** Right. There is such a thing as being ahead of your time, and Melville is one of the greatest examples of it. You can also be “out of time.” He started writing when the sea was a hot topic and wrote his magnum opus—the great novel about America—when our attention was shifting from the ocean wilderness to the western wilderness. We have Melville’s response to Hawthorne’s review of his novel in his house in Lenox. The person most important to him, Hawthorne, got it. No human being has ever written like that. *Moby Dick* is a life-changing experience and is moving the way Shakespeare is moving. The passages that build and roll are so ravishing and the language is so exalted. That must be its own gratification. The pain of doing what he had to do—and he didn’t miss it by much. It is indubitably the great American novel. Imagine what it was like to be living in this country in 1850, 1851 on the eve of the Civil War. The plates were shifting; things were looming. Melville was so aware of it. He knew he had found a natural parable of a society full of enormous promise blighted by enormous darkness.

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**The Civil War**

An Illustrated War by

Big Blend on Ben Blend

[Image of a book cover with the title "The Civil War"]
were both fantastic in a certain way. With Jeff, even though he doesn’t sound anything like Andy Warhol, there was a rapturous, not faux-naïf voice saying “time is, time was.” Whatever that means, Jeff got that completely. There is a different temporality. You have to really hear the words they’re saying; the microphone in these recording studios registers an attention that is the life-blood of these movies.

JC: The documentary, the visuals, and the soundtracks are riveting. I would like to talk briefly about your introducing reenactments. In your Tecumseh’s Vision: We Shall Remain film, you and Chris Eyre chose to introduce aesthetic metaphors.

RB: I am not opposed to reenactments, but I think that most of the time they don’t work. We thought long and hard about why they don’t work. To start with the conclusion we arrived at: in a movie, there has to be a ratio between things that are disclosed and held back, what the camera sees, and what is suggested. There always has to be more than what is suggested so that the imagination and the feelings of the audience become part of the shot. Then, reenactment, I’ve now discovered, is your friend.

In a Jane Campion movie, there is that ratio between what you can see and what you’re forced to imagine. What we found with the whaling movie, which has reenactments in it, is that three-masted ships are the greatest thing in the world. The idea that this thing, the ship, takes a force outside of it and redirects it—they are always poised between an abysmal depth and an enormous height. Literally and metaphorically, they’re very poetic.

JC: In addition to your mastery of a range of fields from aesthetic to acoustic, let’s talk briefly about the ethics of raising money for your films. I know you’ve been criticized for working on a film about Goldman Sachs. Do you want to talk about your relationship to that?

RB: There are circumstances where I’m very happy to be employed by somebody who’s making a corporate film. The moral question you have to ask is not the one you think it is: “Is there a ‘there’ there?” If you can answer this question in the affirmative—“Is there something in the past that accounts for Goldman Sachs’s enormous success?”—then you can do the film. Where did it come from? We started working on the film in 2006–7, and then the world changed, which made it more interesting. The history is coherent, starting with a Shakespearean rivalry between Goldman and Sachs at the time of the First World War.

JC: Another four-hour film?

RB: Right now it’s three hours; we’re three months from being done. There’s no way to make this film without inside access, and, with thirty-five thousand employees, they have a right to know their own history. They had three “near death” experiences, but they did everything right. Going forward, they have to figure out what best practices to put into place. Rarely has a brand been the best of the best of the best. The appearance of conflict of interest is there, but I was intrigued by the issues. We interviewed about fifty people. The film is mainly the textures of the people talking.

JC: Is it harder to fund your documentaries?

RB: The problem is that the funding issue for public television has always been broken, but it’s now so broken that it’s hard to see how it can be repaired. These films are not cheap to make and don’t get done quickly. The easiest part is to shoot it; the hardest part is to plan to shoot it correctly and to edit it correctly. It takes more money to do an hour of these programs than is available now. An interesting crisis is going to unfold over the next decade: we can’t subsidize ourselves. You can’t just move to someplace cheaper. The hard costs can’t be reduced. Since the recession, public-television stations can’t pay their dues; programs don’t have the fee base to continue; corporations aren’t giving as much; and viewership is down. There is a huge difference between an underwriter, who can’t dictate content, and a sponsor. With public-access television, C-span, and PBS, no ulterior motive is being served. Its model isn’t a commercial model. PBS was established by the World Congress to create broadcasting which wouldn’t otherwise be created that would reach underserved constituencies. Sadly, the trend is turning away from public television in general.

Most people I know who make films for a living are not getting rich. It’s the honest, exhilarating thrill of being able to make things that matter. Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux said that Central Park must be a place where people can breathe freely. Public television is the Central Park of the mind: close to but apart from the rapacious city, the commercial scrimmage. Public television is more embattled and more important than ever.

Jan Garden Castro is an alumna of Washington University in St. Louis. She is author of books on Georgia O’Keeffe and Sonia Delaunay and is a contributing editor to Sculpture and other humanities publications.
The Great Blond God and the Devil That Rode Him
The Rise and Collapse of Mickey Mantle

Review of
Jane Leavy, The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle and the End of America’s Childhood (HarperCollins, 2010), 456 pages with appendix, bibliography, index, and photos

…bashful, a hillbilly kid, really.
—Yankee catcher Yogi Berra, on first meeting outfielder Mickey Mantle

Mickey, what happened? Why did you do it? Why did you choose to live the life you did? Because you were not that kind of person. That was not you.
—Minor league teammate Cromer Smotherman

It was August 1961 and the sweltering heat and humidity in New York City were unbearable. My parents invested in a window air-conditioning unit, so desperate were they for something that would help my flagging concentration and get me through my ordeal. I was sitting at my desk, alone, trying to do the impossible: memorize the Haftorah portion for my bar mitzvah coming up fast in November. But instead of learning the Hebrew text, I kept peering over my right shoulder to the thick scrapbook full of clippings lying on the bed. Given my inability to concentrate and comprehend the language, my Hebrew teacher, Cantor Friedman, decided to cut a recording of the Haftorah and accompanying prayers to assist me in memorizing the strange, arcane melodies I was supposed to chant but couldn’t. The record was spinning on the turntable, but I couldn’t make out the words on the prayer book open before me or hear the sounds coming from the hi-fi. All I could do was think about one thing, the same thing thousands of boys about my age were thinking about that summer. The photograph from the Daily News I had pasted on the scrapbook cover told the story: two muscular young men in pinstriped Yankee uniforms, grinning, each with a bat slung lightly over a powerful shoulder like soldiers or vagabonds. The photo depicted the M&M boys, Roger Maris and Mickey Mantle, and their furious assault on baseball’s most hallowed record: Babe Ruth’s 60 home runs in a single season, set back in 1927. My scrapbook of the M&M boys was lying there on the bed, every single home run recorded for posterity along with clippings and photos. In a few seconds I would return to its sacred pages, temporarily putting an end to Cantor Friedman’s strange warbling.

In the end, it was Maris, not Mantle, who managed to set the new record, albeit at great cost. No asterisk was officially appended to Maris’s 61 homers, but baseball commissioner Ford Frick, a ghostwriter for Babe Ruth during the slugger’s career, insisted that Ruth’s and Maris’s home-run totals had to be listed separately as if they were distinct records. Frick argued that it took Rog 162 games to break Ruth’s record, not 154, the length of a Major League Baseball season before 1961. The frenzied chase to pass Ruth’s record cost Maris clumps of his hair and his health. He chain-smoked two packs a day to deal with the incredible pressure (and the annoying press corps) for daring to challenge Ruth’s legend.
This was how I spent the summer of 1961: following the fellows who followed the dream.

Mantle came up short, finishing with 54 homers because of yet another in the seemingly endless series of calamitous injuries that plagued him throughout his storied career. The Mick’s knee first buckled as a rookie in the 1951 World Series when he suddenly tried to stop, chasing a softly struck fly ball in shallow right-center field (the legendary Joe DiMaggio was in center, and Mantle, as always, deferred to the elder Yankee), only to catch his spikes in a four-by-four inch metal sewer drain imbedded in the Yankee Stadium sod. From that moment on, however remarkable his accomplishments might be, Mantle’s brilliance was always overshadowed by what might have been had he only managed to stay healthy. All his Bunyanesque accomplishments—the legendary “tape measure” homers, winning the Triple Crown (home runs, runs batted in, and batting average) in 1956, the twenty-one All-Star Games and seven World Series rings, 536 home runs over his lifetime—were inevitably contrasted with the even more magnificent things he might have accomplished, if only he had played on two good legs. But by losing the fabled home-run chase to Maris, Mantle’s stature actually rose higher than ever. Now, he was no longer the chronic underachiever booed throughout the late 1950s every time he struck out; now, he was transformed into Hamlet, a young prince doomed by circumstances, fate, and his own flaws to be less than he might have been. (The mythical DiMaggio, whom Mantle replaced in center field, had been retired for nearly ten years in 1961.) In defeat, the Mick became more luminous, more heroic than he would have had he set the record. It was Mantle, the lifelong Yankee (then in his tenth year as the pinstriped center fielder), whom my friends and I all rooted for to scale the hitherto unattainable record of Ruth, not the surly upstart Maris, who had come over in a trade just a year before from the lowly and despised Kansas City Athletics. Mantle’s failure made him that much more of a legend.

Jane Leavy’s *The Last Boy* is a remarkable study of this iconic figure, and far more than a book about baseball. Meticulously researched and superbly written, Leavy eschews hagiography and captures Mantle’s essence in a way that connects his life and persona with American culture in the fifties up until his death by alcohol-related liver cancer in 1995. “With his aura of limitless potential, Mantle was America incarnate,” Leavy writes. Her complex, nuanced study reveals the trajectory of our own development as a society, moving from the collectively willed innocence and naïveté of Mantle’s rookie year at the very start of the fifties, all the way to the dark cynicism of the present day, in which celebrity is both glamorized and suspect, and icons are toyed with in a kind of cat-and-mouse game: raised up in order to be ignominiously torn apart. The author accomplishes this in part through her painstaking investigation into every aspect of her subject’s life, including interviews with former teammates, friends, family,
and lovers. “I spoke with more than five hundred people…. I interviewed linguists, coaches, physicians, batboys, and clubhouse men,” Leavy writes. But what makes Leavy’s book radically different from straightforward biography is its inclusion of the author’s own first-person testimony. Interspersing sections describing her own Washington Post interviews with Mantle at a 1983 golf tournament with other episodes from her subject’s life allows her to remain simultaneously within and without her story. Instead of straightforward chronology, Leavy fragments her subject from every possible angle and vantage point, stitching together events from each period of Mantle’s life. This cubist approach to layering and juxtaposing conflicting images of Mantle’s various selves is perfectly suited to her complex, contradictory subject. Leavy combines Mantle’s outsized Olympian talent, his boyish, “aw shucks” Oklahoma good looks—even the magical number 7 on his uniform, and the deliciously mellifluous name so appropriate for the age of America’s innocence—with an abhorrent anti-mask: a foul-mouthed, drunken lout who treated women as disposable property and squandered not only his incomparable talent but his own health, destroying the lives of all those closest to him, especially his long-suffering wife, Merlyn, and his sons and daughter. The Mantle who emerges from these pages is a complex figure of tragic dignity: a man blessed by the gods with mythical talent, a luminous combination of home-run power and lightning speed whose like we have yet to see again. A wonderful teammate, Mantle the player was unselfish and caring, a man who relentlessly pushed his powerful but always fragile body beyond its limits to succeed.

At the same time she illuminates his greatness, Leavy is unsparring in revealing a dark, tormented man driven by demons of self-destruction and self-loathing. Many of these demons were inadvertently created by his father, Mutt, who drove his son relentlessly, hoping his son’s remarkable athleticism would somehow allow the boy to escape the other man’s destiny—a life in the Oklahoma mines. Mantle was named after the great catcher Mickey Cochrane, and an early death from the ubiquitous cancer that claimed Mutt and nearly all of the male Mantle clan was his birthright unless the father saved him. Yet in his rush to make sure the boy did not follow in his footsteps, Mutt unintentionally propelled the boy toward the abyss. The same compulsion that he used to force his gifted son to master the discipline of hitting from both sides of the plate (Mantle was unquestionably the greatest switch-hitter the game has ever seen) and push his body beyond its limits also unintentionally produced an emotionally crippled adult who never knew or experienced love. And it was this cycle of emotional unavailability that Mantle tragically replicated in the lives of his own children, who never saw their father’s love (or much of his attention) until the very end of his life, when it was too late. Interestingly, Mantle always spoke very highly of his father, haunted by the fear that he would die before he was forty, as Mutt did.

Mantle’s final years led to a Faustian reckoning for all his years of drunken, debauched behavior. The alcoholism and womanizing finally caught up with him and resulted in cirrhosis of the liver, which destroyed his perfect body and all-American good looks. At the same time, Mantle’s end offered redemption, allowing him to embrace the generous, warm-hearted person long buried underneath the public persona of the Mick. In his last months, after receiving a liver transplant (itself a source of controversy as some wondered if Mantle was given preference), Mantle became a spokesperson for organ donation. Although his final days must have been agonizing as he succumbed to liver cancer, coping with physical pain was the story of Mantle’s life. Only now, he accepted pain not simply as a way of helping the Yankees win baseball games but as a means of reminding other human beings of their responsibilities to assist others. Despite his image as the “Last Boy” for a generation of baby boomers who refused to grow up and who required a perfect hero to worship, nothing became Mickey Mantle’s life or personified his true heroism more than the way he walked off the field at the end of the game, the way he slipped quietly into the dugout. He was every inch a star.

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1 This practice was eventually discontinued, as most sportswriters found it unfair. No other records or statistics in Major League Baseball were distinguished according to the length of the season in which they occurred.

2 Although Mantle played eighteen seasons, he appeared in twenty-one All-Star Games because Major League Baseball authorized two All-Star Games from 1959 through 1962.

3 For a review of the latest biography of Roger Maris, see Gerald Early, “The Exile and the Fall of the Kingdom: The Anguished Heroism of Roger Maris,” Belles Lettres 10, no. 2 (January/May 2010), 18–21. This is a review of Tom Clavin and Danny Peary’s Roger Maris: Baseball’s Reluctant Hero (Touchstone, 2010).
The Fire-Breather, the Gym, and the City
How Boxer Joe Frazier Defined Philadelphia

It is well that war is so terrible, or we should grow too fond of it.
—Robert E. Lee (1862)

Anybody black who thinks Frazier can whip me is an Uncle Tom.
—Muhammad Ali (1971)

1. Boxing as War
Norman Mailer, in his 1971 Life magazine article on “The Fight of the Century” (the championship boxing match between the then undefeated, Olympic gold medalist Muhammad Ali and the then undefeated, Olympic gold medalist Joe Frazier), called him the War Machine. He was short, with stumpy, muscular arms, a stocky body, thick legs—all the signs of someone who had been a fat kid who at first had been bullied and then became a tough guy himself. As Frazier wrote in his autobiography, “Fact is by the time I was ten, eleven years old, adults in Laurel Bay [South Carolina] would steer their kids clear of me.”

There was nothing of the ideal heavyweight about him. But his dream, from watching Friday Night Fights as a boy (his family was the first in Laurel Bay to own a television), was to be another Joe Louis: “Boxing fit with the rough-and-tumble character I was.” His nemesis, Ali, had the Greek-god proportions, the proper dimensions of the modern heavyweight of the 1960s and 1970s, the looks of the boy next door all combined with the patina of political relevance and the fervent innocence of the true believer.

Joe Frazier was actually relatively small for the division where the men were growing bigger, a truck built more to be a football running back than a heavyweight. But he was fierce, relentless, always bobbing and weaving, his head in constant motion, pressing forward, looking for an opening with his deadly, stomach-smashing, liver-paralyzing left hook. (I cringed the first time I saw Frazier hit somebody during the 1964 Olympics. The blow was both so immaculately merciless and bone-breakingly hard.

“I wore a son of a bitch out with that hook,” Frazier said. I was twelve and felt utter fear when I saw it. When Ali hit someone, I was dazzled, not fearful.) Frazier sometimes left his feet to throw a punch. Shorter fighters occasionally do that. Mike Tyson did, during his halcyon days. If Ali made you think, for at least a certain portion of his career, that boxing was some form of ballet or modern dance, or a form of comic theater threaded with moments of melodrama, Frazier told you simply that boxing was war. Nothing more. Nothing less. Frazier was honest in that way; you either learned to grow fond of the sport’s brutality and savage objectives, its horrific terror, or you walked away from it, horrified or outraged or bored or all three combined. I never quite learned to grow too fond of it, never learned to love the war in the ring, but I learned to respect it immensely. I never liked Joe Frazier as I encountered him during my adolescence or young manhood, but I learned to respect him a great deal, even more so his scorched-earth brand of masculinity: fight, fuck, play, intimidate. Frazier reassured me in my doubt, rescued me from my own immature instincts, prevented me from growing too fond of war.

2. What My Sibling Knew
The first person to teach me anything about boxing was my sister, Rosalind, two years older and many years smarter. In those childhood days, I thought Rosalind simply knew and knew and knew. She told me all about the first middleweight championship bout between Sugar Ray Robinson and Carmen Basilio, which took place in September 1957. As I was only five, I had no idea what she was talking about, why the fight was important or who the fighters were or even what prizefighting was, exactly. Yet she painted a picture that I found unforgettable—compelling about the two men, the fight, and what was at stake—Robinson was old at thirty-seven and Basilio was tough—and, as I remember it, she was curiously objective in her analysis. She had good things to say about both.

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men. I wanted Basilio to win because I liked the sound of his name. She did not make fun of me for that, for my ignorance or shallowness. She thought that was not a bad reason to back a fighter. “Names mean something,” she said. She liked Basilio, too, but liked the sound of Sugar Ray better. “He’s wonder man,” she said. She was really rooting for Robinson to win the rematch a year later, as Basilio won the first bout. I said I would stick with Basilio. She said Basilio would lose because Robinson “beat him up a lot” in the first fight. “You can’t get beat up like that and win a lot of fights,” she said sagely. And she was right.

She taught me about the famous heavyweights of the era: Floyd Patterson, Ingemar Johansson, Rocky Marciano, and Sonny Liston. But she also taught me about heavyweights that only the Corinthians—the true, committed fans—followed: Eddie Machen, Thad Spencer, Doug Jones, Zora Folley, and Cleveland Williams. All of these fighters were serious contenders at a certain point in their careers before they ultimately became “dogmeat,” the expression used in Philadelphia gyms to describe a fighter who is just a stepping-stone, or a meal, for an up-and-comer or an easy notch for a champion looking to defend his title without having to train too hard.

As I grew up among black and white working-class people in Philadelphia, boxing was in the blood, in the genetic makeup of the city. Boxers loomed over the landscape, symbolic and ornamental, portentous and implike, like angels and gargoyles in the architecture. Boxing called to me from the pavement; it stalked me in the very air. My wife, Ida, on arriving in Philadelphia as a college freshman said the city “had an attitude. Hard, crowded, tough, untrusting, as if being nice was a sign of weakness. It seemed like a place where everybody lives on top of each other and everybody was at war with everybody else.” She was right. That was Philadelphia exactly, or at least the Philadelphia of the working poor, for whom boxing was a form of morality and the representation of a conceit. I hated the city with a ferocity that I felt rightly or wrongly helped to keep me alive, and I loved the city more than anything but God. Philadelphia was, during the alcoholism of my boxing passion, a sort of God for me. When I first met Ida, nothing gave me greater pride than to act exactly how she thought Philadelphians, at least black ones, acted: as if I had an attitude. Hard, crowded, tough, untrusting, as if being nice was a sign of weakness. It was an easier pupil for the lore and the gore. God, how I thought I loved boxing then, and for a good many years to follow, as if my heart were wired to the throbs of training gyms. It was the only thing in the city for me. And so it was that I entered the world of boxing in Philadelphia and followed avidly the careers of Eugene “Cyclone” Hart, Sammy Goss, Stanley “Kitten” Hayward, Bad Bennie Briscoe, Joey Giardello, Rubin “Hurricane” Carter, Gypsy Joe Harris, Willie “The Worm” Monroe, Augie Pantellas, Bobby “Bougaloo” Watts, and the rest of the mad warriors who made up the local fight scene. The Philly fighter: the guy who fought as hard in his gym workouts as he did in his actual fights, sometimes harder, because it meant something to be the king of the gym—less than being a champion, but for some not a lot less. Joe Frazier arrived sometime in 1961, as I was beginning my true boyhood education in boxing, to work for a local slaughterhouse called the Cross Brothers. The hero, not the dragon, came with the art of fire breathing, scorching and cleansing and laying bare all that was around him. He became the king of all Philly fighters. He became—this black southerner with no education, Gullah roots, a passel of children, a desire to be somebody, a sense that he had a rendezvous with destiny—everything that Philadelphia, or more precisely a significant portion of working-class Philadelphia, was and aspired to be: tough, proud, ambitious, dumb, and lucky. He wanted to eat. He could only hope that his body would last long enough for him to become a world-class athlete and make a lot of money.

3. The Will as the Sum of All Fears
When Madison Square Garden promoter Teddy Brenner asked Joe Frazier to write the figure $2.5 million on a piece of paper, Frazier couldn’t do it. Neither could Yank Durham, Frazier’s foghorn-voiced trainer. Muhammad Ali even didn’t try. Their inability to do so cost them a considerable sum of money, as they could never understand that Brenner’s offer of a percentage of the gate for their March 1971 fight was a better deal than the flat fee of $2.5 million offered by Jack Kent Cooke. Both fighters were that dumb. I don’t say that with arrogance or a sense of superiority but with a deep sense of identification and understanding. I know what it is like to look that stupid in front of white people and what it can cost. I am not trying to make the incident racial in any way, because it wasn’t. But Frazier was acutely embarrassed that he couldn’t write 2.5 million numerically and had no idea how to calculate the percentage of anything. It is unclear whether Ali was embarrassed. But both men put on a brazen front and insisted on their guarantee and pretended that it didn’t matter whether they could understand the other offer. When I heard that story I simply thought that, well, there’s a real incentive to, as a friend of mine put it, “smarten up.”

I mention this story only to put to rest the mistaken notion that Ali was smarter than Frazier. He wasn’t. Both men were equally uneducated, equally unlettered, equally uncurious about
ideas or the world. Ali was simply glib and had the glib person’s bulwark of a dogma to defend and protect him in a strange world that wanted to exploit his looks and his athletic skills in much the way brothels exploit beautiful young whores. “The Honorable Elijah Muhammad teaches . . .” could fend off a great deal, and the hypocrisy and illogic of racialism did not require great intellect to parse, only a certain sort of minimal self-awareness on the part of a black person. In looking back at the rivalry between Frazier and Ali, we are apt to denounce Ali’s derogatory name-calling, referring to Frazier as an Uncle Tom, a gorilla, a nigger, and the like. Frazier is now seen, in some ways, as a more “authentic” black than Ali, less afraid of the larger white world (as he did not need the militant bromides and grim visages of the Nation of Islam to offer him solace), less fixated about color, less hysterical about racial politics, and more genuinely rooted in black southern culture. This interpretation, most vigorously promoted by Mark Kram in Ghosts of Manila: The Fateful Blood Feud Between Muhammad Ali and Joe Frazier (2001), is a sort of corrective for all of the years of overweening, sometimes blatantly wrongheaded Ali hero-worship as the prince of boxers and the darling of black militancy and political resistance because of his stance against the Vietnam War and the draft. Frazier always thought Ali’s politics was “a bunch of bullshit.” “[If] I had been single, like Ali, I’d have had no problem serving this country if that draft board had called me. In fact, I tried to join the military when I was fourteen, but wasn’t accepted. Ours is a great country, and worth defending. What Clay [Frazier insisted on not using the name Muhammad Ali but rather Cassius Clay] did was to make himself out as a man of conscience instead of the draft dodger he was.” That’s working-class cynicism for you! But history still sides with Ali: the Vietnam War was a tragedy and a mistake, resisting the government’s will and policies is sometimes wise and sometimes morally necessary, and overly esteemng people in the military is a fairly dangerous thing to do. It is good that Frazier is getting a second and deeper look in recent years, but he still remains, even in death, something like a foil for Ali, where Frazier becomes the measure by which Ali is either an unqualified romantic hero or a qualified complex hero.

I thought Frazier would break Ali in half in their first fight in 1971, and he wanted to so badly that he nearly died as a result. Frazier won the fight—although Ali turned public sentiment against him so that even in victory Frazier did not enjoy the status or accolades a true champion should have—he hurt Ali badly in the eleventh round, nearly breaking his jaw, and knocked him down with a pile-driving left hook in the fifteenth. “But the fight had taken a toll on me. My blood pressure was dangerously high,” Frazier writes. He goes on to say that it wasn’t Ali’s punch-es that was the cause of his problem, but Frazier took the worst beating of his career up to that point in his first fight with Ali, who battered him with stinging jabs and straight right hands. Frazier went into intensive care. There were rumors circulating in Philly that he had died. He was in the hospital for weeks. Ali made a point of this whenever he discussed the fight, indicating that Frazier had been more severely beaten in the fight even though Ali never knocked him down. Frazier would have absorbed Ali hitting him with a tree trunk to win that first fight. I wanted Ali to win that fight but I respected the sheer suicidal intensity of Frazier’s hatred of his rival. “I’d rather die than lose,” some fighters have said, but Frazier came very close to doing just that, dying as a cost of winning.

By the time the two men fought again in Manila in 1975, the third and final match (Ali won the second, a twelve-round decision, in New York in 1974, when neither man was champion), I wanted very much for Frazier to win back the title but felt that Ali would break him in half—and that was nearly the case. Ali took a severe beating from which he never fully recovered, but he broke Frazier apart round by round, muscle by muscle. I was not surprised by Frazier, only that he fought as hard and long as he did as a washed-up fighter, which he was then. But his will was unvanquished, and so he fought better than he knew. But for Frazier, breathing the fire of war, absorbed with the pure hatred of one’s enemy in every syn-apse and sinew, was not enough. The homeboy didn’t make it. And he lived on the fumes of his bitterness after that. Joe Frazier was demented with how much he detested Muhammad Ali. I respected that, even when others told him he was being foolish and foul in some of the things he was saying about Ali. Why make up with Ali? Loves and kisses would only have made Frazier more completely a foil of Ali than he was. I thought there was a sort of romantic glow about his hatred, a shimmering clarity that gave Frazier’s life meaning and purpose, the grandeur of rude dis-sent. Great passion creates a kind of greatness, even as it corrupts itself with self-pity and bravado. The more alloyed the hatred, the sterner its imperfect glory. Frazier wasn’t really railing against Ali in his last years but rather against God for giving him more hatred than his body could do anything with. But Frazier was luckier than most men in that he found a profession where he could go to war against what he hated and not have to find sub-stitutes to deceive his mind and soul.

No greater representation of athletic valor hath working-class Philadelphia than Joe Frazier, no greater a symbol of the city’s compelling character. It is an ironical misfortune that perhaps only a working-class Philadelphian can truly appreciate: that the only man in his sport whose will was greater than his own, was the man he so thoroughly hated. To borrow a phrase, Frazier disagreed with something that ate him.
Washington University’s International Humanities Medal
Friday, November 16, 2012, at 5 p.m., Steinberg Auditorium

We are pleased to announce the 2012 recipient of Washington University’s International Humanities Medal: documentary filmmaker Ken Burns. The award ceremony, sponsored by the Center for the Humanities at Washington University and the University Libraries, will take place on the campus of Washington University on Friday, November 16, 2012. The medal—awarded biennially and accompanied by a cash prize of $25,000, generously supported by Dr. David and Phyllis Wilson Grossman—is given to honor a person whose humanistic endeavors in scholarship, journalism, literature, or the arts have made a difference in the world. Past winners include Turkish novelist Orhan Pamuk in 2006, journalist Michael Pollan in 2008, and novelist and nonfiction writer Francine Prose in 2010.

Ken Burns has been making documentary films for more than thirty years. Since the Academy Award–nominated Brooklyn Bridge in 1981, Burns has gone on to direct and produce some of the most acclaimed historical documentaries ever made, including The Civil War, Baseball, Jazz, Frank Lloyd Wright, Mark Twain, The War, The National Parks: America’s Best Idea, and, most recently, Prohibition.

A December 2002 poll conducted by Real Screen Magazine listed The Civil War as second only to Robert Flaherty’s Nanook of the North as the “most influential documentary of all time,” and named Ken Burns and Robert Flaherty as the “most influential documentary makers” of all time. The late historian Stephen Ambrose said of Burns’s films, “More Americans get their history from Ken Burns than any other source.” Burns’s films have been honored with dozens of major awards, including twelve Emmy Awards, two Grammy Awards, and two Oscar nominations; and in September 2008, at the News & Documentary Emmy Awards, Burns was honored by the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences with a Lifetime Achievement Award. Projects currently in production include films on the Dust Bowl, the Central Park jogger case, the Roosevelts, Jackie Robinson, the Vietnam War, and the history of country music.

Please check the Center for the Humanities website and publications for more information in the coming months.