Reviewing the Reviews
by Albert R. Vogeler

What is a review? It is an essay, short or long, summarizing and analyzing a book and discussing its importance in some category of literature. The word also denotes a periodical that prints such essays—a review journal. For almost all scholarly interests, and many vocational interests, specialized review journals devoted to the relevant new literature are at hand. Many distinguished periodicals—the Partisan Review, the Kenyon Review, the Hudson Review, the Paris Review, the Sewanee Review—have inherited the name from the nineteenth century but are devoted less to book reviewing than to essays, short stories, and poetry. And popular upscale magazines like Harper's, the Atlantic, and the New Yorker carry a limited number of reviews.

But despite the abundance of such specialized journals and literary magazines, it is clear that book reviewing for the general reader has greatly diminished during the last decade. The relentless decline of major newspapers, attributable in part to the growth of the internet, has forced cost-
cutting reductions in content and staff. Stand-alone weekly book review sections, reluctantly
deemed dispensable, have disappeared from the Washington Post, the Boston Globe, the Chicago Tribune,
the Cleveland Plain Dealer, the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, the Minneapolis Star Tribune, the San Diego
Union-Tribune, the San Francisco Chronicle, Newsday, and the Los Angeles Times. Their relatively few book
reviews are carried by other sections of the paper along with entertainment and the arts.

Only The New York Times stands firm with a diminished, but still robust, Sunday book
review of about 30 pages and a staff of a dozen. But of the seven hundred to one thousand new
books it receives every week it can review only about twenty per issue. Even counting its single daily
book reviews, some written by the formidable Michiko Kakutani, it covers only a handful of
mainstream titles and for others offers only short squibs. It can “make” a book with a front-page
review. And for half a century the Times Best Seller lists have been the measure of a book’s
popularity, if not of its quality.

Can the “common reader” hope to find a periodical more comprehensive than The New
York Times Book Review? The answer is unequivocally Yes. There are three, the New York Review of
Books, the London Review of Books, and the Times Literary Supplement. Their styles and agendas differ,
but all are cultural powerhouses.

When The New York Times ceased publication early in 1963 due to a printing strike, several
publishers, journalists, and critics decided to replace its rather stodgy book section with an
independent and vigorous review, published twice a month, embodying their own literary and
political values. They featured the extended essay as the defining characteristic of the New York
Review, an essay centered on an important new book but also exploring larger relevant issues. (This
of course was a revival of the long topical essays in great Victorian periodicals such as the Edinburgh
Review, Westminster Review, and Fortnightly Review.) With length comes the need for a compelling style
to hold the reader’s attention. For forty-five years the New York Review has attracted and cultivated
some of the most fluent writers, as well as significant thinkers, of their time. And the editors found
in David Levine a portrait cartoonist who provided thousands of distinctive images of these writers.

The names Saul Bellow, W.H. Auden, Alfred Kazin, Harold Bloom, John Updike, Norman
Mailer, Edmund Wilson, Mary McCarthy, William Styron, Gore Vidal, Joan Didion, and Truman
Capote suggest the range of literary talent deployed in the NYRB over the years. Indeed, so many
authors were regularly discussing other authors that critics spoke of the “New York Review of Our
Books.” But the political dimension of culture has always been co-equal and deeply involved with
the literary. Hannah Arendt, Susan Sontag, Noam Chomsky, Garry Wills, Ronald Dworkin, Vaclav
Havel, Andrei Sakharov, Isaiah Berlin, and Tony Judt represent some of the voices that gave the
NYRB a strongly left-liberal stance, solidarity with dissidents, and a moral, philosophical, and
historical depth.

The New York Review’s vigorous stands against the Vietnam War, Richard Nixon, the Iraq
War, and George W. Bush, together with a preoccupation with nuclear weapons, civil rights, and
foreign policy, have made it a major political organ in America. But, according to its critics, it has
thereby exceeded its proper role as a book review, and they have also derided it as an inbred New
York, or East Coast, or Ivy League elitist coterie. But the excellence of its writing and research, its
serious analytical manner, and the qualifications of its writers are all undeniable. It has been called
“one of the great institutions of intellectual life here or elsewhere.”

Across the Atlantic, the London Review’s beginnings resembled those of the NYRB: it
emerged from a strike that suspended The Times of London in 1980. Its aim was similar: to offer
substantial authoritative essays on the wider significance of important new books. And it engaged a
comparable array of distinguished writers and critics, mostly British. Though it reviews many books
with political themes, it is not strenuously committed to a political viewpoint, nor does it
consistently pursue current controversial issues, as does the NYRB. Its book advertising, like that of
its New York counterpart, provides a valuable overview of the best academic and commercial
publishing. The London Review offers Londoners something more than twenty-six issues a year: a
cozy well-stocked bookshop welcoming browsers, with an adjacent bakery, near the British
Museum.

The Times Literary Supplement (now called TLS) is the godfather of existing book reviews,
having been founded in 1902 as a supplement to The Times of London and becoming an independent
weekly in 1914. While its reputation as a source of responsible and quotable judgments on books
grew, so did the frustration of readers with its policy of anonymity for its reviewers—“Who
said that about my book?” Finally, in 1974, one of its most creative editors, John Gross, allowed the reviewers
bylines. The TLS has since identified them more fully at the back of each issue, and also lists all
twenty-seven of its editors by their subject specialties. It is an impressive and heavily academic
roster, reminding us of the immense range of topics under review. The TLS has recently tried to
erase any vestige of its reputation for dull staid sobriety by means of allusive and often punning
titles. The Nobel Prize winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa has called it “the most serious,
authoritative, witty, diverse and stimulating cultural publication in all the five languages I speak.”

These three iconic periodicals generally favor nonfiction over fiction. They celebrate and
articulate not only the 500-year old transatlantic literary culture of the English language but also a
Western literary culture 2,500 years old. All three have consistently made a point of honoring the
achievements of the ancient world through the books they review and the scholars they employ.
Similarly, all three offer essays inspired by new books on the life, literature and culture of the Middle
 Ages, the Renaissance, and the Enlightenment. Victorians, Modernists, and our own
contemporaries are ever-present in their pages. Politics and philosophy, history and anthropology,
religion and science, technology and psychology, art and music are inevitably encompassed in their
essays. They represent the observations of some of the most articulate observers of our time. The
NYRB, LRB, and TLS are, in effect, journals of ideas. This is more than can be said of mere “book
reviews.”

The ultimate value of these three periodicals lies in something more than their currency,
quality, and comprehensiveness. Though the internet can be seen as the enemy of book reviewing
(in the case of newspapers), it is also provides a new dimension to the value of reviews by means of
archiving. Periodicals live, accreting, through time. So to have the complete contents of these three
book reviews instantaneously available and searchable on the internet, which can now be done, is a
great gift to scholarship.
BOOK SALE CENTER REPORT

By

June Pollak

With the start of the spring semester, the Patrons and Emeriti Book Sale Center reopened, fully restocked. We sell used books, both from donations and excess volumes from the CSUF Library. Our very low prices of $1, $2, or $3 per book are set to help the CSUF students and others purchase books which are usually extremely expensive. All proceeds from sales are designated to purchase books for the Library, vitally important in this era of drastically reduced state funding.

Our hours for the spring semester are 11 to 3 on Tuesdays, 11 to 7 on Wednesdays, and 12 to 3 on Thursdays. Please visit us regularly. We are open throughout the fall and spring terms, but not during intersession or summer.

As always, we need your donations to keep the shelves stocked in L 199. Please call 657-278-2182 and ask for Joy Lambert or Lorraine Seelig in order to make arrangements. If you are interested in joining the Patrons and Emeriti volunteers working in the Book Sale Center, please call June Pollak at 949-661-0463.

Book Sale Center
Annual Sale
Save the date for the Annual Sale in late April or early May. The Patrons website will be updated soon with details.

Anyone wishing to make a donation of books to the Book Sale Center may call 657-278-2182. Joy Lambert, who is in charge of Collection Development, will arrange to have a library employee meet the donor at the loading dock or arrange to have a large donation of books picked up at the donor's home.

Activities Report

Lis Leyson and Howard Seller

This spring, the Patrons of the Library will host two distinguished speakers whose accomplishments are expansive and diverse. We are pleased to offer the opportunity for members and guests to hear these two eminent scholars.

Robert Scheer will be the second speaker in the 2010-2011 Patrons Lecture Series.
His presentation is on Saturday, March 12, 2011. Mr. Scheer is the editor in chief of the online magazine and blog Truthdig.com, which he co-launched in November of 2005 and is a senior lecturer in communications at the University of Southern California as well as a panel member on KCRW’s Left, Right, and Center and a frequent guest on other news programs.

Mr. Scheer graduated from the City College of New York and has done graduate work at Syracuse University, U. C. Berkeley, Yale, and Stanford. He began his career as a free-lance reporter before joining the Los Angeles Times in 1976. While with the Times, Mr. Scheer reported on a variety of topics for the next 17 years and was nominated eleven times by the Times for a Pulitzer Prize. In 1993, he left the Times as a full time reporter but continued to contribute a weekly op-ed column for the next twelve years.

Mr. Scheer is author of nine books. His most recent is The Great American Stickup: How Reagan Republicans and Clinton Democrats Enriched Wall Street While Mugging Main Street. Copies will be available at his presentation.

Timothy Naftali, Director of the Richard Nixon Library and Museum, will be the speaker at the annual meeting of the Patrons on Saturday, June 4, 2011. Dr. Naftali earned degrees from Yale, Johns Hopkins, and Harvard and has taught history at several universities.

His interest in research led him to the position of Director of the Presidential Recordings Program, where he coordinated the transcribing and annotating of meetings and telephone conversations secretly recorded by Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Dr. Naftali also served as consultant to the Nazi War Crimes and Japanese Imperial Government Records Interagency Working Group and to the National Commission on Terrorists Attacks Upon the United States.

Dr. Naftali writes for scholarly as well as general audiences. His articles appear in online publications, newspapers, magazines, and journals. His books include One Hell of a Gamble: Khrushchev and Kennedy 1958-1964 (with Aleksandr Fursenko) and Blind Spot: The Secret History of American Counterterrorism. His most recent book, George H. W. Bush, is part of The American President series.

Please join us on March 12 and June 4 at 2 p.m. in room 130 of the Pollak Library. The events are free.

MEMBERSHIP REPORT

By

Nancy Holmes

Membership in the Patrons of the Library offers individuals privileges at the Pollak Library as well as discounts at Titan shops, Marriott CSU Ha’ Penny Pub and CSUF performing arts and athletic events. In these times of continuing state budgetary problems, your membership in the Patrons of the Library is of great import as the Patrons provide significant support services to the Library. Said services are book purchases, periodical subscriptions, activities, lectures, operation of the Book Sale Center in cooperation with the Cal State Fullerton Emeriti, plus significant projects such as the cataloging of the Roy V. Bowell Collection of the History of Cartography.
Please maintain your membership in our beneficial organization and urge colleagues, friends, and family to join us. Our website, www.library.fullerton.edu/patrons, identifies events, activities and other relevant information. Also, please feel free to contact me at 714.738.5590 or via e-mail at nancylynnholmes103@gmail.com should you need any additional information.