



The Patrons' Post

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California State University Fullerton**

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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 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 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.



. (Photo by Ralph Orlowski/Getty Images)

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.

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**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.



(Photo by Scott McIntyre-Pool/Getty Images)

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 nancylynholmes103@gmail.com should you need any additional information