

Give Me That Old Time Criticism

Joan Acocella makes quick, thrilling work of her subjects.

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Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints

By Joan Acocella, Pantheon, 2007

The cultural critic Joan Acocella is often the first to identify some aspect of our contemporary society that we may have too easily passed by as obvious or ordinary, but which in the hands of a gifted writer becomes fodder for a highly intelligent meditation. There are things we couldn't even see until she told us to look for them. Her newest book, *Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints*, is a collection of thirty-one essays, most from *The New Yorker* and *The New York Review of Books*, written during the past fifteen years, profiles of writers ranging from Saul Bellow and Simone de Beauvoir to Marguerite Yourcenar and Stefan Zweig, and dancers and choreographers such as Nijinsky, Balanchine, Jerome Robbins, and Bob Fosse. There are also two genuine saints, Joan of Arc and Mary Magdalene (and yes, dear reader, you've counted right: there is one extra essay, a lagniappe she calls "Writer's Block").

When Acocella was selecting the essays for the book, she thought she would choose those she personally liked best and wanted "to send out into the world again." As she made her selection, she found a single theme emerging from the lives of all the persons she had written about, that of "difficulty, hardship." However, she also realized that her interpretations differed from the usual biographical trope, that of the creative person who overcomes an unhappy childhood of poverty, deprivation, and abuse before evolving into the major artist, writer, poet, or painter. She is not interested in the story of "early pain, conquered and converted into art"; she is intrigued by "the pain that came with the art-making, interfering with it," and the ways in which the artists dealt with it.

For me, the most sparkling essay in a collection filled with gems is "A Hard Case," about Primo Levi, the author and Auschwitz survivor. Acocella's point of departure is Carole Angier's biography, and she has serious reservations as well as outright disagreements with her portrait of this complex man, a chemist as well as a novelist, who may or may not have committed suicide (he was found at the bot-

tom of the stairwell in his Turin apartment building, but whether he deliberately jumped or accidentally fell is not known). In the process of expressing her reservations, Acocella provides a model of how a biography should be reviewed: not by the simple retelling of the facts of the life but by interpreting what the author tells us and questioning why she adopts that particular perspective for her telling.

Acocella finds out all there is to know about her subjects, so when she offers better, alternative readings of Levi's life, her reader does not hesitate to agree that they are far more engaging, as well as more plausible, than those in the book under review. Just one example: Angier, writing about how Levi was a blushing and bumbling teenager around girls, assumes an air of existential angst, wondering, "What was this.... Can one ever say?" To which Acocella replies acidly: "I can say. Has Angier never heard of geeks?"

Acocella's essays offer the reader short courses in everything from philosophy and physical chemistry to schizophrenia and clinical depression. Acocella is especially good at uniting a body of disparate knowledge into the cohesive unity of a satisfying biographical portrait. She does this most excitingly in "After the Ball Was Over," her essay on Nijinsky. In her telling, whatever Nijinsky the man and artist was in his own life, he has become both legend and "cultural fact" because of how his personal story coincides with and informs what she calls "certain critical issues" within ballet. Nijinsky's career as a dancer and choreographer was short: he had a breakdown when he was 28 and was subsequently confined in mental institutions for the rest of his life. Acocella, who had earlier declared that Nijinsky's is "not the kind of story that one wants to see turned over to a psychobiographer," nevertheless admires a biography by Peter Ostwald, a professor of psychiatry, whom she credits with writing "less a psychobiography than a psychiatric history." She finds no Freudian origins of childhood trauma for a psychobiographer to unearth in Nijinsky's life, for nothing is "latent" and everything is wide open and easily seen. "Never," she writes, "has such a quiet man led such a lurid life." And for her, what matters is how this "tongue-tied intro-

vert" turned a sad and tawdry life into brilliant art.

Turning a saint's life into art might make for dull reading, especially when the saint is the noble and fearless Maid of Orleans, Joan of Arc. French folk tales and fables have always depicted her striding into battle with virginity intact, but then along came Luc Besson, with his 1999 movie *The Messenger: The Story of Joan of Arc*. In it, the saint we used to know as the "mystic and national hero" suddenly morphed "in keeping with the times...[into] a victim of post-traumatic stress disorder." In her review of the film, Acocella provides a chronological history of what seems like all the literature and numerous films about Joan since she was burned at the stake. She calls Cecil B. DeMille's epic in which the opera star Geraldine Ferrar, "neither young nor thin," plays Joan, "a milestone in the history of cinematic grandiosity yoked to cinematic realism."

On Broadway, where everyone from Maxwell Anderson to George Bernard Shaw was writing plays about her, "you couldn't get Joan of Arc to shut up." In our time, there are "Johannic studies" and "Johannic-reception studies" in universities, where the saint falls into the "paradigm of abyssal indeterminacy," according to a scholar Acocella drolly quotes. Acocella doesn't ignore religion, and follows with a list of the "devout [who] have not deserted the field," and who venerate the saint everywhere from churches to the internet. Madonna and Sinead O'Connor have both expressed interest in playing the maid, but Acocella believes that Joan, "small and fleet, brave and glad," will always manage to elude them, just as she has always eluded all others who sought to define her for their own theories or points of view.

"Small and fleet, brave and glad" strikes me as a description of how Acocella approaches cultural criticism. Like the Joan she writes about, she, too, exhibits the quality of slipping through the net that others weave so dutifully, as they cite the requisite facts and events of life in order to codify and contain. In these essays, Acocella eludes the obvious and avoids the expected. She astonishes her reader with the force of a judgment or an impression that is—to use cli-

chés she would never permit—off the wall, outside the box. She has the unique quality of gently engaging her reader to go along on her critical quest as she arrives at her own interpretations of how the life was lived, and then: Whammo! Time after time, she had me saying, “Now why didn’t I think of that?” And this, I think, will be the thrill she imparts to all her readers.