
Of War and Wharton, Starbucks and 'Peanuts'

By MARK LASSWELL
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Over the past year, book reviewers for the Journal have assessed work on a daunting array of topics, reflecting the wide-ranging interests of our readers. Books reviewed in these pages have included titles about the "quants" who practice quantitative analysis on Wall Street; a Tabasco-fueled family fortune; American songwriting's golden age; email etiquette; the racehorse Kelso; Peter Drucker's management philosophy; the publicity machine of the Hollywood studio system; the Poincaré Conjecture in mathematics; the building of the Taj Mahal; and riots over rival Shakespeare productions in New York in 1849 that left 23 dead. We have reviewed fiction, gastronomy books, children's books and titles in that occasionally entertaining, sometimes nourishing category known as "airplane reading." But of all the books reviewed in these pages, these are the dozen that we found the most memorable of 2007:

David Halberstam's posthumously published "**The Coldest Winter**," about the Korean War, was "a fitting memorial to his exceptional talents as a reporter and a writer," wrote our reviewer, Peter R. Kann. "Mr. Halberstam covers all four bases of a military-history home run: He sets the conflict in its political and geopolitical context; perceptively profiles the era's leading statesmen and scoundrels; analyzes the many strategic and tactical miscalculations by all parties; and provides gripping descriptive narratives of battles and the men who fought them. There are few heroes in this book, other than the men in combat."

Reviewer Edward Kosner described Leo Lerman as "the last of the Conde Nast mandarins -- an industrious aesthete with a lapidary eye for the latest nugget of high culture that could be polished up for the slick pages of Vogue." But Lerman also kept a journal, covering five decades, that was edited by his longtime assistant, Stephen Pascal, and brought out under the title "**The Grand Surprise**." Mr. Kosner wrote that Lerman "knew everybody in the incestuous world of the arts and the rich in Manhattan and beyond, entertained most of them, loved many of them, and gossiped about all of them" -- the names include Maria Callas, Truman Capote, Ernest Hemingway, Greta Garbo, Norman Mailer and Marlene Dietrich. The book itself was a grand surprise, Mr. Kosner



wrote, "a superb secret history of the culture of our times."

"Hermione Lee has done a back-breaking amount of research" wrote reviewer Barbara Amiel about the author's "**Edith Wharton**," a biography of the novelist who helped define New York manners at the turn of the 20th century. Ms. Lee "gets all of Wharton -- writer, serious gardener, cutting-edge interior designer, war correspondent and intrepid traveler -- between covers in spite of Edith's lifelong determination that no one ever would. Thus Wharton's irritating habit of retrieving her letters and barbecuing them. She should have known that there's no defense against a determined biographer."

Long before he signed on as President Bush's chief of staff (2001-06), Andrew Card learned about life behind a food counter when he worked at a McDonald's restaurant to support his young family while he was in college. Mr. Card brought that background to bear in reviewing "**My Secret Life on the McJob**," business consultant Jerry Newman's account of going undercover at a variety of fast-food chains to assess their management practices. "He offers entertaining anecdotes and wonderful descriptions of the personalities working at every station of responsibility," Mr. Card wrote, "from the fry guy to the consistent MVP, the 'jack of all trades.' Mr. Newman writes with respect about the tasks that too many see as menial but that must be met with efficient excellence in order to satisfy the demands of corporate brand-owners, franchise holders and hungry, impatient customers." Mr. Newman's book, according to Mr. Card, "offers many lessons that would be helpful to managers in almost every segment of business -- or even government."

Sir Harold Evans reviewed two books that were stand-outs of 2007, "**John Osborne**," John Heilpern's biography of the "Look Back in Anger" playwright, and "Fathers and Sons," Alexander Waugh's "autobiography of a family." Mr. Heilpern captured the many contradictions of Osborne, who was capable of great sweetness and astonishing cruelty, "a radical who hated change; a working-class enemy of class privilege who despised the sweating proletariat," Sir Harold wrote. The book is "prodigiously researched, spiced with revelation and gossip without ever losing a genial authority, and often emotionally moving. This is the best literary biography I have read in a long time."

Although many readers might pick up "Fathers and Sons" hoping to learn more about novelist Evelyn Waugh, this account of five generations of Waugh men offers much more, according to Sir Harold. Alexander Waugh, Evelyn's grandson, "has plundered the archives of print and memory with zest. He has threaded the character studies into an absorbing narrative; he is often funny and always direct. He keeps nothing from us: sex, money, dishonesty, greed, envy, the crippled emotions of some very clever people. It is all here."

At 63, Michael Gates Gill, a father of five, found himself out of work, divorced and nearly broke -- not quite what he expected when he was growing up on Manhattan's Upper East Side, the son of New Yorker writer Brendan Gill. But then Mr. Gill found a life raft in the form of an unlikely job, as he relates in the memoir "**How Starbucks Saved My Life**." Reviewer Barbara D. Phillips wrote: "Mr. Gill suspects that his parents, who had died before his Starbucks employment began, would not have been pleased with his new life as a working stiff in a baseball cap and apron. But surely Brendan Gill would have appreciated a tale well told. In the best tradition of The New Yorker, 'How Starbucks Saved My Life' is one great read."

Novelist Penelope Lively's "**Consequences**," the story of three generations of British women in the mid-20th century, is a "wonderful" addition to her oeuvre, said reviewer Brooke Allen. Ms. Lively writes in the tradition of "close attention to characterization and psychological nuance with an underlying humor and sense of proportion" -- a literary approach that is "dwindling . . . sadly," Ms. Allen wrote, which makes Ms. Lively "all the more worth treasuring."

"There are at least 14,000 books on Abraham Lincoln, and even his greatest enthusiasts won't claim to have read a tenth of them. Do we need another? Yes, indeed. What Andrew Ferguson offers in '**Land of Lincoln**' is the geography of enthusiasm itself." So began reviewer Ernest W. Lefever, discussing Mr. Ferguson's exploration of and meditation on everything Lincoln. The author "engages in leisurely conversations with historians, boosters, memorabilia collectors . . . visits memorials, educational centers, theme parks and kitschy shops. In short, he pursues Lincoln by sounding out the Lincoln in American lives." The result, Mr. Lefever said, is a "vivid, beautifully written book."

As Luuk van Middelaar noted in his review of "**Infidel**," author Ayaan Hirsi Ali has made an extraordinary journey: from Somalia-born, hijab-wearing member of the Muslim Brotherhood to former member of the Dutch Parliament and prominent critic of Islam. Ms. Hirsi Ali's account of this life -- including her collaboration on a film about Islamic repression with director Theo van Gogh, who was then murdered by a Muslim extremist -- is "a lucid and captivating autobiography," Mr. van Middelaar wrote. "As 'Infidel' makes clear, Ms. Hirsi Ali plans to keep asking questions that many do not want to hear."

Actor Edward Herrmann, who has directed Noël Coward's "Private Lives," found himself surprised over and over again by "**The Letters of Noël Coward**." The playwright, songwriter and performer certainly displayed the expected cleverness in his correspondence, Mr. Herrmann said, but Coward could also be "very serious indeed." This was especially the case during World War II, when Coward chafed at being unable to rebut critics -- who faulted him for not contributing to the war effort -- by divulging his clandestine work for the British government. Barry Day, the editor of the collection, did a "superb job," Mr. Herrmann wrote, giving us "a portrait of a complex, charming, driven, serious and, frankly, courageous artist."

"Calvin and Hobbes" creator Bill Watterson is known for keeping a low public profile, especially since retiring the comic strip in

1995, but he agreed to review for the Journal David Michaelis's "**Schulz and Peanuts**," a biography of Charles Schulz. The "Peanuts" comic strip made such "a deep impression" on him when he was young, Mr. Watterson said, that he grew up intending to become "the next Charles Schulz." Not that Schulz's life was something to aspire to: "He was able to expose and confront his inner torments through his creative work," Mr. Watterson recounted, "making insecurity, failure and rejection the central themes of his humor. Knowing that his miseries fueled his work, he resisted help or change." Mr. Michaelis "has done an extraordinary amount of digging," Mr. Watterson wrote, "and has written a perceptive and compelling account of Schulz's life. This book finally introduces Charles Schulz to us all."

One of the pleasures of greeting the new year is the knowledge that it will introduce us to a fresh array of books that will -- with their ability to entertain, inform, explain or inspire -- distinguish themselves from all the rest in 2008.

• *Mr. Lasswell is the Journal's deputy books editor.*