

Past Masters

Three short reviews in praise of neglected books

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Redeeming Memoir

I re-read Geoffrey Wolff's memoir, *Duke of Deception*, reissued by Vintage in 1990, the way I re-read *Pride and Prejudice* and Robertson Davies's Deptford Trilogy (especially *Fifth Business* and *World of Wonders*). I re-read them all every two years and none of them fails me. I read them for rapture's sake, for the swooning over the sentence, and, in all three cases, for the brilliant, gimlet-eyed but not uncompassionate insight contained in the very good sentence.

You may have read Tobias Wolff's version of the Wolff family in *This Boy's Life*, a fine novel. His older brother Geoffrey's version is so good, I teach it in my fiction workshops. It helps aspiring writers see that it is not the fact, or even the truth, that makes the story; it's the telling. It's the sentence and the thought that carry the facts to a bigger, wider place than "It really happened," or "I cannot make an interesting story out of what really happened without changing the facts." Geoffrey Wolff spares no one, least of all himself, and every chapter bleeds laughter and tears. Really, a hell of a book.

—Amy Bloom

A Frank Assessment

We live in a society, Frank Donner warned twenty-five years ago, "programmed for fear. Just as fear is packaged to stimulate consumption, it is marketed to promote conformity." *The Age of Surveillance*, published in 1980, is now (unconscionably) out of print. Donner wrote it—in meticulous and witty detail—"to provide an x-ray of the domestic spying apparatus erected out of fear of foreign communism, and to trace its decades-long metastasis into a network of national secret police forces devoted to wiretapping, infiltrating, and disrupting dissidents like Martin Luther King and John Lennon." Over a career extending from the McCarthy era through Watergate, Donner helped bring the spy machine down, and in *The*

Age of Surveillance he put that history on exhibit and reinvented it as a theory of political repression.

Donner is essential to understanding today's constitutional crisis. Our era's extralegal wiretaps and extralegal interrogations all amount to direct attacks on Donner's civil libertarian legacy; old Nixon and Ford retainers like Dick Cheney have never stopped yearning for the era before the Freedom of Information Act. And beyond laying out the facts, Donner draws on sociology, history, and psychology to provide the most penetrating roadmap to how and why authoritarians can flourish in democratic America. This Jeremiah warned of the potency of "the twin myths...of an all-powerful internal subversive enemy and a permanently endangered national security, which deny vitality to protected freedoms."

In that sense, Frank Donner is a civil-libertarian cousin to Rachel Carson, and *The Age of Surveillance* deserves a space on the shelf right next to Carson's *Silent Spring*. People mistakenly read Carson only as the founding prophet of environmentalism, but her deepest subject was the corrosion of democracy. By whose decree, Carson demanded to know, was the policy unloosed that "sets in motion these chains of poisonings? The decision is that of the authoritarian temporarily entrusted with power; he has made it during a moment of inattention by millions." Back-to-back readings of Donner and Carson deliver a wake-up slap to our slumbering sense of reason. Guantanamo Bay and global warming are two sides of one rotten coin.

—Bruce Shapiro

A Violent Act of Articulation

"Every time I begin work on a new production," writes theater director Anne Bogart, in *A Director Prepares*, "I feel as though I am out of my league; that I know nothing and have no notion how to begin and I'm sure someone else should be doing my job, someone assured, who knows what to do, someone who is really a professional. I feel unbalanced, uncomfortable and out of place. I feel like a sham.

In short, I am terrified."

But Bogart, artistic director of New York's groundbreaking SITI theater company, argues in favor going head first into the awful territory of embarrassment, and even terror, in hopes of arriving at "the violent act of articulation." She quotes Goethe: "Boldness has genius, power and magic in it." Hers is not a swashbuckling boldness: sometimes you charge into the darkness stumbling over your shoes, like Bozo. Bogart and her actors start every day with a strenuous regimen of physical and mental exercises: if you're going to be diving into the unknown—or into the floorboards of the stage—you've got to build the kind of muscle that resists broken spirits and bones. Then you've got to plunge: "Do your homework," says Bogart, "and know when to stop doing your homework."

And learn your history. Bogart urges U.S. stage artists to understand how the facts of America's theater past still influence what happens on stages in the twenty-first century. "[I]n 1778, with the Colonial forces fighting for life and liberty," she reminds us, "the Federal Congress adopted a law prohibiting theater in any form." Less than a century later, the juicy, rowdy, ecumenical impulse of vaudeville emerged at the end of the Civil War and barreled all the way to the nineteen-thirties. By then the country had amassed a staggering wealth of performance capital, from Bessie Smith to George S. Kaufman to Jelly Roll Morton to Martha Graham. But after World War II, those politicians who had long resented the New Deal's support for socially engaged art started feeding meat to that old-time American distrust of theater, and the beast went wild: Joe McCarthy and HUAC began wiping out the careers of many leaders of these radically new American performance styles. McCarthyite paranoia about collectivism promoted what Bogart calls an "arrogant culture of the self" in which the scope of theater rarely got broader than "you, me, our apartment and our problems." That legacy of safe, narrow focus and timid, bankable choices is still very much with us: anyone glancing at the *New York Times* theater listings might conclude that twenty-first-century American directors

are anesthesiologists rather than artists.

Bogart's theater requires both artist and audience to be wide awake and ready to take risks together. "Every great journey," she says, "begins with disorientation." As navigator rather than know-it-all, the director needs to feel caught off guard by a provocative play just as much as any first-time ticket buyer, and yet have the nerve to steer the course. "In the midst of frightening uncertainty," Bogart admits, "I try to lean into the moment and point clearly."

—Margaret Spillane