



Remembering Nat Hentoff, A 20th Century Liberal Lion

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“I would have not known I had been excommunicated had it not been for the news reports,” Nat Hentoff recalls in the opening line of his marvelous memoir, "Boston Boy." Hentoff attributes his symbolic ouster from the faith by three Massachusetts rabbis in 1982 to his opposition to Israel's invasion of Lebanon, and he revels in it. An instinctive civil libertarian, a natural-born dissenter, Hentoff only regrets having missed the chance to appear before the rabbis to describe his “life as a heretic.”

Most people, I suspect, like to imagine they'd stand on principle at the risk of being excommunicated from their tribe, or otherwise ostracized and maligned; Hentoff actually did so. A champion of free speech and racial justice, among other rights and liberties, an atheist, anti-authoritarian skeptic of government power, he alienated liberal allies years ago by aligning with the Catholic church in opposing abortion rights. He assailed the progressive embrace of censorship, criticized the ACLU's drift from first principles, and, toward the end of his life, this former ACLU national board member was affiliated with the libertarian CATO Institute; his columns could be found on right wing websites.

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Hentoff was no right-winger; his principles were essentially the same. He remained, I think, a 20th century liberal lion, not a 21st century progressive, which is only one reason he'll be sorely missed.

Jazz lover and eminent jazz critic, columnist and prolific writer of fiction and non-fiction books, Hentoff was a kindly curmudgeon, quick to praise and to extend aid to other writers, lawyers and activists. His Village Voice columns often credited other people's work and their contributions to rights and liberties. He was committed to principles and causes, not to his own aggrandizement, and he was unusually generous to other writers.

I owe him much. Thanks to Nat Hentoff's support, I began my career freelancing book reviews for the Village Voice. I had no personal connection with him at the time; we'd never met. I was just a young writer who had the temerity to ask for his help, and he gave it. I hope I've earned it in the years since. Getting to know him was an honor and perhaps most of all, an education.

Look for his columns and criticism. Read his books. Remember him.