

[« Back](#) | [Print](#)

Nonfiction Reviews

By -- *Publishers Weekly*, February 22, 2010

The Rule of Empires: Those Who Built Them, Those Who Endured Them, and Why They Always Fall Timothy H. Parsons. Oxford Univ., \$29.95 (528p) ISBN 978-0-19-530431-2

Unhappy empires are, in crucial respects, all the same—and happy ones don't exist, according to this incisive study. Historian Parson (*The British Imperial Century, 1815–1914*) surveys imperial regimes from Rome's rule in ancient Britain to Spain's in Peru, Britain's in India and Kenya, and Nazi Germany's occupation of France. He identifies a single mercenary purpose behind these diverse examples: to loot the wealth and exploit the labor of conquered peoples. At the same time, he argues, stable rule requires the cooperation and assimilation of imperial subjects, which sets up a fatal contradiction—as an empire co-opts its subjects, it becomes harder to profitably exploit them, and the financial underpinnings of empire crumble. Challenging neo-imperialists like Niall Ferguson, the author insists that there is no such thing as benign empire; he fingers Britain's allegedly “liberal” empire as one of the most dysfunctional, because of its racist refusal to assimilate its populace. Parsons draws together an enormous amount of scholarship into a lucid, cold-eyed analysis of the mechanics of imperial control. The result is a compelling critique of empires past and of their latter-day nostalgists. (*June*)

★ **Sissinghurst, an Unfinished History: The Quest to Restore a Working Farm at Vita Sackville-West's Legendary Garden** Adam Nicolson. Viking, \$27.95 (336p) ISBN 978-0-670-02173-4

Nicolson, grandson of poet Vita Sackville-West and diplomat Harold Nicolson—best known, perhaps for being Virginia Woolf's lover—grew up in the 1960s at Sissinghurst, the ruined castle where Sackville-West created her renowned gardens in the 1930s. The author's father Nigel gave the estate to the National Trust in 1967, and when Nicholson came back to live there after his father, Nigel, died in 2004, he embarked on a campaign to “revive a landscape that had forgotten its past.” It's through this lens of love for its past and passion for its future that Nicholson relates the story of his quest, embedding it in a history of Sissinghurst, beginning in its origins in clay, forest, and pastures and the “custom of Kent”—a unique culture of self-reliant men and women who depended on the land rather than on a lord—following through its transformation into a prison for French prisoners of war in the 18th century and its 20th-century revitalization by Vita and Harold. Nicholson's love of language is equal to his love of the land, and his poetic prose evokes the richness of the landscape he strives to save. (*May*)

Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle over Black Family Life from LBJ to Obama James T. Patterson. Basic, \$26.95 (288p) ISBN 978-0-465-01357-9

Despite the author's caveat, “this is not a biography,” it is the life story (and afterlife story) of a document commonly named “The Moynihan Report”—its conception as a memo, its delivery in 1965 as a report entitled “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Moynihan, and its independent, later development. Bancroft Prize-winning historian Patterson (*Grand Expectations*) reviews the report's perspectives on “the woes of lower-class, inner-city black families”—at the center of which are nonmarital births—rooted variously in the historic past (slavery, migration to urban centers), contemporaneous economic forces (joblessness), or “black culture.” Patterson's wide scouring through the scholarly literature and the popular media, from the mid-1960s to the Obama era, results in a generous survey of the sociological and historical treatment of “lower-class black family life” and a reappraisal of whether the report scuttled LBJ's civil rights agenda. Alas, Patterson's thorough account is dulled by a plethora of repetitive statistics concerning out-of-wedlock births and a surfeit of reports concerning media handling; while it remains useful documentation, it is a tiresome read. (*May*)

★ **Slow Love: How I Lost My Job, Put On My Pajamas & Found Happiness** Dominique Browning. Atlas & Co., \$23 (288p) ISBN 978-1-934633-31-1

Browning's 13-year-job as editor-in-chief of *House & Garden* fulfillingly defined her days and her identity; when the magazine folded two years ago, she was shaken to the core of her being. Having maintained her Westchester house, family of two grown sons, extensive garden, and frequent dining out, her life and general sense of self was radically shaken over the next year, and in this enchanting, funny, deeply gracious memoir, Browning, many years divorced, recounts how she found enlightenment at the other end. Writing was one way to absorb the panic; she went on a muffin-baking binge and gained 15 pounds; lost track of days, remaining comfortingly in her pjs and yearning perilously to reconnect to a former lover she calls Stroller, who was deemed wrong for her by everyone she knew. A few small decisions had enormous impact, such as when insomnia compelled her to tackle Bach's Goldberg Variations on the piano, and poignantly she refocused on her artistic nature. There is such feeling and care on each page of Browning's well-honed memoir—her rediscovery of nature, her avowal to let love find her rather than seek it, tapping satisfying work at her own keyboard—that the reader is swept along in a pleasant mood of transcendence. (*May*)

Bury Me in My Jersey: A Memoir of My Father, Football, and Philly Tom McAllister. Villard, \$22 (256p) ISBN 978-0-345-51651-0

More than a family memoir, this debut work by McAllister, a lecturer in the English department at Temple University, reads like a feverish coming-of-age tale of a gridiron groupie known as a “Philly fanatic,” complete with endearing childhood and college flashbacks. Many devotees of the Philadelphia Eagles football team will recognize themselves in McAllister, starting with the author and his sport-obsessed father sitting in their game-day uniforms during the telecasts, comparing notes on the players and contests, and enjoying the stadium melees that caused management to install holding cells in the ball park. Although the author questions how much of his character he owes to his family or the zeal of the city, he writes that Philly fans are the greatest in the NFL, even if they sometimes get crazy. This is great reading for all who have shared a father-son kinship, football zanies, and the raw sporting soul of Philly. (*May*)

Bob Marley: The Untold Story Chris Salewicz. Faber and Faber, \$27 (432p) ISBN 978-0-86547-999-9

The usual tropes of pop stardom attain a mythic resonance in this lively biography of the Jamaican reggae demigod. Journalist Salewicz (*Redemption Song: The Ballad of Joe Strummer*) draws an earnest portrait of Marley: his Rastafarian creed—he worshipped the Ethiopian emperor Haile Selassie—was unusually flamboyant; his marijuana use was probably heavier than other pop stars' and, per the Rasta sacrament of spillfueled Bible reading, certainly more sanctimonious; his feuds with managers, escalating to flourished pistols and beatings, were more operatic. His politics were weighty—his embroilment in Jamaican party rivalries in the 1970s prompted an assassination attempt—as was his canonization as an icon of black empowerment and countercultural protest. Salewicz's profile is full of piquant yet troubling details—Marley was apparently present at the lynching of his would-be assassins—and insights into the rough Jamaican surroundings that gave Marley's music its edgy desperation and millennial fervor. He is agnostic about whether Marley was the reincarnation of Christ—against Marley's uncanny prophecies were his adulteries and occasional wife beating—but gushes faithfully about the music, which he calls "tantalizingly world-shaking in its scintillating essence." Salewicz's profile is as gritty, entertaining, and starry-eyed as Marley himself. Photos. (May)

★ **The Last Stand: Custer, Sitting Bull, and the Battle of the Little Bighorn** Nathaniel Philbrick. Viking, \$29.95 (480p) ISBN 978-0-670-02172-7

Philbrick here takes on an oft-told tale, replete with its dashing, flawed main character, its historically doomed, noble Native chief, and a battlefield strewn with American corpses. While off his usual stride with a surfeit of unnecessary detail, bestselling author and National Book Award–winner Philbrick (*In the Heart of the Sea; The Mayflower*) writes a lively narrative that brushes away the cobwebs of mythology to reveal the context and realities of Custer's unexpected 1876 defeat at the hands of his Indian enemies under Sitting Bull, and the character of each leader. Judicious in his assessments of events and intentions, Philbrick offers a rounded history of one of the worst defeats in American military history, a story enhanced by his minute examination of the battle's terrain and interviews with descendants in both camps. Distinctively, too, he takes no sides. In his compelling history, Philbrick underscores the pyrrhic nature of Sitting Bull's victory—it was followed by federal action to move his tribe to a reservation. 32 pages of b&w photos, 18 pages of color photos, 18 maps. (May 4)

★ **Get Capone: The Secret Plot That Captured America's Most Wanted Gangster** Jonathan Eig. Simon & Schuster, \$28 (480p) ISBN 978-1-4165-8059-1

"Not since the hunt for John Wilkes Booth... had so many sources been brought to bear in an attempt to jail one man," writes former *Chicago* magazine editor Eig (*Opening Day*). But Al Capone eluded them all—even J. Edgar Hoover. In a page-turning account, Eig details the chase for the elusive Capone, dissecting both the man and his myth. Born in Brooklyn in 1899, Alphonse Capone came to a booming, bustling, corrupt, and very thirsty Chicago in 1920, just as Prohibition began. Rising swiftly through the underworld ranks, Capone soon headed a crime syndicate he dubbed "the outfit," which dealt in bootleg alcohol, racketeering, drugs, and prostitution. Eig traces the largely unsuccessful efforts by various law enforcement agencies to bring him down. He focuses on U.S. Attorney George E.Q. Johnson, who finally saw Capone convicted in 1931 for tax evasion and conspiring to violate Prohibition laws, leading to an 11-year prison sentence. Using previously unreleased IRS files, Johnson's papers, even notes he discovered for a ghostwritten Capone autobiography, Eig presents a multifaceted portrait of a shrewd man who built a criminal empire worth millions. 16 pages of b&w photos. (May 1)

★ **Contested Will: Who Wrote Shakespeare?** James Shapiro. Simon & Schuster, \$26 (352p) ISBN 978-1-4165-4162-2

Shapiro, author of the much admired *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare: 1599*, achieves another major success in the field of Shakespeare research by exploring why the Bard's authorship of his works has been so much challenged. Step-by-step, Shapiro describes how criticism of Shakespeare frequently evolved into attacks on his literacy and character. Actual challenges to the authorship of the Shakespeare canon originated with an outright fraud perpetrated by William-Henry Ireland in the 1790s and continued through the years with an almost religious fervor. Shapiro exposes one such forgery: the earliest known document, dating from 1805, challenging Shakespeare's authorship and proposing instead Francis Bacon. Shapiro mines previously unexamined documents to probe why brilliant men and women denied Shakespeare's authorship. For Mark Twain, Shapiro finds that the notion resonated with his belief that John Milton, not John Bunyan, wrote *The Pilgrim's Progress*. Sigmund Freud's support of the earl of Oxford as the author of Shakespeare appears to have involved a challenge to his Oedipus theory, which was based partly on his reading of *Hamlet*. As Shapiro admirably demonstrates, William Shakespeare emerges with his name and reputation intact. 16 pages of b&w photos. (Apr.)

Cleopatra: A Biography Duane W. Roller. Oxford Univ., \$24.95 (256p) ISBN 978-0-19-536533-5

In the first volume of Oxford's series *Women in Antiquity*, historian and archeologist Roller (*Through the Pillars of Herakles*), professor emeritus at Ohio State University, debunks the myth of Cleopatra (69–30 B.C.E.), offering a straightforward, reader-friendly biography of this intriguing and powerful ruler. Drawing on ancient sources, he portrays not a seductress who used her charm to blind men to their better judgment but a powerful naval commander during the Battle of Actium and a savvy royal administrator, "who skillfully managed her kingdom in the face of a deteriorating political situation" and Rome's increasingly intrusive presence. Roller also reveals her for the first time as an author—of *Cosmetics*, a medical and pharmacological treatise for such conditions as hair loss and dandruff. Tracing her life from her birth and her extensive education as a young girl to her ascension to the throne in 51 B.C.E., her consolidation of the Egyptian empire, and her strategic alliances with Rome, Roller provides a definitive account of a queen of remarkable strength (she compared herself to Alexander) who was a leader of her people. 18 b&w illus. (Apr.)

★ **A Kingdom Strange: The Brief and Tragic History of the Lost Colony of Roanoke** James Horn. Basic, \$26 (320p) ISBN 978-0-465-00485-0

A leading historian of early Virginia, Horn (*A Land as God Made It*) relates the convoluted, fascinating story of the failed 1598

publishersweekly.com/.../449903-Nonf...

venture on Roanoke Island: a British settlement whose 100 men, women, and children disappeared without a trace. Horn teases from the record as no one before the “Lost Colony of 1587,” which had not even been intended to settle on the island. Horn recounts its travails, hostilities with the Indians, requests to England for support that failed to arrive for three years, by which time the settlers were gone. Based on the available evidence, Horn finds that the colonists did not die but intermarried with local Indians. Over a century later, a North Carolina settler, venturing to Roanoke Island, found Indians who claimed Englishmen among their ancestors (and some gray-eyed tribesmen seemed to support the claim). He places it all in the context of the political and economic tumult of the time for an outstanding historical mystery/adventure tale with an ending perhaps less tragic than historians have long believed. Illus. (Apr.)

The Long Shadow of the Civil War: Southern Dissent and Its Legacy Victoria Bynum. Univ. of North Carolina, \$35 (240p) ISBN 978-0-8078-3381-0

Bynum (*Unruly Women: The Politics of Social and Sexual Control in the Old South*), a historian at Texas State University, offers an analysis of “home front schisms” in three Confederate regions: Big Thicket in eastern Texas, Piedmont North Carolina’s “Quaker Belt,” and the counties in Mississippi’s Piney Woods known as the “Free State of Jones.” Geographically and culturally isolated, they were largely populated by nonslaveholding subsistence farmers whose relationships with slaves and free blacks often generated “a lively interracial subculture” and even interracial family networks. Conscription policies favoring planters and manufacturers, together with food requisitions and taxes collected in kind by force, contributed to a sense of “rich man’s war, poor man’s fight” that made civilian-supported desertion and draft-evasion endemic. Defiance escalated to insurgency; Bynum quotes one unrepentant de facto Unionist: “we fought [Confederates] like dogs, and we buried them like asses....” The collapse of Reconstruction left these dissenters marginalized by a race-based legal system and a lost cause mythology. Bynum highlights the “solid South” as a construction and even more successfully presents the importance of “kinship, community, and place” in sustaining resistance to oppression. 9 illus., 1 map. (Apr. 15)

The First War of Physics: The Secret History of the Atom Bomb, 1939–1949 Jim Baggott. Pegasus (Norton, dist.), \$35 (576p) ISBN 978-1-60598-084-3

Science journalist Baggott addresses a subject he describes as both personal and intellectual. How did the nuclear bomb, “this dreadful instrument of fear, come to be created?” Specifically, how did some of the world’s great physicists contribute to a process that would “recalibrate what it means to be inhuman?” His answers combine published sources and recently declassified British, American, and Soviet archival material. He seeks the answers in the period from the discovery of nuclear fission in 1939, through the efforts by the combatants to develop nuclear weapons, to the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and the early cold war arms race. Through these years, the author follows the great physicists, from Otto Frisch to Werner Heisenberg and Edward Teller. They realized early on the terrible power they could unleash, and FDR was warned of German efforts to develop a nuclear weapon. Baggott concludes that the confluence of the discovery of nuclear fission with the leadup to war made the atom bomb inevitable, and the scientists were “drawn inexorably” into its development. Baggott’s assertion that events confronted scientists with “[d]ecisions for which they were poorly prepared” is anticlimactic but all too accurate. (Apr.)

The Dangerous Book of Heroes Conn Iggulden and David Iggulden. Morrow, \$25.99 (480p) ISBN 978-0-06-192824-6

In this off-key collection of biographical sketches, the authors of the bestselling *Dangerous Book for Boys* series stumble over the limitations of retro puerility as a worldview. A few Americans, like George Washington and Martin Luther King Jr., and heroines, including Florence Nightingale and Helen Keller, appear in their pantheon, but the Igguldens embrace the sensibilities of a daydreaming Edwardian lad by focusing on soldiers and explorers of the British Empire. Some of these—Horatio Nelson, Antarctic martyr Robert Scott—seem wholly admirable, but in others the boisterous lust for adventure is accompanied by brutality and perversity. The authors dutifully note Sir Richard Burton’s mind-expanding encounters with Indian prostitutes. They balance Oliver Cromwell’s massacres of Irish Catholics with his achievement in decapitating royal absolutism, and offset 17th-century buccaneer Henry Morgan’s town burning and church pillaging against his role in building the British Empire. As they struggle to explain their protagonists’ misdeeds, the Igguldens’ commitment to historical complexity undercuts their celebration of boyish dangerousness. This awkward mix of genuine uplift, moral ambiguity, and imperial nostalgia will confuse as much as it inspires. B&w line drawings. (Apr. 20)

A Thousand Sisters: My Journey of Hope into the Worst Place on Earth to Be a Woman Lisa Shannon, foreword by Zainab Salbi. Seal (PGW, dist.), \$24.95 (300p) ISBN 978-1-58005-296-2

The subject of a recent *New York Times* column by Nicholas Kristof, Shannon details how she left her comfortable life in Portland, Ore., to aid women in the Democratic Republic of Congo suffering abuse and death in what has been termed “Africa’s First World War.” Running a successful business with her fiancée (who would leave her), Shannon is still “hungry for something all [her] own” and after seeing a show on *Oprah* about Congolese women, she establishes the Run for Congo Women to raise money to help those suffering. From meeting Congolese women she’s sponsored to learning that 90% of the women in one village have been raped, Shannon is exposed to a world remote from her own affluent life. Her painful firsthand accounts of the violence inflicted upon Congolese women by Hutu militants will most interest readers, but the book lacks a detailed overview of the political circumstances surrounding this long war. Shannon provides a much-needed view of how one inspired American can act with hope, drive, and courage to aid women in a part of the world too often overlooked. (Apr.)

The Battle for Gotham: New York in the Shadow of Robert Moses and Jane Jacobs Roberta Brandes Gratz. Nation, \$27.95 (400p) ISBN 978-1-56858-438-6

The mid-20th-century showdown between New York City planning czar Moses and legendary community urbanist Jacobs reverberates down the decades in this meandering polemic. A journalist and member of New York City’s Landmarks Preservation Commission, Gratz (*The Living City*) views 50 years of economic and real estate development as a duel between the legacies of Moses, whose pharaonic highway and urban renewal projects obliterated neighborhoods, and Jacobs, who extolled urban diversity and disorderly mixed uses, hated cars, and championed organic, human-scale development. Through this lens, Gratz rehashes Jacobs’s defeat of Moses’s Manhattan expressway schemes, examines New York’s (anti-)industrial

policies and historical preservation laws, and attacks what she sees as latter-day boondoggles like Brooklyn's proposed mammoth Atlantic Yards development and Columbia University's expansion. The avowedly partisan author despises Moses as "arrogant" and "racist," and sometimes cedes the book to Jacobs with lengthy excerpts from interviews with the late urbanist. Gratz offers some cogent critiques of contemporary urban planning (while also embracing a few, like urban farming). Alas, her exposition of Jacobs's ideas is larded with unfocused autobiography, and far less tightly argued than Jacobs's own classic writings. B&w photos. (Apr. 1)

Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-First Century Rabbi Jonathan Sacks. Schocken, \$26 (304p) ISBN 978-0-8052-4269-0

British chief rabbi Lord Sacks (*Will We Have Jewish Grandchildren?*) laments what he sees as a virulent new strain of anti-Semitism plaguing Western Europe as well as serious divisions within the Jewish world that make it difficult to speak of Jews as one people with a shared fate and a collective identity. To combat anti-Semitism, Sacks encourages Jews to work closely with people of other faiths and to recognize that not only Jews face prejudice and hate. He urges his fellow Jews to be both particularist and universalist, to hold fast to their Jewish identity while passionately embracing the modern world and becoming a source of inspiration to others. Sacks believes that criticism of Israel is legitimate but denial of its right to exist is not; he supports a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, but explains how the Palestinians have thwarted every Israeli move to establish peace. Although controversial, articulate, and well intended, the book is wordy, digressive, and familiar. Blending abundant Hebrew phrases with references to Spinoza, Thomas Paine, and Greek tragedy, Sacks is preaching to an audience of already committed yet worldly Jews who nevertheless may feel inspired by a leader who shares their views. (Apr.)

13 Bankers: The Wall Street Takeover and the Next Financial Meltdown Simon Johnson and James Kwak. Pantheon, \$26.95 (320p) ISBN 978-0-307-37905-4

Though this blistering book identifies many causes of the recent financial crisis, from housing policy to minimum capital requirements for banks, the authors lay ultimate blame on a dominant deregulatory ideology and Wall Street's corresponding political influence. Johnson, professor at the MIT Sloan School of Management, and Kwak, a former consultant for McKinsey, follow American finance's rocky road from the debate between Jefferson and Hamilton over the first Bank of the United States through frequent friction between "Big Finance" and democracy to the Obama administration's responses to the crises. The authors take a highly critical stance toward recent palliative measures, arguing that nationalization of the banks would have been preferable to the bailouts, which have allowed the banks to further consolidate power and resources. Given the swelling size of the six megabanks, the authors make a persuasive case that the financial system cannot be secure until those banks that are "too big to fail" are somehow broken up. This intelligent, nuanced book might be too technical for general-interest readers, but it synthesizes a significant amount of research while advancing a coherent and compelling point of view. (Apr.)

The Age of Persuasion: How Marketing Ate Our Culture Terry O'Reilly and Mike Tennant. Counterpoint, \$26 (304p) ISBN 978-1-58243-580-0

O'Reilly and Tennant, the ad men team behind the Canadian radio series *The Age of Persuasion*, offer a witty and insightful look at the perpetually evolving advertising industry. With an eye-catching page design, featuring interchanging text formats, dictionary entries, and full-page shaded myth debunkers, the authors keep readers engaged through technical passages with servings of fun factoids on what Clark Gable's lack of an undershirt, *Star Wars*, John Mellencamp, and John McCain have to teach us about advertising. The authors are gifted communicators, and their conversational narrative covers successful advertising tactics, such as how to effectively market to "Yoots" (anyone in that Holy Grail demographic of under age 20), the impact of YouTube, the power of song, and multisensory experience. Appealing and informative, this ragbag of pop culture references, jokes, anecdotes, solid research, and advice will be indispensable to marketers or anyone curious about the power and ubiquity of advertising in modern culture. (Apr.)

The Struggle to Limit Government: A Modern Political History John Samples. Cato Institute, \$24.95 (300p) ISBN 978-1-935308-28-7

Freedom fights a losing battle with an out-of-control Washington in this manifesto. Cato Institute scholar Samples decries seven decades of "progressive" government, from the New Deal to today's giant bailouts in this story of soaring taxes, spending, and deficits in which both parties come out tarnished. (The author credits Ronald Reagan with restraining government growth but pillories George W. Bush as a champion of big government.) More than over-mighty bureaucrats and spineless politicians, Samples's real target is the American people, whose self-reliance has been corrupted, he believes, by government largesse that others pay for. (His *bête noire* is Social Security, which he regards as essentially a multigenerational Ponzi scheme.) Samples rarely justifies smaller government in terms of public well-being; he deplores almost any accretion of government power as an infringement of liberty. His flinty libertarianism can seem callous: grouching about an initiative to tax cigarettes to pay for children's health insurance, he writes, "[T]axpayers could afford to be sentimental about sick children if... someone else would be required to pay." Samples shrewdly analyzes the politics behind government expansion, but never grapples with it on the merits. (Apr.)

Moving Millions: How Coyote Capitalism Fuels Global Immigration Jeffrey Kaye. Wiley, \$27.95 (320p) ISBN 978-0-47042-334-9

Kaye, a special correspondent for *PBS*, writes that the American approach to immigration isn't working and suggests ways to change course. He uses the term "coyote capitalism," a system of interlocking, dependent relationships, to describe how unauthorized Mexican labor recruiters trade in human cargo and influence migration. He examines how coyotes and various other businesses encourage, support, and benefit from both legal and illegal migration—and how globalization has made it increasingly profitable to do so. He also looks at American economic and trade policies that encourage rather than hinder migration. Kaye provides an insightful glimpse into recruitment agencies and their impact, and offers an astute study of the effects of politics, influence, and alliances on immigration. While a dense read, the book is well worth the effort. Kaye makes a convincing argument and offers, for many readers, a completely new perspective. (Apr.)

On Evil Terry Eagleton. Yale Univ., \$25 (192p) ISBN 978-0-300-15106-0

An engaging if ultimately unsatisfactory argument in favor of the reality of evil by one of Britain's most distinguished Marxist literary critics. Analyzing some of Western literature's major pronouncements on evil from Thomas Aquinas to William Golding, Eagleton (*Reason, Faith and Revolution*) pieces together what he sees as the defining features of evil in a rather unsystematic way, before grounding his own vision of evil in Freud's notion of the death drive, describing evildoers as suffering from "an unbearable sense of non-being" which must "be taken out on the other." Despite its undeniably enjoyable verve and wit, the book's claims are undermined by a rather arbitrary use of source material as well as a belated and inadequate articulation of its major theoretical claim. Muddy talk about different levels of evil and an undeveloped but evidently important distinction between wickedness and evil suggest that the author's notions on the topic would be better served by a larger, more sustained work. Nonetheless, as an attempt to take seriously the reality of extreme wrongdoing without recourse to either religiously grounded certitudes or a total sociological determinism, it offers a promising alternative. (Apr.)

Kissing the Mask: Beauty, Understatement, and Femininity in Japanese Noh Theater William T. Vollmann. Ecco, \$29.99 (528p) ISBN 978-0-06-122848-3

The performance of female characters by male Noh actors sparks a deeply researched, lovingly detailed, and obsessive discourse on the nature of feminine beauty by award-winning novelist and essayist Vollmann (*Imperium*). The book charts an increasingly peripatetic path through the meticulous yet ineffable art of Noh drama from the perspective of an enthusiast, all the while groping toward some definition of beauty and the feminine. But the feminine, and even the label "female," is something widely claimed, and so the search takes him from a Tokyo transvestite bar to the feet of a master Noh actor—Umewaka Rokuro, scion of an ancient acting family—to the lips of the uncanny masks themselves, the kimonos of Kabuki geishas, and well beyond, traipsing far and wide across India, Babylon, the American fashion magazine industry, old Norse literature, the paintings of Andrew Wyeth, Yukio Mishima's Noh heroine Komachi, and a transgender community in Los Angeles, among other stops. The fervently reflective, probing narrative—replete with footnotes, glossary, illustrations, appendixes, and asides—demands patience, but rewards it on almost every page. (Apr.)

Beware of Small States: Lebanon, Battleground of the Middle East David Hirst. Nation, \$29.95 (448p) ISBN 978-1-56858-422-5

A former Middle Eastern correspondent for the *Guardian*, Hirst (*The Gun and the Olive Branch*) chronicles the travails of modern Lebanon in this provocative polemic that doubles "as a history of the Arab-Israeli struggle." Given Lebanon's tiny size, sectarian polity, and strategic location in a volatile region, Hirst observes that it "was almost designed to be the everlasting battleground for others' political, strategic and ideological conflicts." Lebanon's role in "the struggle for Palestine," however, is the author's primary interest. Displaced Palestinians flooded into southern Lebanon following the first Arab-Israeli War (1948) and spawned a "guerilla 'state-within-a-state'" on Israel's northern border. Hirst is solidly in the Palestinians' corner throughout; he inveighs against Israeli policies of "ethnic cleansing" and blocking progress toward a settlement of the Palestinian issue. The author also faults the United States for its "deference to all things Israeli"; takes to task Israel and the Israeli lobby in the U.S. for provoking the 2003 invasion of Iraq; and anoints the Iranians as "the only true victor" of America's war in Iraq. Hirst's is a passionately partisan and eloquent recounting of the tragic fate of modern Lebanon and the Palestinian people. (Apr.)

The Blue Moment: Miles Davis's Kind of Blue and the Remaking of Modern Music Richard Williams. Norton, \$25.95 (320p) ISBN 978-0-393-07663-9

Over 50 years ago, Miles Davis and his sextet walked into a church basement in midtown Manhattan that had been converted into a music studio. The album that emerged just nine hours later, *Kind of Blue*, not only changed jazz in a dramatic way, but it also changed popular music forever. As music critic Williams points out in this often exceptional, though sometimes pedantic, reflection, Davis introduced listeners in the Western world to a music suffused with a kind of mild exoticism that had its roots in Eastern philosophies. Many contemporary critics weren't exactly sure what to make of the album, but others recognized the powerful tremors that Davis's album sent through the music world. While the story of the making of the album has been well told before (as in Ashley Kahn's *Kind of Blue*), Williams traces the deep influence that the album had on a wide range of musicians, from John Cale and the Velvet Underground to Brian Eno, Robert Fripp, and Duane Allman. Williams's inspired reflections demonstrate the ways that luminous music can pervade other cultural forms and usher in momentous changes throughout all parts of culture. (Apr.)

Jerry West: The Life and Legend of a Basketball Icon Roland Lazenby. Ballantine/ESPN, \$26 (448p) ISBN 978-0-345-51083-9

Going beyond the facade of the multifaceted NBA legend, Lazenby, a professor of journalism at Virginia Tech (*The Show: The Inside Story of the Spectacular Los Angeles Lakers*), examines West, who played for the Los Angeles Lakers from 1960 to 1974. From the frail kid from West Virginia coal country through his rebellious youthful hoopster to the crowning of a pro sports icon, this entertaining biography explicates how West, a shy, introverted perfectionist, emerged as a fabled college star with the West Virginia Mountaineers, using his patented one-hand jumper, pushing himself with endless drills to change the fate of the pro ball leagues. Lazenby accurately captures the inner man, his quirks, his rituals, his competitiveness when West, "Mr. Clutch," faces off with Bill Russell's Celtics and Wilt Chamberlain's 76-ers. Even when the topic is life after active duty in pro ball, this book continues as a great example of old school sports bio without tabloid muck, satisfying all fans. (Apr.)

Rock and Roll Will Save Your Life Steve Almond. Random, \$23 (240p) ISBN 978-1-4000-6620-9

The goofiness and magnetism of rock is celebrated in this exuberant memoir. Rock critic and memoirist Almond (*Candyfreak*) describes himself as a "drooling fanatic" of rock and roll with a morbid passion for obscure bands, arcane record collections, and proselytizing his musical tastes. This freewheeling mix tape recounts the central role music played in his relationships,

2/22/2010

Nonfiction Reviews - 2010-02-22 00:0...

sexual encounters, and life transitions, while sprinkling in idiosyncratic lists, from "Rock's Biggest Assholes" to "Silly Names of Rock Star Spawn," and tragicomic exegeses of songs great and terrible. His rock-critic gig enables his obsessions, giving him cover to profile, hang with, and otherwise stalk rockers while gazing into the bleak underside of their lives, "the desolation in which... art continues to bloom." Almond deftly straddles the line between intellectual and fan. He's canny about the ways rock stars manipulate their idolators, yet happy to be seduced by them. He veers smoothly between funny, cruel takedowns of rock fatuity while registering its emotional impact (the song "I Bless the Rains Down in Africa" may be "the lovechild of Muzak and imperialism," but you can't help "sort of digging it"). Almond's snarky, swoony counterpoint makes for a hilarious riff on the power of music. (*Apr. 13*)

[« Back](#) | [Print](#)

© 2010 Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.