

al journey, freeing Trilling from the collective opinions of a generation. For example, contrary to the general view that *The Liberal Imagination* is a political book, Trilling explicitly made the liberalism alluded to in his title at once “an emotional tendency, a literary value, an intellectual tradition, and a way of being in the world,” Kirsch observes. Indeed, he makes a compelling case that the book reflects Trilling’s rejection of a simplistic equation of literature with ideology in favor of a nuanced liberal imagination suffused with “complexity and difficulty,” which the reader must confront in the great works of modern literature. Trilling’s liberalism, therefore, was an interior conversation—reader to author.

For most of his book, Kirsch makes a case for Trilling as an important historical figure, if not a figure of current importance. The Modernists who held the attention of Trilling’s contemporaries are largely without an audience today, and the agonized arguments over Modernism and communism among *Partisan Review* writers will fail to move a new generation to pick up Trilling’s books. But in the last chapter, which he titles “The Reader as Hero,” Kirsch cleverly pits Trilling against the still-influential critic Susan Sontag.

In the 1960s, Sontag opposed many of Trilling’s literary values in favor of an “erotics of art” that offered no standards with which to discriminate among artistic experiences; the emerging “one culture” she championed would be dedicated to “seriousness” as well as “fun and wit and nostalgia.” What Sontag did not anticipate was that this culture, in breaking down the boundaries between popular art and high culture, would transform art from something experienced internally to something to be consumed. Kirsch finds Sontag’s legacy in brand loyalties and commercial purchases: art as reflecting whom we want to be perceived as by others, rather than whom we are trying to become. Trilling’s unique encounter with the work of Henry James is superseded by Andy Warhol’s endlessly replicable soup cans.

Trilling long argued that the individual reader’s struggle with great literature formed character, and that the 1960s counterculture and the global capitalism it colonized replaced this struggle with a quest for external status markers. He regarded with alarm the same cultural shifts Sontag celebrated—until she eventually grew chastened at their destructive possibilities. Trilling’s enduring value, Kirsch concludes, is that despite the rise of a consumerist sensibility to replace the liberal self, his brand of “readerly heroism is always a possibility for those who believe in it.”

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Where the Writers Live

Reviewed by Leonard Benardo

THE NEW YORK CITY BOROUGH of Brooklyn is one of the most ethnically diverse places on earth. Drenched in working-class iconography, from baseball’s fabled Dodgers to the 1970s television series *Welcome Back, Kotter*, it has

long been home to immigrants and the many other New Yorkers who can’t afford to live in Manhattan. It has scarcely been perceived as a hotspot for the cultural set. Yet over the past decade, much ink has been spilled charting the migration of writers to New York City’s suddenly fashionable destination. Some, such as the inimitable British novelist Martin Amis, have even come from across the pond. Few cultural critics have attempted, however, to put this development in historical perspective, a glaring omission given the rich diversity of Brooklyn’s literary tradition.

Blending literary and urban history, Brooklyn-based writer Evan Hughes assays these *longue durée* connections. Commencing with that rugged, empathic democrat, Walt Whitman, and following with a score of other character studies, including considerations of poets Hart Crane and Marianne Moore,

LITERARY BROOKLYN:

The Writers of Brooklyn and the Story of American City Life.

By Evan Hughes. Holt. 337 pp. \$17



Before his death in 2007, Norman Mailer was among the most notable of the literary luminaries who live in Brooklyn.

Native Son author Richard Wright, and contemporary novelist Paul Auster, Hughes writes capably about the vast terrain Brooklyn writers have traversed. While most of this biographical material is culled from secondary sources, Hughes deftly weaves rich, allusive links between writers—whether Crane’s channeling of Whitman’s democratic ethos; the street-fighting, bravura prose styles of novelists Norman Mailer and Henry Miller; or the shared aspiration of literary critic Alfred Kazin and novelist Bernard Malamud to cross the East River.

Literary Brooklyn’s main contribution may lie in its subtle interweaving of history and literature. Hughes vividly evokes the dystopian currents of the Boerum Hill neighborhood in the 1970s, as reflected in the fiction of then-residents L. J. Davis and Jonathan Lethem. The suggestion that Boerum Hill would soon be populated by brownstone-buying gentrifiers

would have produced nothing short of guffaws in what was at the time a broken-windowed enclave. And Hughes’s complex sociological portrait of Wright’s world in the 1930s and ‘40s sheds light on the racial and class dimensions of elegant Fort Greene, showing how the demographic makeup of this once lily-white neighborhood and of Brooklyn as a whole changed as African Americans flooded into the borough during the Great Migration.

It is no fault of Hughes that the question of what constitutes a “Brooklyn writer” remains unresolved. He says at the outset that “there is no ‘Brooklyn school,’” and that “we shouldn’t mistake a massive place for an aesthetic camp.” He remains careful not to overreach. Writing of Moore, Hughes concedes that she “likely would have honed her unique voice . . . even if she had never moved to Brooklyn.” These are honest caveats. Without them, one wonders what William Styron

or Thomas Wolfe, who spent only short spans of their careers in Brooklyn, would be doing in this lot. Or what Norman Mailer's literary preoccupations—including executed murderer Gary Gilmore and the CIA—have to do with the borough of his youth.

Hughes's urban history occasionally veers toward the inductive when gratuitous facts—repetitious rehearsals of who lived down the street from whom—interrupt the narrative flow. Photos would have helped, too. And the final chapter seems the product of an editor's ukase to trumpet the present Brooklyn renaissance. Here Hughes departs from the introspection of the rest of the book, leaving us with a laundry list of current literati.

Quibbles aside, unpacking the historical relationship between a city and its literary culture is no easy feat. Kings County deserves more than puff pieces on the “New Brooklyn.” Hughes has written a sensitive literary history on an underexplored theme. And as he makes abundantly clear, Brooklyn not only has a literary tradition; its past is also consonant with the social currents coursing through American urban history.

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The Natural

Reviewed by Aaron Mesh

BEFORE I LOVED THE MOVIES, I loved Roger Ebert. As a teenager, I spent hours lying on my bed, engrossed in a fat purple volume of his *Home Movie Companion*, with its summaries of “grownup” films I had never dared to see: *Leaving Las Vegas*, *Flirting*, *Natural Born Killers*. Later, I would understand how much more grownup Ebert's reviews were than many of the movies themselves, but at the time, I just knew he was genuine. His informal prose, often suggesting a chat between

LIFE ITSELF: A Memoir.

By Roger Ebert. *Grand Central*. 435 pp. \$27.99

intimate friends, radiated a nearly aching romance with cinema. He retold other people's stories, and sometimes I recognized my own.

My reading was a solitary pleasure, though hardly a unique one. Just about everybody loves Roger Ebert. Instantly recognizable from his long-running television shows *Sneak Previews* and *At the Movies*, he didn't so much teach us to take movies seriously—at a time when critics such as Pauline Kael were enshrining films as high art—as make criticism seem like a universal pastime. His naysayers, who are not without their ammunition, charge that he never became much of a student of cinema, and deride his plainspoken, democratic style as artless. But for more than 40 years, he has celebrated the joy of moviegoing and given his readers confidence in their ability to read a film intelligently without being snooty about it.

Since 2006, when thyroid cancer and complications of surgery deprived him of his jaw, his ability to eat and drink, and his speech—his communication is now limited to the written word and the thumb that for years warred with that of the late Gene Siskel on television—Ebert has been granted the chance, like his boyhood hero Huckleberry Finn, to sit in the back of the church for his own eulogies. Even as the tributes pile up, Ebert, now 69, keeps expanding his following. Pundits wondered if there could be an Ebert in the Internet age; it turned out that that new-media critic was—Ebert. His Web site, rogerebert.com, attracts more than 100 million visitors a year. Ebert is one of the few movie critics working today who is comfortable engaging his readers as equals in online comment threads. With this new audience, he has also broached a new subject: himself.

From the personal blog posts that mingle with his reflections on movies have emerged *Life Itself*, a discursive, companionable memoir that foremost confirms what fans have long known: Ebert is a natural born writer. But the book also makes clear how little we have