

decisive battles such as Midway and Stalingrad hinged on a mixture of skill, courage, and sheer luck, he also affirms that they were decisive because they accelerated what was already a steepening decline in Axis material strength. He does not suggest that the Germans could have “won” at Stalingrad, even if they had reached the Volga. While this is not to say they were doomed, it comes rather close. Even the straw man of material determinism creeps into his description of the overwhelming supply backup for American combat troops, whose “fighting power” did

not always impress their opponents (and has been doubted by some modern analysts). Likewise, his assertion that the Allies won not least because their cause was just looks fairly conventional. But even if Overy does not resolve all the puzzles and paradoxes he raises, his incisive, persistent interrogation of the inner structures of this immense war makes this a uniquely challenging and rewarding account.

> CHARLES TOWNSEND is professor of history at the University of Keele. He is the author, most recently, of *Britain's Civil Wars* (1986).

Keepsakes of a Satirist

*THE DIARIES OF DAWN POWELL
1931–1965*

By Dawn Powell. Edited and with an introduction by Tim Page.
Steerforth. 513 pp. \$32

by *Richard Selzer*

Other than the ledger of a business, a diary is the only book that is *kept*. The word implies faithfulness to the task, as in keeping at it, even as it conveys a sense of privacy, as in keeping a secret. It also suggests the tending and marshaling of thoughts that might wander away and be lost, as sheep would be, were it not for the shepherd who keeps them. The keep is also the deepest part of a castle, where the prisoners—in this instance, preferences, prejudices, urges, obsessions, and humiliations—are locked up at the same time they are given voice.

Private though the diarist's announced intention may be, it is likely that she does not keep the diary for herself alone, but in the still, small hope of making contact with others, the way an astronomer keeps his great electronic ear cocked at the void, palpitating for faint evidence that we are not alone in the universe. What is this incessant keeping if not a hankering for companionship, for that one dearest reader who will give you license, without let or hindrance, to “unpack your heart with words”? There is pathos in this diary

keeping, as if to stop would mean to die. And who knows? Maybe it would.

Call it prying, or prurience, but I confess my favorite literary genre is the diary. It is the most direct route to an author, and should that author be Dawn Powell, the entries are certain to be witty, acerbic, and touching. Only two years ago,



the name Dawn Powell would have elicited blank stares. Now, thanks to the whim of posterity and the resurrecting hand of Gore Vidal (who wrote an overview of her work), this excellent writer's reputation has been restored. For some 40 years—from the 1920s to the 1960s—Powell lived in lower Manhattan and situated her 15 satirical novels and many short stories there. It is hard to say which is more acute: her ear for speech, her eye for custom and habit, or her intuition for the relationship between tragedy and folly. Her fiction paints an incomparable portrait of her time: limited in its scope, perhaps, but impressive in its depth of perception. It can certainly hold its own with the work of such better-known peers as Dorothy Parker and Muriel Spark. It is no longer possible to make a study of 20th-century American literature without considering Powell. And now there is this superb edition of her diaries, unique among contemporary journals for its trenchant opinions and intimate views of many of the important figures of the time: Edmund Wilson, Ernest Hemingway, Mary McCarthy, John Dos Passos, Gore Vidal, Malcolm Cowley, Franz Kline.

In contrast with poems, plays, novels, and essays, a diary provides the writer with occasions for natural braggadocio, whining, and spleen venting. Elsewhere, such indulgences might be faults; here, they are pith. Besides, Dawn Powell is incapable of writing a clumsy sentence. She sparkles, hungry for experience, inhaling deeply the oxygen of laughter, yet also noting, "I learned early that the best way to be alone with your thoughts is to be funny. Laughter is a curtain behind which you can live your own life and think as you please—sort of a sound barrier."

Powell loved New York, and her work reflects an affectionate but unflinching view of the city. Sociable, yet craving solitude, she wrote: "People call you up till finally they stop and then you call them." Her fiction is peopled with hard-drinking men and women, many of them lonely, not knowing where their next meal is

coming from or whether they will be evicted onto the street—like Powell herself. With all the borrowing and lending going on, Polonius would not have been tolerated in this crowd. Yet, like Powell, these characters are gallant and dignified, never too broke to help a friend or relative in need.

Powell's friends and acquaintances were legion, and each is given a portrait, whether warmly compassionate or crackling with electricity. Truman Capote is of "the Southern Trash and crème de menthe school as against the mint julep school." Edmund Wilson "appears to ask questions . . . but pays no attention to the answers, though later they emerge. Now that his mind has enlarged into such a vast organization, it's as if conversation had to wait in the lobby till the message has been routed through the proper department. Sometimes it has to come back Monday." Stella Adler's "precise features are . . . chiseled by a dozen plastic surgeons . . . not one fold of fat drips carelessly over the photogenic silhouette"; the "Artless Blue" of her eyes is "now diluted with years of venom, so that . . . a flash of flame darts out when the vanity is hurt."

Most affecting are the entries that pertain to Powell's only child, her son, JoJo. From early childhood, JoJo was profoundly ill with what was diagnosed as schizophrenia; grown to manhood, he was permanently hospitalized. Yet even here, Powell leavens her sorrow with acute observation and brave humor—as when she fetches JoJo for an outing, and he makes a comically stilted little speech: "I feel the need of something hot—some substantial refreshment." It is typical of Powell to record his exact words, so that the moment, in all its tenderness and quirkiness, is not lost. Thanks to her precision, compassion, and verve—and to the meticulous editing of Tim Page—a lifetime of such moments may now be kept for good.

> RICHARD SELZER is a former professor of surgery at Yale University and the author, most recently, of *Raising the Dead* (1994).