

son to approach. Price's 11 novels, beginning in 1962 with *A Long and Happy Life*, cannot be called religious, in that they deal less with divine love than human, less with faith than faithlessness. Yet he has published two volumes of translations from the Bible (*A Palpable God*, 1978; *Three Gospels*, 1996) and has spent a lifetime reading and thinking about the nature of this God to whom he has always felt a personal access.

In his reply to Fox, Price makes no more serious argument for God's existence than that "my belief in a Creator derives largely from detailed and overpowering personal intuition, an unshakable hunch," and what he calls "demonstrations," of which the Sea of Galilee was the most dramatic. Most of the other demonstrations are closer to Wordsworthian "spots of time"—"moments of sustained calm awareness," as Price puts it, "that all of visible and invisible nature (myself included) is a single reality, a single thought from a central mind." To an unbeliever, this seems a fittingly modest approach, given the unlikelihood that Price might succeed where all others have failed in constructing an inarguable proof that God exists.

As to the question of whether God cares, Price suggests that part of the reason this question is so troubling has to do with our notion of God the Father. Price notes "how seldom the oldest strata of Hebrew scripture call God our father," and suggests that our inability to comprehend a God who is less than fully attentive to the world's suffering (and, indeed, often seems to pour it on with those he favors) has to do with our confusing his love for his creation with a benign paternal love. Even those believers who are not among the overtly suffering more often than not know God's inattentiveness, Price concedes, in the form of unanswered prayers. "I've come more and more," he writes, "to wish that scriptures of Judaism and Christianity—and a great many more modern clergy and counselors—had forthrightly confronted the silence at the very heart of any God we can worship." That divine silence apparently extended to Jim Fox, who died at 35 in February of last year.

—Robert Wilson

**ISAIAH BERLIN:
*A Life.***

By Michael Ignatieff. Metropolitan Books. 356 pp. \$30

Ideally, a biography of Isaiah Berlin should be as engaging as the man himself—no small challenge, considering Berlin's brilliance as a lecturer, author, and conversationalist. Ignatieff has more than met the challenge. He has written an intimate, intelligent, and succinct life of one of the more widely loved men of this century. Like Berlin, Ignatieff has Russian roots, is a political philosopher in his own right (and an accomplished novelist and memoirist as well), and shares with his subject a fine liberal temperament. Indeed, the making and sustaining of such a temperament during a century when liberal ideals faced grave threats from all sides serve as the guiding themes of this biography.

Ignatieff shapes the facts of that life (1909–97) into the story of a charmed, almost blessed existence. Even though political upheavals forced Berlin's family to flee first from his native Latvia to St. Petersburg, and then from Petersburg to London, Berlin had a comfortable, secure, almost Nabokovian childhood. Berlin felt the distinction of outsider status from his earliest years, but that sense of difference was never humbling or humiliating. If the Berlins were Jews, distantly related to the founder of the devoutly pious Lubavicher Hassidim, they were largely assimilated residents of a city that exempted its Jewish citizens from restrictions that so hobbled their coreligionists in most western provinces of the Russian Empire.

Flight to London in 1921 inscribed another degree of apartness on the Berlin family. But though exile, in Ignatieff's words, "consolidated detachment," Isaiah took to his adopted country with an avidity that evolved into an articulate embrace of that country's institutions and ideals. His regard for Britain's blend of resilient traditionalism, liberal constitutionalism, and ethos of inviolable individualism made him, in some ways, more English than the English. But Ignatieff does not neglect the power of Berlin's underlying Russian and Jewish identities, expressed above all in a need for passionate intensity, whether in friendships or in responding to ideas or

works of art, particularly music. In Berlin's case, an English reasonableness allowed a rich, emotional interiority to flower.

Ignatieff adds little to the evaluation of Berlin's philosophical achievement set forth in John Gray's fine intellectual biography, *Isaiah Berlin* (1995), but he provides the human context and drama behind the writing of Berlin's brilliant discourses on the making, meaning, and makers of ideas—and counterideas—that have shaped the modern world since the Enlightenment. We are given an intimate view of Berlin's involvement not only in academic politics but in real politics, not only the reporting he did for the British Foreign Office from Washington during World War II but also his shrewd efforts to support moderate Zionists in the achievement of a Jewish state. Berlin's engagement with the extra-academic world, his contact with politicians, statesmen, and doers of all stripes, gave his political reflections a realism and an appreciation of the role of personality and character in history. Both qualities will extend the life of Berlin's work.

This is an almost Boswellian blend of memoir and biography, and one wishes there were even more of the former: more anecdotal accounts of the conversational brilliance, more words from the man himself. A certain thinness in the treatment of Berlin's later years might have been remedied by more reportage. After all, Ignatieff had the high privilege of interviewing his subject for 10 years, and he is a superb and

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reliable evoker of characters and scenes. If it seems churlish to complain of too few words in an age of disastrously overlong biographies, for once less might not necessarily have been more.

—Jay Tolson

Arts & Letters

AT HOME WITH THE MARQUIS DE SADE: A Life.

By Francine du Plessix Gray.
Simon & Schuster. 491 pp. \$27.50

SADE: A Biographical Essay.

By Laurence L. Bongie. Univ. of Chicago Press. 336 pp. \$29

With so many fine minds bent upon the monster these days, you can choose your Marquis. Was he the compelling, nearly lovable son and husband of Gray's biogra-

phy? Or the "obnoxiously adolescent, opportunistic, tantrum-prone," mother-hating reptile of Bongie's academic screed? Was he, as Gray believes, the "father of modernism" and "prophet of Queer Theory"—academe's latest contribution to sexual politics? Or, as Professor Bongie would have it, a false prophet of the First Amendment, "author of the most monotonously egregious . . . pornographic novels imaginable, all richly interlarded with a preachy secondhand ideology . . . pilfered from thinkers far more original and coherent than he"?