Donatien Alphonse Francois de Sade (1740–1814) came from a cash-poor but landed family of debauched aristocrats (Sade's father picked up boys on the street). Sade attended a Jesuit school in Paris, where he learned, firsthand, the joys of corporal punishment. Through family machinations, he served in the prestigious Carabiniers de Monsieur despite being too short to qualify. He strutted in his gleaming blue uniform with crimson lining, cuffs, and collar, cultivating his notorious sexual tastes off hours.

Sade's father married him off to the plain daughter of a wealthy, *haute bourgeoise* family. To everyone's surprise, the marriage took. During the next decades Renée-Pélagie Cordier de Montreuil would bear Sade's children, endure his absences, defy her mother, and procure young victims for Sade's bloody orgies of whipping, masturbation, and sodomy. After his arrest and imprisonment, she sent him dildos and *petits gâteaux*. Sade called Pélagie "my puppy dog," "celestial kitten," "fresh pork of my thoughts."

Sade wrote his scabrous novels—*Justine* (1791), *Juliette* (1799), and their ilk—from jail. Briefly freed during the Revolution, he died at Charenton, the fancy mental hospital where he had staged theatrical productions. Two decades later, he resurfaced as a dictionary entry: "Sadism: The perversion of deriving sexual satisfaction from the infliction of pain on others."

Gray, the novelist and feminist, became interested in Sade after reading his prison correspondence with his wife. She argues that "few lives provide a more eloquent allegory on women's ability to tame men's nomadic sexual energies." She reminds readers that "the writer's task is to probe the mystery of personality," giving "equal time to . . . demons and to saints." Neither justification persuades. Few married men remain so untamed as Sade, who got more than his share of equal time before Gray came along.

But no matter. What makes her biography worth reading is the writing, the novelist's gift for richly realized character, for pacing and plot. Gray tells a riveting story of Sade and his family, of the aristocracy's fall, of Regency fashions and prejudices and the insanity of life in Paris during and after the Revolution.

Bongie, a professor of French at the University of British Columbia, has written 18th-century studies before; what he lacks in readability he makes up for in erudition. But his determination to revise the standard thinking on Sade's oedipal psychology, based on two newly discovered letters from Sade's mother, may tire all but the most dogged Sadeans. And some readers may wonder whether, in making such a lengthy case against postmodern literary criticism (the work, not the life, is what matters), the scholar doth protest too much.

—A. J. Hewat

THE UNKNOWN MATISSE: A Life of Henri Matisse—The Early Years, 1869–1908.

By Hilary Spurling. Knopf. 480 pp. $40.

When Henri Matisse died in Nice in 1954 at the age of 84, he was an honored figure whose work had affected the course of art in the 20th century as surely as had the entirely different achievement of his sometime rival,

Vase of Flowers *(1924), by Henri Matisse*

Pablo Picasso. Reading this splendid book, we know how the story will end, yet Spurling, a British critic and biographer, makes us doubt the outcome. Her account of the adversity the young Matisse endured—financial, critical, physical, psychological—is so persuasive that, time and again, we expect him to renounce his vocation and find another career.

The eventual master of luxuriant, voluptuous color was born into the cold, dank world of French Flanders, near the Belgian border, and spent the first quarter of his life in that gloomy landscape. His father was a seed merchant, and it was assumed that Henri too would find a middle-class career. He was studying to be a lawyer when he discovered, at 20, his true calling. Despite the opposition of his family and the cartoonish scorn of villagers, he moved to Paris to study art in one of the establishment schools.

Of course, he initially failed his drawing exam for admission to the École des Beaux-Arts. But he persisted, was accepted, and went on to immerse himself in the Parisian art world. After years of often desperate poverty, he told friends in 1903 that he had lost all desire to paint and had almost decided to give up. But he did not surrender to circumstance, and by 1908 he was on the brink of fame. The rivalry with Picasso had begun.

Matisse's preoccupation with light drove him to seek its origin within the canvas itself and to release the light in colored emanations from that source. He strove to free color from its representational role and to use it to interpret reality. In so doing, he overturned the traditional objective way in which Western painters had represented reality. "He was," writes Spurling, "substituting for their illusion of objectivity a conscious subjectivity, a 20th-century art that would draw its validity essentially from the painter's own visual and emotional responses." Matisse's work, paintings that experimented with light and color through scenes of simple domesticity, seemed to many of his contemporaries an assault on civilization itself. To her great credit, Spurling makes us understand why.

Matisse painted windows and doors opening onto landscapes of infinite promise and possibility. "This is what I find so particularly expressive," he once said, "an open door like this, in all its mystery." At the end of his life, Matisse believed that his entire career might be seen as a flight from the dark world of his northern upbringing to the light and color of the south, where the Mediterranean sun freed his genius. An insistent sense of how physical place worked on Matisse and drove him to achievement informs this biography. Spurling opens a window onto the immense and varied landscape of a life, and the intelligence she brings to observing the life bathes the landscape in light.

—James M. Morris

THE AMATEUR: An Independent Life of Letters

by Wendy Lesser. Pantheon. 274 pp. $24

In the "overture" to these interlocking autobiographical sketches, Lesser aptly describes herself as "an 18th-century man of letters, though one who happens to be female and lives in 20th-century Berkeley." *The Amateur* is a bracing memoir of a one-of-a-kind life that has been shaped by an addiction to (of all things) books, dances, paintings, plays, photographs, poems—and by a deep need to judge, not merely enjoy, them.

As I learned the minute I met her (we were on a book prize committee together years ago), Lesser has the intimidating gift of great clarity and certitude about what she likes and what she doesn't like in life, which for her comprises "mainly, other people and works of art." Yet she is anything but dogmatic. *The Amateur* helps to explain how Lesser has skirted that danger, and in the process become the boldly eclectic editor of the *Threepenny Review*, the literary quarterly she founded in 1980; the subtly discriminating author of four very different books of (for want of a neater term) cultural-social-literary criticism; and, not least, a self-portraitist who has what many fiercely opinionated people lack—calm (and often comic) perspective on herself and her era.

There was never much fear that "brash, impatient, judgmental, loud, energetic, efficient" Lesser, born in Palo Alto in 1952, would get lost in the unrest of the 1960s or in the comparatively unstructured life she led as an English graduate student during the 1970s. Instead, she found latitude for her own "relatively untutored ominivorousness," and she also had a chance to exercise "what one Berkeley friend calls my 'unremittingly linear' mind." By the 1980s and 1990s, she