

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 omnivorousness," and she also had a chance to exercise "what one Berkeley friend calls my 'unremittingly linear' mind." By the 1980s and 1990s, she

had carved out a precarious literary existence outside the academy, “on the fringes of the economy.” And she was launched on a rigorous mission to understand and evaluate “the experience that takes place when a reader or observer or auditor encounters a work of art: that meeting place between one person’s sensibility and another person’s creation.”

Lesser’s own sensibility is unfailingly independent but never willfully idiosyncratic. She is not shy about being “the learned critic, commenting on the work,” or about sharing what it is like to be “the novice, being molded by that work.” Writing about the Balkan folk dancing that was once her passionate pastime, she finds an analogy to the welcoming but demanding conversation her criticism aims to set in motion. “It was a place,” she recalls, “in which everyone was accepted, but in which discriminations (of grace, skill, knowledge) nonetheless mattered. It was a kind of community that was ideal for someone who was essentially, secretly solitary.” In a culture ever more balkanized between high and low, academic and popular, creative and critical, cerebral and visceral, Lesser reminds us of the distinctions that matter.

—Ann Hulbert

PREEMPTING THE HOLOCAUST.

By Lawrence L. Langer. Yale Univ. Press. 207 pp. \$27.50

It’s hard to believe that, a few brief years ago, people worried that American memory of the Holocaust would fade through lack of interest. These days, movies, memorial museums, Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies, and the general roar of what some cynically call “Shoah business” have made the destruction of European Jewry such a common rhetorical touchstone that trivialization, not oblivion, poses the more immediate threat. It’s natural, then, that we now see the emergence of cultural critics who denounce the misuse of the Holocaust, and of a smaller group—call them Holocaust fundamentalists—who oppose virtually all attempts to draw parallels or lessons from the Holocaust or, indeed, to do anything but rigorously contemplate its singularity.

The literary critic Lawrence Langer has

long been prominent in this latter group. Over the years, he has written a shelf of books that treat artistic and literary aspects of the cultural memory of the Holocaust—from survivors’ testimony and memoirs to the art and poetry that emerged from the furnace of suffering—while maintaining strenuous objections to what he sees as “preemption” of that memory by others. His objection, reiterated and elaborated in this brief collection of essays, is to the drawing of connections from the Holocaust to other matters, whether it’s teaching tolerance in schools, pondering moral conundrums about the line between ordinary people and murderers, or highlighting accounts that point to the strength of the human spirit—“the habit of using mass murder as a text for furthering personal agendas about humanity’s capacity for goodness or its ability to resist oppression.”

This is, to say the least, oddly put—what demotes the search for uplift to a mere “personal agenda”?—but the larger point is sound. When parallels are drawn too easily or uplifting accounts are accepted too readily, horror is trivialized. But Langer is stricter yet. He argues that all efforts to find “meaning” of any kind in the Holocaust are intrinsically suspect and reductive, even questions about how we would act in similar circumstances. Of the hundreds of Jews boiled alive in an acid bath, he observes: “There is simply no connection between our ordinary suffering and their unprecedented agony, nor do our trivial inclinations toward sin resemble in any way the minds that designed such terminal torture.”

At some point, such stringency becomes self-defeating. To refuse *all* analysis of an event, to reject *every* possible inference, is finally to insist on silence. So it is almost a relief, late in the book, to find Langer disobeying his own dictum, drawing his own meaning—albeit a dark and despairing one—from the material on which he has spent his career. “The need for a revision, and then a re-vision, of our cherished value systems,” he writes, “is the chief spiritual legacy of the Holocaust.” A grim prescription, perhaps, but not so grim as the insistence that nothing can be learned, said, or remembered about this greatest of crimes.

—Amy E. Schwartz