

uscript pages a day in the throes of inspiration, his sentences were always *constructed*, never dashed. The right word obsessed him. . . . The difference between the *almost right* word and the *right* word is really a large matter—'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning.'"

We love to linger in this "gigantic childhood." Certainly it was lit by lightning. But this book is aptly titled. These were dangerous waters. Almost nobody got out alive.

—Benjamin Cheever

#### TELLER OF TALES:

##### *The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle.*

By Daniel Stashower. Henry Holt. 412 pp. \$32.50

On a summer night in 1930, some 6,000 well-dressed Londoners crowded into Royal Albert Hall. They had come to see and hear the renowned Scottish author Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for whom a chair waited on the stage. One technicality set this hastily arranged public appearance apart from countless others: Conan Doyle had died five days before. Seeing no sign of their man, skeptics began stealing out of the hall. The emcee—a psychic of dubious gifts—shouted, "He is here! He is here!" Everyone stopped, and all eyes locked hungrily on the empty chair.

Conan Doyle's latest biographer, himself a writer of detective novels, tackles the hardest part of his job first: How could a writer of such intelligence and principle, a gifted physician, explorer, athlete, war veteran, husband, and father—how could this man have believed in spooks and fairies? A "cordial disbeliever," Stashower argues for "sympathy rather than derision." After reading this account, few readers are likely to rush out to buy Conan Doyle's *Coming of the Fairies* (1922), but they will understand that there was more to his life than Sherlock Holmes.

Born in Edinburgh in 1859, Conan Doyle grew up poor, the second son of an artistic, high-strung alcoholic father, and the lively, educated mother whom he adored. He got a decent (if detested) Jesuit education, and studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh. One of his professors, Joseph Bell, had an uncanny ability to deduce an entire life story from particulars of accent, clothing, and manner. "Well, my man," Bell would say to a plain-clothed stranger, "you've served in the army."

"Aye, sir." "Not long discharged?" "No, sir." "A Highland regiment?" "Aye, sir." "Stationed at Barbados?" "Aye, sir." It was a small step from there to Sherlock's "You have been in Afghanistan, I perceive."

Published in *The Strand* starting in 1891, the adventures of Sherlock Holmes became the *Star Trek* of their day, and Conan Doyle grew "suddenly, colossally famous" for something he considered far less noteworthy than his other writings. So popular were the detective stories that, when the author killed off his celebrated character in 1893 (temporarily, as it developed), 20,000 people canceled their subscription to the magazine, Londoners wore black mourning bands, and members of the Royal Family were said to be distraught. Conan Doyle expressed only relief. "If I had not killed [Holmes]," he said in a speech to the Author's Club, "he would certainly have killed me."

Conan Doyle never got his fondest wish—to be viewed as a writer of the first rank. Stashower makes a case for *The White Company* (1891) and other historical novels, but doesn't pretend to share his subject's enthusiasm for the occult writings. Many fine minds took up spiritualism at that time. W. B. Yeats traveled far down the path of ghosts and fairies, and, like Conan Doyle, had a wife who practiced automatic writing. But where Yeats's traffic in the supernatural yielded superb poems such as "Lapis Lazuli," Conan Doyle's resulted in a silly book about Atlantis.

Stashower has turned out an unselfconscious, easy read—affectionate and fair-minded, genially short on the naughty bits now endemic to the genre. He hides a prodigious amount of work beneath the surface, so that what the reader sees is not webbed feet paddling strenuously but a swan serenely floating. Conan Doyle and his brilliant detective both would have liked this book.

—A. J. Hewat

#### WALKER EVANS.

By James R. Mellow. Basic. 654 pp. \$40

By 1956, when this biography ends, the photographer Walker Evans (1903–75) had done his most important work. In his last years, he spent too little time looking into a viewfinder and too much time looking into a bottle. Still, these final two decades of his life, for which the publisher appends a chronology, might have given a perspective to Evans's achievements

that this unfinished book (the author died before completing it) never attains.

For example, in 1960 a second edition of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* appeared, doubling the number of photographs from the 1941 first edition of that seminal collaboration between Evans and writer James Agee. In 1966, a major project from the 1930s and 1940s featuring hidden-camera portraits Evans had taken on the New York City subway got an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art and was published as the book *Many Are Called*. In 1971, John Szarkowski curated a major retrospective of Evans's work at the Museum of Modern Art. During these final years, Evans had close friendships with younger photographers such as Szarkowski, Lee Friedlander, Robert Frank, and William Christenberry. The reader longs to hear them talk about their friend.

Mellow is best known for his books *Charmed Circle: Gertrude Stein and Company* (1974) and *Nathaniel Hawthorne in His Times* (1980), which won a National Book Award. It may be a little unfair to say that this book seems perfunctory compared to those, given its unfinished state—but perhaps no more unfair than publishing it at all.

I wonder, though, whether Mellow's imagination would ever have caught fire with Evans, a man who was essentially private, solitary, and somewhat dour. Even his best-known photographs, of those Alabama sharecropper families in *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, which seem so politically charged at this distance, came much more from a personal aesthetic than any encompassing vision of what the world should be. Evans had first wanted to be a writer; his aesthetic as a photographer was in the plain style of Lincoln or Twain. It was a style that perfectly matched his times, with its urgent program to ennoble the common man. But Evans embodied the style and not the program, which is why he could just as easily ennoble buildings, cars, and graveyards as

those who built and would rest in them.

—Robert Wilson

### ***SURVIVING LITERARY SUICIDE.***

By Jeffrey Berman. Univ. of Massachusetts Press. 290 pp. \$60 hardcover, \$18.95 paper

*Surviving Literary Suicide* is an important book about suicide and the psychological impact of its literary portrayals. A professor of English at the State University of New York at Albany, Berman assigned his graduate students writings about suicide by six authors (Kate Chopin, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Anne Sexton, William Styron, and Virginia Woolf), and had the students keep diaries recording their responses to the works.

Not one to celebrate self-inflicted death, Berman nonetheless captures well, and in detail, the profound despair experienced by the authors. Most powerful for me, though, were the strength, insight, and humanity of the students' responses to what they read. Here, for instance, is one student's outrage at how the cerebral dissections of Plath's life and work overlook her suffering: "I picture them fighting over the souvenirs of her demise . . . and forgetting the person who went through the infernal pain. Readers may reify Plath, and the 'cost' to them is that they forget to be human, forget that their subject of study was also a person whose life hurt so much that she was forced to end it."

Works that glorify suicide may pose risks to readers, but Berman reminds us of the affirmation of life that can come from great literature. One student wrote of how Styron's wonderful, and wonderfully influential, *Darkness Visible* (1990) reached through her own depression: "William Styron, the one who made it through, the one who did not succumb. While I still identify more with Anne Sexton, it is you toward whom I gravitate because you are breathing." Berman has written an excellent book.

—Kay Redfield Jamison

## ***Science & Technology***

### ***BRAIN POLICY:***

***How the New Neuroscience Will Change Our Lives and Our Politics.***

By Robert H. Blank. Georgetown Univ. Press. 208 pp. \$60 hardcover, \$21.95 paper

The human brain, the source of political ideas, is increasingly becoming the object of policy, too. According to Blank, a professor of political science at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand, the implications