

advancing his career, vigorously negotiating with editors, publishers, and literary agents. He aims both to secure his long-term reputation as a serious novelist and to generate the income to devote himself to such work. It is a constant struggle. What he hopes to write (long, complex, often disturbing fiction) is, after his early successes, at odds with what the market wants (shorter, simpler, reassuring novels and stories), and many of the newly published letters record this impasse.

Far from suggesting a confident writer with no reason to worry about money or fame, this volume depicts a tenacious, at times desperate attempt to win the promised rewards. James is convinced that his works will crumble into dust. He would have been amazed that almost every published word he wrote remains in print on the brink of the 21st century, and that the large, discriminating audience he despaired of finding is reading them. And though he feared biographers (see his story “The Aspern Papers,” with its “publishing scoundrel” looking for secreted letters), he might have been grateful that one of them has chosen to concentrate on his struggles to make his name rather than on the intensely private world he hid even from his intimates. For readers with similar priorities, Horne’s book is an ideal introduction.

—Alex Zwerdling

***THE GREAT AMERICAN THING:
Modern Art and National Identity,
1915–1935.***

By Wanda M. Corn. Univ. of California Press. 470 pp. \$50

Its smooth white surface evoked ancient Greece, and its sleek curves echoed Constantin Brancusi’s modernism, yet R. Mutt’s *Fountain* was barred from the 1917 exhibition of the Society of Independent Artists in New York. Why? It was a urinal, and therefore offensive to the artists and patrons organizing the show under the tutelage of the French Dadaist Marcel Duchamp. The punch line, of course, is that Duchamp himself had pseudonymously submitted *Fountain* in order to expose the provincialism of his “progressive and modern” American colleagues.

Or so the tale is told by most art historians. To them, *Fountain* inspired the conceptual art that today scorns beautiful objects in favor of provocative public gestures. To Corn, an art



Radiator Building—Night, New York (1927),
by Georgia O’Keeffe

historian at Stanford University, the story is not so simple. In her fascinating study of modernism’s first American phase (during and after World War I), she argues that Duchamp, along with other *transatlantiques* accustomed to the filth and stink of the Paris pisseoir, truly admired American plumbing and saw its gleaming, efficient products as beautiful objects in their own right.

In recent decades art history has split into two modes of inquiry: the formal analysis of the connoisseur and the contextual approach of the cultural theorist. By combining the two, Corn uncovers a rich and often contradictory mix of motives for each object she scrutinizes, from Duchamp’s “readymades” to Joseph Stella’s hallucinatory painting of the Brooklyn Bridge to Georgia O’Keeffe’s stark still lifes of cattle skulls. Corn argues that American modernism really began in the 1910s and 1920s, not in the 1940s, as urged by postwar critics such as Clement Greenberg. The probing, often playful dialogue between European visitors and emigrés (Duchamp, Joseph Stella, Fernand Léger, Francis Picabia) and home-grown artists (O’Keeffe, Gerald Murphy, John Marin, Charles Demuth, Charles Sheeler) set

the terms for a century-long debate over what it means to make art in America.

Corn dissects the antagonism between Alfred Stieglitz (and his followers), who embraced a romantic “soil and spirit” idea of art, and the “machine age” aesthetic imported by Europeans influenced by futurism, cubism, and Dada. To the latter, America was not a vast country with a complex history but rather an edgy, jazzy place (they rarely ventured outside New York City) whose skyscrapers, bridges, and bright lights were icons of modernity. The author takes amused pleasure in the enthusiasms of the Europeans; especially acute is her account of how the wealthy, Yale-educated expatriate Murphy, with his precise, hard-edged renderings of commercial products such as safety razors, fountain pens, and watches, fulfilled “French expectations of how a modern American was supposed to paint and act.”

Ultimately, though, her sympathy lies with those Americans—Demuth, O’Keeffe, and Sheeler—who learned from the Europeans but also got out from under their expectations to create a way of seeing that was both modernist and deeply rooted in the American experience. “It is more difficult in America to work,” Demuth wrote in 1921, then added, “perhaps that will add a quality.” This book comes as close as any to capturing that elusive quality.

—Martha Bayles

BRUCE CHATWIN:

A Biography.

By Nicholas Shakespeare. Doubleday.
618 pp. \$35

As he neared death at age 48, British novelist Bruce Chatwin (1940–1989) blamed his illness on, variously, a visit to a bat cave, a rotten thousand-year-old egg he had eaten in China, and a fungus previously reported only in a handful of Asian peasants and “a killer whale cast up on the shores of Arabia.” Chatwin was really dying of AIDS, but mythologizing lay at the heart of his life as well as his five novels.

Now Shakespeare, a novelist, reveals the man behind the myths. Although Chatwin burned piles of papers during his illness, the biographer still had plenty to work with. Chatwin’s widow offered access to family papers and to restricted material at Oxford University. Shakespeare also gathered interview tapes, letters and diaries, and recollections from nearly everyone who crossed paths with Chatwin.

The result is a comprehensive portrait of a man so multifaceted that art critic Robert Hughes called him not a person but a scrum. By the time Chatwin published his first novel, *In Patagonia* (1977), he was only in his thirties and had already been a renowned art expert at Sotheby’s, a journalist, and an archaeologist whose pet theory was that settling down engenders human aggression.

His literary output was equally unclassifiable. Noting that Chatwin “made life difficult for booksellers, but vastly more interesting to readers,” Shakespeare calls his work “the most glamorous example of a genre in which so-called ‘travel writing’ began to embrace a wider range: autobiography, philosophy, history, *belles lettres*, romantic fiction.” *The Songlines* (1987), the bestseller about a journey across the Australian outback, was even up for a prestigious travel-writing award until the author reminded the judges it was a novel.

As Shakespeare explains, Chatwin’s life was full of paradoxes. He carried on a not-so-secret life as a gay man even as he shared a deep bond with a wife of almost unearthly patience. He was a middle-class boy from Birmingham who grew up to have an address book in which Jackie Onassis’s phone number appeared just before an oryx herder’s. While idealizing nomads’ ability to travel light, he spent a lifetime collecting beautiful objects. He traveled the world despite a bad case of hypochondria, toting a rucksack filled with pills. He was an impossibly handsome charmer but a difficult—and frequent—houseguest who never offered to do the dishes. Unlike *With Chatwin: Portrait of a Writer* (1997), editor Susannah Clapp’s slim memoir, this first-rate biography shows Chatwin in all his complexity.

—Rebecca A. Clay

BLOOMSBURY AND FRANCE:

Art and Friends.

By Mary Ann Caws and Sarah Bird Wright. Oxford Univ. Press. 430 pp. \$35

Generations of artists have escaped the pressure of conformity and the conventional pieties of their time by going abroad, even if only across the English Channel. The resulting encounters have often brought unexpected growth, cross-pollination, and a bountiful alchemy in the exile’s later work. E. M. Forster found freedom in Italy and India, Paul Bowles his true voice in Tangier. From Ernest Hem-