

Similarly, Haberski's survey of a century of film critics is enlivened by the goofy pleasure of discovering that Hugo Münsterberg, a pioneer thinker about the psychology of moviegoing, fretted in 1916 over the "trivializing influence of a steady contact with things which are not worth knowing." (As I write this, MTV turns 20.) One can also savor this nugget of auteur theory from writer Ferydoun Hoveyda in 1960: "The specificity of a cinematographic work lies in the form rather than in its content, in the *mise-en-scène* and not in the scenario or dialogue." On behalf of the Writers' Guild, grateful appreciation.

Haberski, a history professor at Marian College in Indianapolis, tells the story of American movies from the vantage point of the critics—at first the amateur and then the professional observers of the craft. It's a Rosencrantz-and-Guildenstern angle on how the industry struggled to elbow aside jazz and have itself recognized as America's only true art form. We move from the 1920s Chicago Motion Picture Commission hearings on film censorship to the rhetorical arena, where, in the 1950s and early 1960s, Pauline Kael and Andrew Sarris sparred over whether movies were Cinema. We revisit an era when the repeated viewing of the same movie was an act of scholarly love by film-besotted nerds, not just some teenage obsessive-compulsive behavior.

There's also a remarkable chapter on Theodore Dreiser's attempt to force Paramount to make a faithful adaptation of *An American Tragedy* (1925), and on the semifarcical lawsuit he filed when, oddly enough, the studio decided to go another way. Although the Dreiser story doesn't have much to do with criticism (he did enlist a "jury" of critics to watch Paramount's version and deride it for the edification of the judge), it can provide hours of pleasure in pondering which is funnier, artistic pretension or rag-trade philistinism.

The story Haberski tells has, in current Hollywood parlance, a good arc: Art critics despise movies, art critics begin to appreciate movies, art critics love movies to death, the concept of art disappears, and the critics become irrelevant. *Become* irrelevant? The author keeps hinting that the decline in the

salience of criticism is lamentable, as if film criticism has something of value to offer. Unfortunately, he never quite gets around to making the case that it does, whether by educating the public (early critics believed in elevating the taste of the masses—there's that quaintness again) or by exhorting the industry to follow its better angels (if you believe in that premise, I have some Internet stock I'd like to sell you).

I've been in and around the movie industry since I was seven years old, and I've yet to hear any practitioner discuss reviews or critics except in the context of whether they hurt or helped business. In an age when Spielberg and Lucas have redefined motion pictures as increasingly expensive recapitulations of childhood media experiences, the only reason movie critics don't feel totally superfluous is that the God of Media, in His infinite wisdom, invented television critics.

—HARRY SHEARER

SHIKSA GODDESS (OR, HOW I SPENT MY FORTIES): *Essays.*

By Wendy Wasserstein. Knopf.
235 pages. \$23

Wasserstein is allegedly a humorist, but the centerpiece of this collection of "essays," as her publisher boldly calls them, is a self-absorbed psychodrama about her grim struggle to conceive and give birth on the brink of the menopause. It's a case of life imitating art. After winning the Pulitzer Prize for *The Heidi Chronicles*, a play about a middle-aged, intellectual spinster who suddenly decides to become a single mother, Wasserstein, 40, decided to have a baby of her own.

At first she tried to do it the old-fashioned way. "I began studying fertility brochures and showed them to the man I was currently involved with." A real seductress, this girl. When, for some strange reason, her lover fled, she turned to sperm catalogs to find a partner in artificial insemination. But she flunked the fertility tests, so she took drugs to stimulate her flagging ovaries and tried in vitro with "an old and dear friend" as sperm donor. Fate, though, thwarted her again: When she had six egg-and-sperm combos on ice and a surrogate mother lined up, her

doctor told her—so help me, I copied this correctly—“Your eggs are scrambled. They were not properly packed or frozen. We cannot proceed.”

But we must. This was a *project*, and every grad student knows what that means: You have to finish it and turn it in at the end of the trimester or you won't get credit. Abandoning the surrogacy plan, Wasserstein replenished her supply of embryos and had herself implanted with them until, eight years after she started trying, she finally got pregnant at the age of 48. The account of the rest of her ordeal has all the elements of a Lifetime Channel movie set in an obstetrics ward: women in perpetual states of self-discovery, female bonding in the sisterhood of the stirrups, the noble African-American mother in the next bed, one life-threatening emergency after another, and no kidney stone left unturned.

Wasserstein's baby, weighing less than two pounds and afflicted with various lung and brain problems, was delivered by caesarean in the sixth month and had to remain in an incubator for three months. But the infant lived, and the book carries the de rigueur single-motherhood blurb: “Wendy Wasserstein lives in New York City with her daughter, Lucy Jane.”

Wasserstein calls her writing “satiric,” but she never goes for the jugular when the jocular will do. The title essay, in which she gives herself WASP roots to match Hillary Clinton's claim to Jewish roots, is a heavy-handed riff, full of trite Aryan-from-Darien stereotypes long since run into the ground by Philip Roth and Gail Parent. What passes for humor here is the fluffed-up agony of women's magazines, where many of these pieces originally appeared, or brittle New York smart talk involving name-dropping, place-dropping, and label-dropping. Lunch with Jamie Lee Curtis, dinner with Tom Brokaw; Armani this, Russian Tea Room that; Bottega Veneta bags here, Plaza Hotel there; and a bizarre story about using votive candles for shoe trees, “which accidentally burned my Manolo Blahnik pumps.” Even the baby has an “Isolette-brand incubator.”

Wasserstein seemingly considers herself a cultural leader, but she comes across as the kind who leads where everybody is already

WQ

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going. She talks the talk about liberation and self-determination, yet she follows every fad.

—FLORENCE KING

THE DEATH OF COMEDY.

By Erich Segal. Harvard Univ. Press.
589 pp. \$35

“I fart at thee!” The motto on the Farrelly brothers' crest? Nope. It's the first line of Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610), and just a trace of the abundant evidence in Segal's book that the comic theater has always had a rude streak. A lewd streak too, right from the start in ancient Athens, where the comic actors wore outsized phalluses and the nimble theater-going citizens divided their time between feeling patriotic and feeling randy—or, when roused by Aristophanes, feeling both at once.

Segal traces the history of dramatic comedy from A (Aristophanes in the fifth century B.C.) to B (Samuel Beckett in the 20th century A.D.). He first describes comedy's origins in Greek festival and ritual, especially rituals of rebirth, erotic renewal, regeneration, and rec-