

rather than the end of this review because they seem germane to the argument. In 1995, Young, an Englishman then 32 years old, was hired to come to New York and join the staff of *Vanity Fair*. The magazine's editor, Graydon Carter, fired him after about two years, a period in which, Young readily acknowledges, he contributed next to no writing, messed up nearly all the administrative tasks he was assigned, and committed a series of other blunders, including bringing in a stripper on Take Your Daughter to Work Day. He does not seek to absolve himself completely from responsibility for his flame-out, but mostly he blames *Vanity Fair* (in his view, an upscale supermarket tabloid under the thumb of publicists for the celebrities it covers), New York journalists ("pinched and hidebound careerists who never got drunk and were safely tucked up in bed by 10 p.m."), and America itself (in the grips of a politically correct tyranny of the majority, much as Alexis de Tocqueville predicted).

But a reading of the book suggests an alternate view: that Young failed because he turned out to be a lazy and undistinguished magazine writer. True, *Vanity Fair* prints its share—more than its share—of celebrity nonsense. But the readers, and consequently the ads, pulled in by the fluff have allowed the magazine to be one of the few in the world with a commitment to the long, exhaustively reported narrative. That isn't Young's kind of thing—if he couldn't be bothered to spend 17 seconds on the Internet checking the opening date of *The Front Page*, how could he be expected to hunt through dusty archives, travel to war zones, or hound stonewalling sources? No, he came to America in order to cover and hang around with celebrities. It's just that he wanted to do it *the right way*, which in his mind had something vaguely to do with the Algonquin Round Table, *The Front Page*, and Jimmy Stewart's character in *The Philadelphia Story*. The trouble is, there *is* no right way to cover celebrities, or rather, to the extent that there is, it has nothing to do with good journalism, good writing, or being able to take a good look at yourself in the mirror.

I don't want to give the impression that Young is unfailingly self-righteous. His first impulse is always to make himself the butt of the joke, and most of the book consists of entertaining anecdotes about his spectacular and mundane failures in the workplace and else-

where. (My favorite ends with Diana Ross screaming at him for hogging a pay phone at the *Vanity Fair* Oscar party.) After much pain and humiliation he eventually acquires a bit of self-knowledge, which he sketches in a deft shift from comedy to something like introspection.

Indeed, Young gets into trouble only when he tries to make a point about something other than himself. So enjoy *How To Lose Friends and Alienate People* for the comic set pieces, but as soon as you encounter the words *Tocqueville* or *Algonquin*, skip to the next chapter.

—BEN YAGODA

ME AND SHAKESPEARE:

Adventures with the Bard, A Memoir.

By Herman Gollob. Doubleday. 341 pp.
\$26

Gollob's epiphany about William Shakespeare came rather late in life. But when it did come, it hit with great force, making him feel what Celia feels in *As You Like It*: "O wonderful, wonderful, and most wonderful wonderful, and yet again wonderful, and after that, out of all hooping!"

Gollob spent his career with words, first as a theatrical agent, then as a literary agent, and finally as a book editor, but only after retiring did he become a serious student of Shakespeare. And, soon, a teacher of Shakespeare as well, as a part-time instructor at Caldwell College in New Jersey. In this "out of all hooping" book, his grace in writing, excitement in discovery, and adoration—"the passion I'd begun to develop for Shakespeare was a mystical experience, a religious experience"—most resemble those of another great Bardologist, British columnist Bernard Levin, author of the similarly enthralling *Enthusiasms* (1983). Both men are blessed with an abundance of life force, and both know how to write a terrific book.

Along with his stimulating and contagious enthusiasm, Gollob provides insights into Shakespearean characters that are sound and often stunning, as when he compares Coriolanus to Douglas MacArthur. He notes that Shakespeare's main characters leave the stage different—usually broader, deeper, kinder—than they entered it. In this sense, Gollob himself becomes a Shakespearean character. Like Hamlet, Portia, Petruchio, Henry V, Antony, Prospero, and others, he suffers, learns,

reflects, accepts, and ultimately changes.

I was dashed only to see H. L. Mencken cited for the proposition that “in general women are practical, men are romanticists.” Excuse me, but Shakespeare reached that conclusion centuries earlier. How about Juliet, who proposes marriage while Romeo’s getting further tangled in his poetry? Or Beatrice, who, when Benedict asks her—he thinks heroically, but in fact rhetorically—how he can help solve the key problem of *Much Ado about Nothing*, replies succinctly, “Kill Claudio”? Or Portia, who, when Antonio is whining and preparing to

die in the arms of his useless sidekick, instantly takes action to save him? So many of Shakespeare’s women are more practical and more intelligent than his men that one wonders, “What can she possibly see in that schlub?”

Gollob sparks his students and readers to be mad about the Bard, and that’s a wonderful thing to do. He quotes John Dryden as saying that Shakespeare has “the largest and most comprehensive soul.” In that respect as well, Gollob is Shakespearean. This book could only have come from someone with a big soul.

—KEN ADELMAN

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

THE UNDAMMING OF AMERICA.

By Elizabeth Grossman. Counterpoint.
320 pp. \$27

Rivers are the bloodstream of a continent, ferrying the nutrients that keep it healthy and recycling its waste products into new sources of energy. We know that now. But for two centuries America dammed its rivers in the name of progress, nearly destroying nature’s brilliant scheme in a misguided effort to improve upon it. As a source of electrical power, dams are nearly obsolete, accounting for only 11 percent of our total usage. They decimate fish populations, obstruct piscine migration, and thus disrupt the food chain. They change water temperatures and degrade water quality in ways harmful to both vegetation and wildlife. They change soil quality and prevent nature’s flood control mechanisms—wetlands—from doing their job. They hold back the silt, gravel, and nutrients that make agriculture sustainable. They breed bacterial disease.

But dam removal creates almost as many human and technical problems as did putting the damn things up in the first place. Dams invited some people to populate deserts and pushed others off soon-to-be-flooded land. Dams created lakes that created tourism that created jobs. Dams shaped the history of entire states, notably California.

Grossman, a native New Yorker, became radicalized on the subject after moving to Oregon. There, she says, “rivers and salmon are with us as we walk to the corner,” yet dams have rendered many species of salmon nearly extinct. For

this book she also visited communities where river reclamation efforts are underway, with varying degrees of success, in Maine, North Carolina, Colorado, Arizona, Wisconsin, California, Montana, and Washington. So far, Wisconsin—an intensely watery place, with 40,000 miles of rivers, streams, lakes, ponds, and wetlands—has the best record of dam removal, largely because there is no shortage of water to begin with.

In dry states such as Colorado, Arizona, and California, by contrast, the antiremoval activists are holding the line. In California, where the grid of dams and water diversions reminds the author of a map of the New York City subway system, the politics of dam removal remain highly charged. California’s water consumption competes with the needs of native fish and river restoration, so much so that the state legislature recently declined to fund even a mere assessment of the state’s dams. At the same time, many of California’s small, privately owned dams have been so poorly maintained that their existence poses more of a threat than does their removal.

While the complexities of dam removal cannot be overstated, Grossman learns, neither can the conviction of environmentalists, politicians, and others concerned with civic planning that the time to act is now. “The longer we wait to remove dams that have outlived their usefulness,” she concludes, “the more difficult the problems plaguing these rivers may become.”

—A. J. HEWAT