

declared her adoring husband, who graciously disregarded her periodic love affairs. The affairs, like much else in her life, found their way into her witty, carefully crafted diary entries, and then into her poetry. Through the diaries, Epstein traces obvious and pure links between the poet's feelings and her verse.

Millay yearned for the respect of the critics as well the devotion of the public, but she lost both with *Make Bright the Arrows* (1940), a heavy-handed tribute to the Allies. "There are a few good poems, but it is mostly plain propaganda," she acknowledged to one correspondent. She hoped reviewers would at least single out the good poems, but they didn't. Her reputation never recovered, and morphine, alcohol, and agoraphobia overshadowed her final decade.

Shifting fashions in poetry further dulled her reputation. Millay's great strength was fiery passion, not the calculated perplexity of Eliot and Pound. Today, in an age dominated by narrative poems in the third person, her first-person confessional verse can seem sentimental. But don't be surprised if Epstein's vigilant investigation sparks a Millay renaissance—a new wave of admiration for the many costumes of her erotic sovereignty.

—ALLISON EIR JENKS

JAY'S JOURNAL OF ANOMALIES.

By Ricky Jay. Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
202 pp. \$40

The historian of stage magic faces a daunting assignment: recreating spectacles as vividly as possible while observing the taboo against revealing their methods. Thus, writing histories of conjuring (and such related forms of deception as confidence games and sports hustling) is itself an exercise in sleight-of-hand. Readers have to be entertained but not fully enlightened, convinced of the skill of the performance but left arguing among themselves about the secrets—especially because sometimes even the experts can only guess.

Jay, a magician's magician, widely considered the outstanding sleight-of-hand specialist of our time, is up to this challenge. He is a stage and television performer/writer, an actor and consultant to the film industry in

its portrayals of conjurers and confidence artists, a scholar and collector of magic history, and the author of *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women* (1986) and the cult classic *Cards as Weapons* (1977).

Jay's Journal of Anomalies presents material from the author's bibliophile quarterly of the same title, with rare and superbly reproduced illustrations from the author's collection. Each issue is an excursion to the farther shores of theater and the extremes of the human condition. We learn about levitation, a favorite of spectators at least since the days of Euripides, and about such early conjurers as Isaac Fawkes, whose skill at extracting eggs from a seemingly empty black bag stunned his 18th-century contemporaries.

Beyond stage magic, *Jay's Journal* celebrates the full and sometimes frightening gamut of a centuries-old European and American demimonde. Where academics would probe the otherness of the past and see these performances as keys to vanished mentalities, Jay seems to revel in dissolving conventional boundaries between past and present. An affable if sardonic cicerone, he has special affection for the acts of the 18th and early 19th centuries, but he also notes that the last flea circus in New York City lasted until 1965 and holds out hope for the revival of the art.

The flea circus is on the divide between two classes of oddities that fascinate Jay. One is the animal prodigy, such as the mathematical poodle Munito and another of the breed called Inimitable Dick, who mimicked the sensational fin-de-siècle illuminated dances of Loïe Fuller: timeless feats that reveal the skills of animals and trainers alike.

Jay takes special delight in questionable creatures purported to be freaks of nature. Among the fabulous beasts exhibited to the gullible were the Mighty Bovalapus (actually an ordinary Philippines water buffalo) and the Cynocephalus or dog-headed man (probably a yellow baboon). Today's taboo against exploiting disabilities would doom the careers of brilliant dwarf performers such as Hervio Nano, the Gnome Fly. Our billionaires, whatever their other failings, do not wager on the weight of extremely fat people, as 18th-century English aristocrats did. And how do we account for the strange

enthusiasm, well into the last century, for apparent crucifixions and the simulated amputation of noses? The Hunger Artist of Kafka's famous story had, as Jay reveals, many real-life counterparts.

Perhaps, though, taste has changed less than we might suppose. In a postindustrial

society, we gawk not at physical exhibitionism but at frontier science and televised self-revelation. Just as Jay celebrates the Bonassus and the Bold Grimace Spaniard, perhaps some future connoisseur will revel in Dolly the Sheep and *The Jerry Springer Show*.

—EDWARD TENNER

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

STANDING UP TO THE ROCK.

By T. Louise Freeman-Toole. Univ. of Nebraska Press. 213 pp. \$26

"In our wedding vows," writes Freeman-Toole, a freelance writer and sixth-generation Californian, "my husband and I pledged to live together in a 'green and peaceful place.'" A few years into the marriage, Silicon Valley's sprawl drove them from Santa Cruz. They ended up in an agricultural region called the Palouse, along the Idaho-Washington border. "It was like being able to take our children back to the time we had grown up in—a safer, slower, and kindlier world." Alternately engaging, lovely, frustrating, dense, and thoughtful, *Standing Up to the Rock* recounts this change of worlds.

But not without a good many side trips. Freeman-Toole tells of her ancestors and of her strong emotional response to rugged landscapes. She includes a heroine's journey and a feminist awakening, a tutorial in cattle ranching, and a population of eccentric and fascinating characters, many of whom deserve entire books unto themselves. Some of these tales reach fruition better than others. Occasionally, a character appears with a sketchy introduction, disappears, and pops up again later with biographical back story, as in a screenplay. Freeman-Toole's poetic prose is more than enough to engage the reader without such gimmickry.

The author redeems herself in the last chapter, which is positively elegiac. She quotes her friend Liz Burns, a rancher (and one of those who surely merits her own biography): "Stop thinking in the abstract about the environment, the economy, politics. Start seeing individual porch lights. Care about *these* animals, *these* native plants, *these* people, this perfect place." The admo-

nation made me wonder about those perfect places within us all, and why, when we find them, we are often compelled to leave. It made me contemplate the central theme of this rich book: what it really means to be home.

—ROSANNE CASH

ON MY HONOR:

Boy Scouts and the Making of American Youth.

By Jay Mechling. Univ. of Chicago Press. 323 pp. \$30

At the start of *On My Honor*, Mechling promises to steer a middle course between the right, which sees the Boy Scouts as the solution to America's "character" problem, and the left, which sees them as part of the problem. He calls both of these views skewed, but it is soon clear that he deems the right-wing view considerably more skewed. A former Eagle Scout who is now a professor of American studies at the University of California, Davis, Mechling asserts his bona fides by citing his "progressive male guilt" over the "militarism," "sexism," "homophobia," and "disrespect for real Indians" of his own scouting days. Little has changed, he reports: The similarities between scout camp of the late 1950s and scout camp of the late 1990s are "too many to celebrate a victory of 'progressive' masculinity over Cold War masculinity."

A curious idea, this distinction between "progressive" and "Cold War" masculinity. What he means by the latter is a harder, more macho masculinity, which he discredits as (among other things) a mere contingency of the Cold War. He himself advocates a softer, more tender masculinity, and even tries to claim some of its social-science