

presumed insignia of status—the right schools, the right clubs (and club ties), the right suits and shoes and cars.

Wonderfully attuned to the calibration of social codes in America, O'Hara holds the record for the number of short stories published in *The New Yorker*, and his books have sold millions of copies. But the bloated best sellers that made him rich in the 1950s and 1960s lost him the favor of critics, who insisted that his best work was either in his short stories or, worse, in his earliest novels, *Appointment in Samarra* (1934) and *Butterfield 8* (1935). Though O'Hara loved money, he desperately needed the respect of his peers too. And sometimes he got it—as when, in 1964, he received the Award of Merit for the Novel from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, an honor bestowed previously on Theodore Dreiser, Thomas Mann, and Ernest Hemingway. But the prize he thought he deserved, the big one, always eluded him. When John Steinbeck won the Nobel in 1962, O'Hara telegraphed his congratulations and said that he could “think of only one other author I'd rather see get it.”

The once-famous O'Hara has now fallen low. In part, that may be because manners no longer matter in America. When cellphones foul the air and flip-flops grace the workplace, and when any self, no matter how puny, qualifies as imperial, who can be anxious about the wrong tie? But O'Hara's reputation may be down as well because the man gave his critics so much reason to do him in. He was an obnoxious drunk, an insecure snob, a boastful and insufferable son of a bitch. That some folks suffered him nonetheless, and were his friends, is the mystery Geoffrey Wolff sets out to solve in this new biography: “The specifics of why a cherished friend was cherished—I had the hubris to believe I could name.” In the event, he doesn't quite succeed in naming them, though he brings a novelist's finesse and a wisened-up adult's jauntiness to the task. And unlike biographers who pretend to be omniscient, he is always ready to concede that we can't know what really happened.

There have been several earlier biographies of O'Hara. Do we need another? Maybe, if it gets his name before the public again. But shake the facts of the life as dexterously as Wolff does, they still roll out

snake eyes. To know the petty details of O'Hara's behavior—such as that he wanted a friend to steal matchbooks from New York's tony Racquet and Tennis Club so that he could leave them around his Princeton home for guests to see—is painful if you admire the fiction.

But if reading *about* O'Hara is a chore, reading *O'Hara* can be addictive. Though a fan, Wolff is insufficiently persuasive about the merits of the fiction. In four decades of novels and short stories, O'Hara created, mostly out of the doings of the Pennsylvania gentry in and around Pottsville, an entire fictional universe, immediately recognizable as his, where the painstakingly recounted personal and institutional histories seem to bleed together into a single vast chronicle of decline and disappointment. Yes, the multigenerational novels lumber from moment to moment, and always have years to go, but you keep turning the pages. And dozens of the short stories are flat-out, dead-on perfect (see *Selected Short Stories of John O'Hara*, with an introduction by novelist Louis Begley, published earlier this year). If O'Hara didn't tell *the* truth about his time, at least he told truths, and better than most of the competition.

—JAMES M. MORRIS

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**GOOD MORNING,  
MR. ZIP ZIP ZIP:  
Movies, Memory, and World War II.**

By Richard Schickel. Ivan R. Dee. 329 pp.  
\$27.50

*Good Morning, Mr. Zip, Zip, Zip* (the title comes from a children's song) is Richard Schickel's engrossing memoir of a “silly, hopeful boy” growing up in Wauwatosa, Wisconsin, in the 1930s and '40s. He dreams of literary fame until discovering the world of the movies, a world more “immediate and potent,” and ambiguously illuminating, too, than the sun-dappled suburban streets and sandlots around him. The author, an only child, looks back at his family's “sad failures of ambition, more subtle failures of love” with clear-eyed honesty and not a hint of “false nostalgia.”

We have come to expect sophisticated and articulate plain speaking from Schickel in his long tenure as film critic for *Time*. He

has written more than 30 books about the movies and iconic American figures such as Walt Disney, Clint Eastwood, and D. W. Griffith. But he is also the author of the thoughtful study *Intimate Strangers: The Culture of Celebrity* (1985), which, with what he calls here “a certain contempt for the false pieties and hypocrisies of our old public culture,” explores America’s enduring fascination with manipulated (and manipulating) images. The contempt is more rueful than sour.

In this memoir, he aims to weave together an unremarkable boyhood with the movies that informed it and, at the same time, to bring perspective to the “greatest generation” myth that wraps a flag around the realities of a dreadful war, much as wartime movies did. World War II films “always insisted on putting heroism within reach of ordinariness,” he writes. “This was, of course, nonsense. It may even have been—in the long run, for me and my generation—dangerous nonsense. Dangerous in the sense that it created false anticipations of adulthood, falsely idealized expectations—at least in me, trying so hard to decipher the mysteries of the universe.”

Schickel acknowledges the uplift, reassurance, and hope imparted by such films as *Mrs. Miniver* and *Since You Went Away*, with their sanitized parables of home-front courage and unity. They provided solace; they served freedom’s cause. Yet they also

“shyly, secretively, but authoritatively spoke” in the tongue of “wartime lies” for the “official culture.” He writes with an immediacy derived from having looked again at every film he discusses. Best image: captured nurse Veronica Lake hiding a live grenade in her cleavage as she lures a leering Japanese soldier to a fatal tryst in *So Proudly We Hail*.

The hateful Japanese, we can see now, were easier to demonize than the hateful Germans because, with so many Americans of European extraction, Hitler and fascism could be made to seem temporary aberrations. And never mind about the Holocaust, which virtually no American movie even mentioned, despite Hollywood’s and Washington’s certain knowledge of the developing horrors.

If this sounds merely revisionist or iconoclastic, Schickel’s tone is elegiac and humane. Deploring the feel-good fraudulence of *The Story of G.I. Joe* and, postwar, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, he writes that “if we cannot remember truthfully, we cannot think clearly or behave decently”—goals this honest, gracefully written book achieves. It is surely accidental, but Schickel’s pages are made more potent by the unavoidable parallel to our contemporary moment of bumper-sticker rhetoric as newer generations—ours and theirs—serve and fall in missions far from Main Street.

—STEVEN BACH

## HISTORY

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**THE IRISH WAY:  
*A Walk through Ireland’s  
Past and Present.***

By Robert Emmett Ginna. Random House. 298 pp. \$24.95

The walk through Ireland’s past promised in the subtitle of this book is far more compelling than the author’s walk through the present. Robert Emmett Ginna, who calls himself a “history-besotted writer,” has a sharp eye and a sure feel for the castles, forts, great houses, monasteries, and other places that contain so much vivid Irish history. He is adept at bringing to life the narratives embedded in the

landscape, and especially at summoning up a sense of “the dust of distant battles.” Visiting the Famine Museum in County Roscommon is an occasion for an abridged history of Ireland’s worst catastrophe. Elsewhere he recaps the 1798 Rebellion (the so-called Year of the French), and artfully recounts the battles waged at Birr Castle in County Offaly and the legends surrounding the Rock of Cashel, which include everyone from St. Patrick himself to Brian Boru. He is also gifted at resurrecting the memory of a select crew of departed luminaries, including Ireland’s most renowned composer, the blind harper Tur-