

regard, and, over the years, Saroyan “withdrew to the hermitage of his illusion, where even his children became part of the conspiracy threatening his immortality.”

In this new biography, which draws heavily on a journal Saroyan kept from 1934 until his death, the writer is an unappealing figure. Leggett, a novelist himself and the author of *Ross and Tom* (1974), an exemplary nonfiction account of the perils of literary success in America, has to explain up front why he nonetheless identifies with Saroyan: “because he found that being a writer lifted him out of obscurity and the scorn of family and friends. He also found that self-reliance, the dependence on his own mind and heart to find his way, was the only reliable compass.” In Leggett’s telling, Saroyan’s story, “so gallantly begun, becomes a tragedy of rage and rejection.”

Which may understate the matter. The accumulation of sad and incriminating (and, finally, trivial and wearisome) detail about Saroyan in these pages—the selfishness, the envy, the arrogance, the suspicion, the ingratitude, the hunger for money, the haggling for money, the irresponsibility with money, the body blows dealt love and friendship—keeps you reading all right, the way a highway accident keeps you looking. It also has you asking, with increasing frequency, Why did anyone put up with this man? And why did publishers continue to want to publish him when he offered them work of embarrassingly low quality?

Leggett omits the evidence that might have answered the questions and tempered the portrait. There are no pages, or even paragraphs, from Saroyan’s work, though time and again the book calls for them and even whets your appetite: “[Saroyan] had an ear for the rhythm, sonority, and sensuality of colloquial speech. He had an eye for the precisely right detail that revealed an emotion, a desire, an anxiety. Although a man stoutly opposed to his own formal education, his aim for the bull’s-eye word was a marksman’s.” Where the revelatory, and perhaps redeeming, passages of Saroyan’s prose might appear, there is only additional damning detail. The omission, surely intentional, is astonishing in a biography of a man whose only reason to be was to write. Saroyan

careens through triumph and failure and emotional disarray, and we watch. But we wait in vain to hear.

—JAMES MORRIS

**WHY A PAINTING
IS LIKE A PIZZA:
A Guide to Understanding
and Enjoying Modern Art.**

By Nancy Heller. Princeton Univ. Press.

192 pp. \$29.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paper

When Morley Safer made fun of contemporary art in a notorious (at least in the art world) 1993 broadcast of *60 Minutes*, his scorn liberated thousands of people to say out loud what they had long thought. To wit: A child of five could do that; art ought to be beautiful; and, as Al Capp put it, “abstract art is a product of the untalented, sold by the unprincipled to the utterly bewildered.”

A professor of art history at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Heller wants to persuade the bewildered that the emperor of contemporary art does in fact have clothes—confusing and abstract clothes, but clothes nonetheless. She realizes that people dislike contemporary art because it makes them feel stupid, so she shies away from the conceptual in favor of formal aspects that everyone can appreciate: color, material, composition, and the like.

Pointing out that Monet’s technique, beloved today, once was reviled by critics and viewers, she demystifies the aesthetic choices and technical skills behind such works as Gene Davis’s stripe paintings and Robert Ryman’s all-white ones. She does a terrific job dissecting the brouhaha over the *Sensation* exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani fomented outrage over Chris Ofili’s elephant-dung-dotted portrait of the Virgin Mary. She also shows how installation art can recast our perspective on the objects and spaces of ordinary life. She admits to having been duped into thinking that a bronze plaque by Jenny Holzer was “real,” and not a piece of art. “After this discovery, I felt somewhat foolish,” she writes, “but ever since then I find myself looking far more carefully at every bronze plaque I pass.”

Yet for all her jargon-free charm, Heller is unlikely to convince the Morley Safers. In

choosing to focus on formal elements, she skirts the intellectual underpinnings crucial to an understanding of much contemporary art. The truth is that a great deal of it isn't self-explanatory, nor is it the kind of thing the average person would want hanging over the mantel. It often engages less with the world around it than with the art that preceded it or the museum that exhibits it. And in most cases, the viewer is helped immeasurably by learning the artist's biography and intellectual framework. Art has taken a journey away from the representational, and, however hard that makes life for tour guides, it isn't coming back.

Indeed, one wonders whether Heller's task is necessary. Why *should* art be equally accessible to all? What does it matter if most galleries attract only a cadre of well-informed insiders, while the rest of the world buys Thomas Kinkadee prints at the mall? It evidently matters to Heller, who wants people to stop worrying and enjoy the art. And it matters to museum curators, who hope to bring in the masses. Someday, a blockbuster Chris Ofili retrospective may attract the same adoring crowds that Monet's water lilies do today. Maybe we'll even see a line of dung-encrusted holiday greeting cards.

—ALIX OHLIN

REMEMBERING PATSY.

By Brian Mansfield. Rutledge Hill Press. 95 pp. \$14.99

Forty years after her death, Patsy Cline (1932–63) is a bigger star than ever. She sells more albums than when she was alive. Her haunting rendition of “Crazy,” a Willie Nelson composition, is the most played song on jukeboxes. And for fans who want to “see” Patsy as well as hear her, two biographical plays are currently touring. It's a remarkable afterlife for any singer, especially one whose Nashville stardom lasted less than two years—from her first hit, “I Fall to Pieces,” in July 1961, until her death in March 1963.

Her short career (along with three other Grand Ole Opry stars, she was killed in a plane crash near Camden, Tennessee) left us with too few photographs, and the same ones tend to get reproduced over and over again. I praise Mansfield, a journalist and music critic, for

unearthing new pictures in the Nashville music establishment: the Grand Ole Opry Museum, the Country Music Hall of Fame, and particularly the files of Les Leverett, official Opry photographer in the 1960s. Mansfield's short book intersperses these photographs with quotations. Singer k.d. lang, for instance, tells of receiving two Patsy Cline albums on her 21st birthday: “I started listening to them seriously and just being blown away by her interpretative quality and the timbre of her voice. . . . It was pretty powerful stuff, powerful to the point where it was transforming.” In tribute, lang named her first band the “re-clines.”

Remembering Patsy is no scholarly treatise (so we don't know where the author got the lang quote), but a sort of love poem by someone who wishes to pay his respects to a voice we all recognize. Many of the book's images display Patsy Cline's appeal beyond the provinces of country music. Photograph after photograph has her in cocktail dresses, looking like Dinah Shore or Connie Francis. We also see her arguing with producers at Decca Records, making nice to disc jockeys who may play her songs, conferring with her manager, and schmoozing with country music star and Louisiana governor Jimmie Davis (best known for composing “You Are My Sunshine”). This is Patsy Cline at work, not singing but engaged in the real labor of keeping her singing career alive. The publicity photographs most familiar to us—Cline in a cowgirl outfit—reveal only a



Patsy Cline shares a laugh in 1961 with Louisiana's governor Jimmie Davis.