

## Current Books

older folk. Two unhappily married couples who are the focus of the show suffer a kind of collective nervous breakdown in a concluding production number of Ziegfeld-like splendor. At the end, the whole cast faces the dawn through the shattered back wall of the theater.

What a lot of mopey, rainy-day stuff, and thanks largely to Sondheim's virtuoso score, how exhilarating.

In telling the story of this one show so precisely, Chapin writes a shadow history of every Broadway show that ever had a difficult birth and pulled itself together. What seems now all of a piece was once just a lot of pieces, and he lets you watch as they're put together, first one way and then another—songs added and dropped, lyrics altered, dances adjusted, dialogue introduced one day and excised the next, costumes sewn, fitted, and shredded. He records the actors' daily bouts of generosity, jealousy, insecurity, and fear. He notices when they blow a line, flub a lyric, or miss a dance step, all of which happen surprisingly often. As the matter-of-fact details accumulate, you're reminded just how *live* live theater is, and how subject to human frailty: a crapshoot behind a velvet curtain.

*Follies* may be the smartest Broadway musical ever—not the fleetest or wittiest or funniest, surely, or the most moving, if only because there's *Carousel*, but the one in which the layers of emotional resonance are built with so much intelligence. If the show had an epigraph, it would be from A. E. Housman: "With rue my heart is laden." But *Follies* is shrewd enough to wear its rue with a difference: sequins.

—JAMES M. MORRIS

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### TILT:

#### *A Skewed History of the Tower of Pisa.*

By Nicholas Shrady. Simon & Schuster. 161 pp. \$21.95

Pisa's problematic bell tower, the final component of a complex of religious buildings undertaken to celebrate the triumph of Christianity over Islam in general and the victory of Pisan forces over the Saracens in particular, began leaning soon after construction

began in 1172. Six years later, when the tower was three stories high, work on it halted—nobody knows exactly why—and didn't restart for a century. Between 1272 and 1278, the uppermost four stories were added, after which construction was once again suspended. In 1370, the tower was finally completed with the addition of the belfry.

Once the tower reached its intended height of 180 feet, the political fortunes of Pisa began to head in the opposite direction. After a century of sieges, the city surrendered to Florentine forces in 1509. It would have been symbolically logical for the tower to collapse then, but this was not to be. Instead, it went on to become the ideal setting for young professor Galileo Galilei's experiments with falling objects, a story as appealing as it is unfounded.

In the 19th century, clever but desperate marketers concocted a different fiction about the tower in order to invert potential embarrassment. They maintained that the lean was intentional. The tower-de-force, so to speak, standing firmly on the brink of disaster, was meant to reflect Pisan survival and past glory.

In his enjoyable account of the creation and survival of the tower, Nicholas Shrady, the author of *Sacred Roads: Adventures from the Pilgrimage Trail* (1999), rescues one of the world's most familiar architectural oddities from the bin of one-liners. He reconnects the tower with the curious collection of people and events caught in the pull of its off-kilter orbit. His pleasant, clear, and often amusing tale is weakened, however, by somewhat stingy illustrations and by all-too-gimmicky packaging. Instead of the usual rectangle, the book has a slanted parallelogram shape intended to evoke the tower—as if the publisher lost faith in the content and felt the need to jazz it up.

—DAVID MACAULAY

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### PUSHKIN:

#### *A Biography.*

By T. J. Binyon. Knopf. 727 pp. \$35

In the view of his friend Nikolai Gogol, the poet Aleksandr Sergeyevich Pushkin (1799–1837) was "an extraordinary and perhaps unique manifestation of the Russian spirit." And not only that: Gogol believed

that Pushkin was “the Russian man in his ultimate development, as he, perhaps, will be in 200 years.” This isn’t necessarily a fate to be wished upon anyone, though, for as T. J. Binyon’s magnificent biography makes plain, the apparently manic-depressive, womanizing, jealous, attention-deficient Pushkin chose, or had forced upon him, the perfection of his work over the perfection of his life. The familiar story—youthful rebelliousness, exile, negotiations with tsarist power, marriage to Russia’s greatest beauty, growing financial and emotional pressures, and the fatal duel with a young man who had tried to woo his wife—is presented here with such verve and careful interlacing of the narrative strands that we seem to be hearing it for the first time.

Binyon, a writer and critic of crime novels as well as a Slavic scholar, uses his investigative skills to sift and synthesize a huge amount of material. The result is a glorious and entertaining tour through the history and culture of Russia’s golden age, a balanced and detailed description of Pushkin and his times, a reliable Who’s Who of his friends and foes, and a psychologically convincing portrayal of the man himself. In all these respects, this is the best biography of the poet yet published in any language.

Unfortunately, though, it neglects the poetry. Setting out “to free the complex and interesting figure of Pushkin the man from the heroic simplicity of Pushkin the myth,” Binyon largely avoids literary analysis, which he deems the business of critics rather than biographers. This decision seems a mistake. The art could illuminate some of the dark corners of the life, given Pushkin’s habit of encoding or masking his own experiences in his works. And simply on their own terms, those works, especially the verse novel *Eugene Onegin* (1823–31)—which one critic has termed an “encyclopedia of Russia”—deserve more detailed analysis than they receive here.

Pushkin himself cautioned against letting the artist’s life eclipse the art. In a letter to a friend and fellow poet in 1825, he wrote: “Why do you regret the loss of Byron’s notes? Thank God they are lost. . . . We know Byron well enough. We have

seen him on the throne of glory; we have seen him in the torments of his great soul. . . . Why should you want to see him on a chamber pot? The crowd greedily reads confessions, memoirs, etc., because in its baseness it rejoices at the abasement of the high, at the weaknesses of the strong. It is in rapture at the disclosure of anything loathsome. ‘He is small like us; he is loathsome like us!’ You are lying, you scoundrels: He’s small and he’s loathsome, but not the way you are—differently.”

Despite its shortcomings, this thickly descriptive and beautifully written book is one of the outstanding literary biographies of recent years. It comes trailing clouds of glorious reviews from Britain, where it won the Samuel Johnson Whitbread Award for the best nonfiction book of 2002. And—perhaps the greatest praise one can offer—it richly deserves to be translated into Russian.

—ANDREW REYNOLDS

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**AN OPEN BOOK:**

***Coming of Age in the Heartland.***

By Michael Dirda. Norton. 335 pp.  
\$24.95

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**SO MANY BOOKS,  
SO LITTLE TIME:**

***A Year of Passionate Reading.***

By Sara Nelson. Putnam.  
242 pp. \$22.95

One person’s obsessive-compulsive disorder is another’s badge of honor. The pleasures of list making surely account in part for the perennial “best of” magazine features: best movies, books, restaurants, and, in an effort to jazz up the phenomenon, more obscure categories such as best public place to have sex and best use of tripe. These lists are popular, perhaps because they require no engagement—they’re meant to be skimmed. So what to make of books that build narratives around lists?

In *An Open Book*, Michael Dirda, Pulitzer Prize-winning critic of *The Washington Post*, remembers the books of his childhood in Lorain, Ohio, in the 1950s and ’60s. We follow him from his primary-school readers to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The*