

IN BRIEF

ARTS & LETTERS

Critic and Creep

THIS IS THE SECOND BIOGRAPHY of Clement Greenberg, kingmaker to that group of artists now known as Abstract Expressionists, to appear since his death in 1994. And Alice Goldfarb Marquis, like the earlier biographer, Florence Rubinfeld, can't help noticing that Greenberg was a terrible, terrible man. He socked people at cocktail parties, neglected his wives and children, whinged through an abbreviated tour of military duty, tormented his comfortably middle-class parents, scorned low-class "Jews that wear jewelry," bullied and manipulated his friends. He was a selfish, lying, cheating, arrogant, lazy, misogynistic SOB. In his 1998 *New Yorker* review of the Rubinfeld biography, art critic Adam Gopnik seized upon the moment when character became destiny: During a visit to the countryside, five-year-old Clement pursued an unsuspecting tame goose and clubbed it to death with a shovel. "Anyone familiar with the varieties of popular biography," wrote Gopnik, "can sense the future as it approaches: the slow escalation in targets, the growing taste for blood, the rise to bigger and uglier assaults, the sordid end. The die is cast; the boy will become an art critic."

Of course: Art criticism isn't for mensches. Yet as Marquis wends her way toward Greenberg's "sordid end," a reader may begin to feel, if not admiration, at least a measure of interest. Greenberg treated himself with the same cruelty he meted out to others—drank with a vengeance, chain-smoked, drugged himself to sleep every night, alternately promoted and subverted his career all the way to his grave. If not exactly loyal, he proved perversely stubborn: Having anointed

ART CZAR:
The Rise and Fall of
Clement Greenberg.

By Alice Goldfarb
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Jackson Pollock and Kenneth Noland as the only true heirs to Impressionism, he stuck to his bet in an age of critical opportunism. He revised his work obsessively, read serious books, and, deeply and continually, relished ideas. In a harrowing kind of way, he was fun.

Greenberg was born in 1909 in New York City. Literature was his first love. He majored in English at Syracuse University, then mostly lollygagged around his parents' house in Brooklyn, reading and sleeping, until his aggrieved father sent him out west to supervise the family necktie business. Greenberg's sojourn lasted only long enough for him to marry, knock up, and abandon his first wife, after which he fled back to New York, to hole up with "that herd of independent minds," as Lionel Trilling called the intellectuals of his day, in Greenwich Village. Surrounded by his betters in the field he loved most, literary criticism, Greenberg found the visual arts wide open for interpretation. Writing about art for *The Nation* and *Partisan Review* in the 1940s and '50s, Greenberg filled a critical void. His take-no-prisoners tone easily upstaged the gee-whiz art appreciation of *Life* and *Time*.

Greenberg's relationships with Pollock, Noland, Helen Frankenthaler (his love interest for several years), David Smith, Morris Louis, and other Modernists weren't so much appreciative as dictatorial. Clem separated the "good" paintings from the "bad" ones, steered the artist in a given direction, then mounted a critical offensive, telling the viewing public what it needed to know. Along the way he inspired Tom Wolfe's facetious guide to abstract art, *The Painted Word* (1975).



Art critic Clement Greenberg in 1948

As a student at Bennington College, I witnessed the critic's power one afternoon in 1975. Greenberg was visiting Ken Noland in nearby Shaftsbury, Vermont (dating one of Noland's friends gave me guest credentials). The entourages of painter and critic waited in suspenseful silence as Greenberg entered Noland's studio and began examining the target paintings. "What if you turned these around?" Greenberg finally demanded, meaning, what if the squares were turned into diamonds? A studio assistant hopped to; Greenberg nodded. A few months later, a show of diamond-shaped Noland's appeared on 57th Street.

Marquis, author of *The Art Biz: The Covert World of Collectors, Dealers, Auction Houses, Museums, and Critics* (1991) and *Marcel Duchamp: The Bachelor Stripped Bare* (2002), writes engagingly, making a reasonable case for Greenberg's enduring importance, a dozen years after his death. He didn't "rise and fall" so much as rise and fade away, obscured and eventually buried under Pop Art (which he despised), Keith Haring and Julian Schnabel, the vile careerism of the 1980s, and whatever's come next. Now that we've begun to look back on the 1950s and '60s as a time of high seriousness—it's all relative—Greenberg's star will likely rise again.

—Ann Loftin

Tell Them Willie Boy Was Here

FEW MAGAZINE EDITORS cast a longer shadow than Willie Morris (1934–99), who took over the top slot at *Harper's* in 1967. The 32-year-old Morris rapidly turned America's second-oldest continuously published magazine (the oldest is *Scientific American*) from a stuffy old men's club into a cutting-edge cabaret that, along with *Esquire* and *New York*,

showcased that path-breaking mix of fictional techniques and shoe-leather reporting known as the New Journalism.

He hired David Halberstam, who wrote long articles that formed the core of *The Best and the Brightest* (1972), about the hubristic architects of America's Vietnam policy, and *The Powers That Be* (1979), about the intersection of mass media and politics. Morris rejuvenated Norman Mailer's flagging career by turning over virtually entire issues of the magazine to the novelist's first-person reportage on war protests outside the Pentagon, the 1968 Republican and Democratic national conventions, and the feminist movement, which became the books *The Armies of the Night* (1968), *Miami and the Siege of Chicago* (1968), and *The Prisoner of Sex* (1971). Morris was in steady demand on TV and op-ed pages, and he was a fixture at Elaine's, the Manhattan restaurant that's a den of power brokers and literati. How hot was he? "There were eight million telephone numbers in the Manhattan directory, and every one of them would have returned my calls," he boasted in his memoir *New York Days* (1993), exaggerating only a bit.

Yet in 1971 Morris resigned from *Harper's* after battling its then-owners, the Minnesota-based Cowles family, over the magazine's spiraling costs and, more important, its left-leaning politics. Though only in his mid-thirties, Morris never regained his luster. Bitter and despondent, he decamped from Manhattan to the Hamptons for a decade and then to his beloved home state of Mississippi, where he became Ole Miss's first writer-in-residence. Over the years he published a string of novels, reminiscences, and nonfiction works, none of which achieved the literary acclaim of his precocious memoir *North Toward Home* (1967). Though his children's books proved popular, especially *My Dog Skip* (1995), the basis of a successful 2000 film, his post-*Harper's* years and output are rightly seen as a coda to what he called his brief attempt "to remake literary America."

IN SEARCH OF WILLIE MORRIS:

The Mercurial Life of a Legendary Writer and Editor.

By Larry L. King. *Public Affairs*. 353 pp. \$26.95