

sources): the hit-and-miss existence of the colony of New Amsterdam; the settlers' relations with the Indians, and episodes of savagery and betrayal on both sides; the dominance of poltroons, those legendary landlords who owned hundreds of thousands of acres up and down the Hudson; the emergence of the British and French as successful rivals to the Dutch; the drama of the Revolutionary War, during which George Washington called the portion of the Hudson at West Point the key to America, and the British defeat at Saratoga altered the fortunes of the United States; the development of the steamboat, rival to the sailboat, encouraging faster travel on the river; the building of the Erie Canal, the waterway that joined the eastern and western slopes of the Appalachians and opened the center of the country to commerce and settlement; the building of a railroad, rival to the steamboat, along the river's eastern bank; the Hudson's progressive industrial fouling (it was an open trough of toxic water by the 1960s) and its eventual environmental redemption.

Familiar names drive these events—Stuyvesant, Arnold, Fulton, Clinton, van Rensselaer, Vanderbilt, Roosevelt—and Lewis deftly recounts how they

earned their familiarity.

But because there's more to the Hudson's history than war and politics and economics, he finds room as well, in a text enriched throughout by uncommonly appealing drawings, engravings, and paint-

ings, for the writer Washington Irving and the painter Thomas Cole and the crowds of other artists and forever-anonymous tourists who traveled the river in search of the sublime.

As Lewis tells the tale, the transformation of New York State impelled by the river seems to enact the larger economic, social, cultural, and environmental development of the nation. His narrative conveys something else, too, a reality more difficult to measure: the spirit of the Hudson River,

The Hudson River deserves a noble adjective of its own, but after reading Lewis's expansive appreciation, you may be hard pressed to choose just one.

which infuses the actions of all who experience its atmospheres, its lights, its roiling waters, its mountains, and its wild beauty. Rivers sometimes carry modifiers, such as the Mississippi's "Mighty." The Hudson deserves a noble adjective of its own, but after reading Lewis's expansive appreciation, you may be hard pressed to choose just one.

—James Morris

ARTS & LETTERS

Escape of a Salary Man

THIS MEMOIR WAS PUBLISHED in Japan in 2000, after its author, a day laborer with a history of homelessness, submitted the manuscript on a lark and won the Kaikō Takeshi, a top literary award. The prose is so precise and dispassionate that one might suspect a put-on, but Ōyama Shirō—not his real name—is as committed to what passes for failure as most men are to what passes for success.

Born into a middle-class family in 1947, Shirō got off to a conventional start, graduating from university and becoming a "salary man." His yearning to fit in with corporate culture was overpowering but short-lived: "A sudden and unmitigated desire to absent myself from work would be accompanied by some psychosomatic disorder, which made me feel physically out of sorts." The process repeated itself in office after office, until, in 1987, he joined the ranks of the least skilled, working on cleaning crews and as a gofer on construction sites. Since forsaking his white-collar career, he has lived in squalid lodging houses or on the street.

"I have gone to very great lengths . . . to avoid the frustration and disillusionment that is brought about—inevitably, as far as I am concerned—by the kind of human interaction that accompanies nearly any job," Shirō writes, adding later, "When the time comes to take stock of things, it hardly matters to me if my existence has not been blessed by events

A MAN WITH NO TALENTS:
Memoirs of a Tokyo Day Laborer.

By Ōyama Shirō. Translated by Edward Fowler. Cornell Univ. Press. 139 pp. \$21

that can be put in the 'plus' column. I will consider my life a success if I have reduced to the bare minimum—as close to zero as possible—those events that must be relegated to the 'minus' column.”

Upon winning the prize, Shirō took the money (some \$20,000) but refused to be lionized. In a postscript, he reports that he has stopped working as a day laborer and, to stretch his savings as far as possible, has moved out of the flophouse in Tokyo's most notorious slum where he'd shared a room with six other men. Instead, he announces almost cheerfully, he's back on the street. He buys his meals but figures he'll soon be scavenging food from the garbage: “I could then afford to buy a movie ticket. I'd take in one of those American suspense thrillers I like so much.”

All of this is recounted with a careful formality that keeps the reader at a distance. Shirō was every bit as pleased to learn that he needn't accept the Kaikō Takeshi in person as he had been to learn that he'd won it in the first place. The real Ōyama Shirō, he writes, is “an even more dull-witted and unattractive person than the one who appears in the pages of this book.”

In fact, the man in these pages is neither unattractive nor dull witted. He's a pathological loner who has slept only with prostitutes, has never formed a friendship that lasted, and has avoided his family for more than 20 years. But such failings are hardly uncommon in the economic stratum he inhabits. Nor—and this *is* odd—does he seem rebellious or even difficult. When children stone him in the park, he mildly observes that high school boys don't do this, only middle school boys “who think of the homeless as hurdles to overcome in the quest to secure their identity.” And he never tries to shake off the stigma of his marginal existence: “One's true self is that which exists in the gaze of other people.”

Ōyama Shirō may be living on the street, and perhaps rummaging through the garbage for dinner, but to those who read this splendid book, his true self will seem a model of decorum and restraint.

—Benjamin Cheever

Tempestuous But Fun

UH-OH. THE JACKET COVER ADVERTISES this biography, the third to appear since Hellman's death in 1984, as the first to be “written with the full cooperation of her family, friends, and inner circle.” Hagiography, here we come?

No, not really. While Deborah Martinson, an English professor at Occidental College in California, clearly admires her subject, she doesn't stint on the scheming and husband snatching and fact fudging and badmouthing that went along with Hellman's brilliance, her unorthodox brand of loyalty, and her unstoppable high spirits. As a friend is said to have remarked at Hellman's graveside, “She was awful, but she was worth it.”

Hellman was born in New Orleans in 1905 to a family of eccentrics, grew up on the bayou and then in New York City, attended—indifferently—New York University, dropped out, and, at age 19, married Arthur Kober, a man both decent and talented, who later wrote 30 films and produced many Broadway plays. She tried to do the expected things, but wifely subordination just wasn't in her. By the time

she met Dashiell Hammett (also married), she'd flown the coop. Though she and Hammett lived together on and off for the next 30 years, first as lovers and later as friends, she never remarried; she simply bedded married men as she pleased.

Hellman went on to write several very successful plays, among them *The Children's Hour* (1934), *The Little Foxes* (1939), and the antifascist *Watch on the Rhine* (1941). She also wrote movie adaptations of her plays, along with other screen-

LILLIAN HELLMAN:
A Life With Foxes
and Scoundrels.

By Deborah Martinson.
Counterpoint.
448 pp. \$27.95



Lillian Hellman, shown here in the 1950s, wrote a number of successful plays, including *The Children's Hour* (1934) and *The Little Foxes* (1939).