

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).

plays, and engaged in world-class brawls with producer Sam Goldwyn. She tried her hand at other genres, too, collaborating (if Hellman the dictator could ever be said to have collaborated) with her friends Leonard Bernstein and Richard Wilbur on a musical production of *Candide*.

Though adept at self-promotion, she took writing very seriously, as both a teacher and a reader. Chekhov, she wrote in the introduction to a 1955 collection of his letters, was “a man of deep social ideals and an uncommon sense of social responsibility”—her highest praise—as well as a “workman” playwright for whom “the smallest stage movement has an end in view and is not being used to trick or deceive or pull fashionable wool over our eyes.”

In 1939, using the profits from her plays and screenplays, she bought a 130-acre farm in Pleasantville, New York, now a suburb but then deep country. There, she cooked, entertained constantly, farmed, gardened, hunted and fished, and raised chickens and other livestock, seeming to master her new environment instinctively. Later she would hold court on Martha's Vineyard for everyone from Norman Mailer to James Taylor. Mary Mahoney, a young woman who kept house for Hellman on the Vineyard one summer, wrote a cruel but no doubt largely accurate portrayal of her as litigious, insanely demanding, paranoid, monstrous; but then, no man is a hero to his valet.

Nearly every other aspect of Hellman's life has been disputed, including how much Hammett helped with *The Children's Hour* (Martinson convincingly shows his editorial guidance to have been critical), her overlong defense of Stalin and the Soviet regime (she finally recanted, but without much vigor), and the truthfulness of her three autobiographical memoirs, *An Unfinished Woman* (1969), *Pentimento* (1973), and *Scoundrel Time* (1976). Of the last, Mary McCarthy famously told Dick Cavett, “Every word she writes is a lie, including ‘and’ and ‘the.’”

What no one can deny is that Hellman drank more, laughed more, smoked more, fought more, and had a whole lot more sex than anyone does today. The pace and ferocity remained truly

staggering until her dying days, when she asked a friend at her bedside, “I was fun, wasn't I?” So even if Martinson isn't really telling Hellmanites anything they don't already know, readers encountering the fiend for the first time are guaranteed a fast ride as well as a realistically complex portrait. The worst thing about this book is Martinson's writing, which belabors certain themes ad nauseam (e.g., Hellman's “eroticism”) and serves up such doozies as “success separated herself from herself and others.” Were Hellman around to read it, one can imagine her imperious scorn.

—Ann J. Loftin

## T. S. Eliot's Love Song?

IN 1952, A CANADIAN professor named John Peter published an article in *Essays in Criticism* arguing that the narrator of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* had at some time fallen in love with a young man whose death by drowning he now

mourned. Eliot reacted furiously, proclaiming his “amazement and disgust” and threatening legal action if Peter disseminated the article further. In 1969, after Eliot's death, Peter republished his essay, along with a postscript that tentatively identified the narrator's lost love as Jean Verdenal, a French medical student whom Eliot had known in Paris in 1911. Verdenal was killed in World War I, and Eliot dedicated *Prufrock and Other Observations* to him in 1917.

Another scholar, James E. Miller Jr., of the University of Chicago, supported and extended Peter's interpretation in *T. S. Eliot's Personal Waste Land: Exorcism of the Demons* (1977). Since then, more biographical material has become available, including seven letters to Eliot from the hitherto virtually unknown Verdenal. Now Miller is back, with a biography that seeks to extend his argument about *The Waste Land's* narrator to Eliot's own early years. In Miller's view, Eliot's obvious distaste for sexual intimacy was due not to extreme fastidiousness and

### T. S. ELIOT:

The Making of an American Poet, 1888–1922.

By James E. Miller Jr.  
Pennsylvania State Univ.  
Press. 468 pp. \$39.95