

in making me an anarchist. Blaming one's Granny would not have gone down well in such a matriarchal society."

All the same, this book offers an engaging, energetic portrait of twentieth-century culture and politics in Western Europe from the perspective of an activist committed to social egalitarianism. After reading *Granny*, our superficial ideas about anarchism—a hollow-eyed Johnny Rotten belting out disestablishmentarian anthems for the disaffected youth of 1970s Britain—seem pat and flimsy. And, with its powerful contemporary resonance, Christie's memoir also forces us to grapple with our own difficult political questions: "by what means other than resorting to violence," he asks, "can ordinary people challenge a state apparatus which is evil, corrupt, and repressive . . . not subject to legal or social strictures, and . . . unresponsive to reason, appeals to morality, and international diplomacy?"

—J. T. Townley

*Alfred Kazin: A Biography* by Richard Cook, Yale University Press, 2008, \$35 cloth, ISBN 9780300115055.

Alfred Kazin (1915–98) was one of America's most powerful literary critics at the height of his influence in the 1950s and 1960s. From the publication of his critical masterpiece, *On Native Grounds*, in 1942, this child of a Brooklyn ghetto rose to become one of our leading public intellectuals.

Kazin arrived on the literary scene as a twenty-seven-year-old *wunderkind* with his critique that an inherent democratic strain was embedded in American literary tradition. The work appeared in the midst of World War Two, when the nation was searching for just such an intellectual defense of its asserted ideals. "The age was wholly with me," Kazin wrote of his first book. Subsequent decades remained with him. Kazin became a powerful reviewer at publications such as the *New Republic*, *Partisan Review*, *Commentary* and the *New York Review of Books* and went on to publish acclaimed books of criticism and of autobiography.

Considering his once tremendous influence, it is surprising how Kazin's legacy has diminished since his death. He was a critic who alienated many writers and was never comfortable with academia; many writers and professors now seem comfortable forgetting him. Richard Cook's biography—using Kazin's private journals spanning six decades—is an effort to salvage the writer from literary oblivion. Cook may not succeed, but his engaging book is an accomplishment regardless. Despite Cook's obvious

affection for his subject, his book is not a hagiography. We are presented with Kazin's many achievements, but we also get Kazin's unvarnished personal failings and profound insecurities, what Kazin himself described as "the personal darkness" and "my never-ending anxieties."

In his first memoir *A Walker in the City*, about his Jewish immigrant childhood in Brownsville, Kazin wrote that the neighborhood was "a place that measured success by our skill in getting away from it." By that measurement, Kazin—the stuttering child of a house painter and a seamstress—became a tremendous success, moving from Brooklyn's remote slums to Manhattan's loftiest offices. His ascendancy was linked with an influential class of New York Jewish intellectuals of whom Kazin was one of the leading lights. Among the luminaries he befriended—and later usually alienated—were the giants of twentieth-century American literature, including Edmund Wilson, Saul Bellow, Delmore Schwartz, Ralph Ellison, Irving Howe, and Hannah Arendt. By the late 1950s, Kazin had become a public intellectual, appearing regularly on television and radio. He traveled the world and taught across the country.

However, all was not bliss. Kazin's personal life was a mess, with rocky marriages, multiple affairs, and filial estrangement. Kazin didn't just slug it out with his paramours. He warred with other intellectuals about his brutally honest reviews and their critiques of his works, and his public jousting with Lionel Trilling was infamous. Critics commonly attacked his essays as unscholarly, and Cook argues persuasively that Kazin was gifted at literary criticism not "in the required scholarly manner of academia but in a broad intellectual assessment."

By the 1970s, Kazin was prominent as old lion of criticism but less in touch with the American (or at least New York) zeitgeist he had once embraced. Up to the end of his life, Kazin wrote reviews and books, but his cultural grip had slackened considerably. He books did poorly, and the times, once so with him, passed him by. When Kazin died in 1998, his family threw his ashes into off the Brooklyn Bridge into the East River, the sluggish waters dividing the slums of his youth and the island of his greatest achievements. "How brief it has all been, how sudden, how much it contracts now," he wrote in his journal in 1987. "The river, the eternal river rushing on, but rushing us into eternity."

One weakness of the book seems to be a factor of time. While Kazin shaped several generations' understanding of "modern literature" with his assessments of Hawthorne, Whitman, Faulkner and others, Cook makes little effort to assess the writer's lasting influence on American literature.

Perhaps it is too soon to tell. This biography, one can hope, will ensure this giant of twentieth-century literary criticism gets his due.

—Cameron McWhirter