

Reviews of the Nonfiction Books that I Read During the COVID-19 Pandemic (March 2020 – April 2022)

By Bill Brown

What follows are book reviews of the nonfiction books that I read during the COVID-19 pandemic, each review consisting of a single sentence excerpted from the book in question, it being assumed that the reader will be able to divine my opinion by the choices that I've made (*a nod is as good as a wink to a blind horse*), presented in no particular order.¹

Tom Lutz, *Doing Nothing: A History of Loafers, Loungers, Slackers, and Bums in America* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006): “But no matter how often he says those words [‘hard work’], George W. Bush will likely go down in history as our slacker president” (p. 251).

Susan Bartlett Foote, *The Crusade For Forgotten Souls: Reforming Minnesota’s Mental Institutions, 1946-1954* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018): “The system isn’t broken; we just haven’t built it” (p. 243).

Kevin Mattson, *We’re Not Here to Entertain: Punk Rock, Ronald Reagan and THE REAL CULTURE WAR of 1980s America* (Oxford University Press, 2020): “The songs managed to fuse together a much more poppy feel (including the song ‘Hare Krsna,’ modeled on the pop song of the mid-sixties ‘I Want Candy’), while still being angular sounding, with heavy guitar playing and feedback fusing with more melodic singing, but singing that often turned into screaming still” (p. 194)

John Steinbeck, *Bombs Away: The Story of a Bomber Team*, (Penguin Books, 1942): “The bomber team is truly a democratic organization” (p. 5).

Rebecca Rischin, *For the End of Time: The Story of the Messiaen Quartet* (Cornell University Press, 2003): “While compositionally prolific at the time, Messiaen’s pedagogical freedom at the Paris Conservatory [during the Vichy regime] was somewhat inhibited by the apparent Nazi censure of ‘modernist’ composers such as Stravinsky and Berg, as well as by the fact that he was still a professor of harmony rather than composition” (p. 89)

Elizabeth Ezra, *Georges Méliès: The birth of the auteur* (Manchester University Press, 2000): “The transformation of men into women enacts the castration scenario (as in the

¹ All books purchased from second-hand book dealers at the cost of \$1 per book.

1898 films *Le Magicien/The Magician*, in which the male magician turns into a female dancer in mid-air, and, most spectacularly, *La Tentation de Saint-Antoine/The Temptation of St. Anthony*, in which Christ on the cross turns into a female seductress), while the transformation of women into men reassuringly reverses this scenario, though more often through transvestism than through substitution splicing: Méliès's films abound in women dressed as male sailors, courtiers, pages, etc.” (pp. 41-42).

Luc Sante, *The Other Paris* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015): “They are the people who built the Louvre and the Bastille; who watched Templars and schismatics be burned alive and common thieves and murderers broken on the wheel; who stared at the first elephant, the first rhinoceros, the first giraffe to enter France; who withstood epic floods, disastrous freezes, devastating fires, sudden famines; who died in great numbers from the Plague, smallpox, typhus, syphilis, whooping cough; who rose up against tax collectors, heretics, foreigners, pretenders, Jews, Protestants, and supporters of Cardinal Mazarin; who ate tainted meat and were trampled during festivals and learned to drink coffee and never once left the city” (pp. 74-75).

The Gospel of Judas: From Codex Tchacos, edited by Rodolphe Kasser, Marvin Meyer, and Gregor Wurst (National Geographic, 2006): “In the song ‘With God on Our Side,’ Bob Dylan sings of Judas: ‘You’ll have to decide / Whether Judas Iscariot / Had God on his side’” (p. 3).

Steve Almond, *Candyfreak: A Journey Through the Chocolate Underbelly of America* (Harcourt, Inc., 2004): “I will leave it to the reader to determine just what sort of ‘diet’ would encourage the consumption of these ingredients, though it bears mentioning that this product is but one in a tsunami of pseudo-candy bars, variously called PowerBars, Granola Bars, Energy Bars, Clif Bars, Breakfast Bars, Snack Bars, Wellness Bars, and so on, all of which contain roughly the same sugar and fat as an actual candy bar – with perhaps a dash of protein sawdust thrown in – but only half the guilt, and stand as a monument both to shameless marketing and the American capacity for self-delusion, particularly in matters related to consumption (see also: frozen yogurt, fat-free chips, and low-calorie lard)” (pp. 124-125).

Howard Blum, *American Lightning: Terror, Mystery, Movie-Making, And the Crime of the Century* (Crown Publishers, 2008): “Three men [Clarence Darrow, Billy Burns and D.W. Griffith] who were caught up in those traumatic times, shaped by them, found with their talents, energy, and ideals a way out of it, both for themselves and for the nation” (pp. 320-321).

42 Today: Jackie Robinson and His Legacy, foreword by Ken Burns, Sarah Burns, and David McMahon, edited by Michael G. Long, Afterword by Kevin Merida (New York University Press, 2021): “If we are serious about the kind of meaningful change Jackie Robinson campaigned for both on and off the field, and before, as well as long after his monumental major league debut, we should remember him in full, celebrate his outspokenness, and acknowledge that many of the obstacles he faced as a black man in

America remain fixed, blocking the path to first-class citizenship for African Americans” (p. xiv).

Josh Alan Friedman, *Tell the Truth Until They Bleed* (Backbeat Books/Hal Leonard, 2008): “The story of Leiber & Stoller is told here for the first time – anywhere” (p. ix).

Tommy James with Martin Fitzpatrick, *Me, the Mob and the Music: One Helluva Ride with Tommy James and the Shondells* (Scribner, 2010): “To me, [the sixties] was more about [trying to get that Kennedy feeling back again after it was crushed in 1963] than about rebellion against the war and all the suspicion that began to infect America” (p. 149).

Ronan Farrow, *Catch and Kill: Lies, Spies, and a Conspiracy to Protect Predators* (Little, Brown and Company, 2019): “In the end, the courage of women can’t be stamped out” (p. 409).

Jane Leavy, *The Last Boy: Mickey Mantle and the End of America’s Childhood* (HarperCollins, 2010): “He would play the next seventeen years [after the injury] struggling to be as good as he could be, knowing he would never be as good as he might have become” (p. 37)

Wil Haygood, *Showdown: Thurgood Marshall and the Supreme Court Nomination that Changed America* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2015): “My challenge as a biographer, however, was finding the proper Marshall story that would satisfy my nonlinear narrative hunger” (p. 357).

Sarah Bakewell, *At the Existential Café: Freedom, Being, and Apricot Cocktails with Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Others* (Other Press, 2017): “The student demonstrations, strikes, occupations, love-ins and be-ins of the 1960s constitute an extended historical moment to which one might point and say that existentialism had done its job” (p. 292).

Eric Clapton, *Clapton: The Autobiography* (Broadway Books, 2007): “However much I might have thought I loved Pattie at the time, the truth is that the only thing that I couldn’t live without was alcohol” (p. 184).

Laura J. Hoffman, *Postcard History Series: Coney Island* (Arcadia, 2014): “On an average summer weekend in 1907, visitors to Coney Island mailed more than a quarter-million postcards to family and friends” (p. 7).

Lawrence Wright, *The Looming Tower: Al-Qaeda and the Road to 9/11* (Vintage Books, 2007; reprinted with new afterward, 2011): “When Soufan realized that the agency [the CIA] and some people in the bureau [the FBI] had known for more than a year and a half that two of the hijackers were in the country, he ran into the bathroom and retched” (p. 409).

Jordan Raphael and Tom Spurgeon, *Stan Lee and the Rise and Fall of the American Comic Book* (Chicago Review Press, 2003): “Martin Goodman’s comic-book line became Marvel Comics in May 1963; its rapidly expanding superhero effort was a visceral punch in the nose for millions of comic-book readers, a lightning-strike break from the medium’s increasingly irrelevant past, and the template for forty years of hip, aware, and deeply heartfelt pop culture” (p. 96).

Dahr Jamail, *Beyond the Green Zone: Dispatches from an Unembedded Journalist in Occupied Iraq* (Haymarket Books, 2007): “I knew that we were going into a city that was being heavily attacked by the most powerful military on the planet, but I felt obliged to do what I could to bear witness to the atrocities being carried out against the people of Fallujah by the U.S. military, especially because the U.S. forces had gone to such great lengths to keep reporters out of the city” (p. 134)

Hanan Ashrawi, *This Side of Peace: A Personal Account* (Simon & Schuster, 1995): “If I have taken the liberty of using my own story as a vehicle to convey a reality much larger than myself, I ask for indulgence” (p. 15).