Arts & Letters

FILM

[Sunshine]

Talk, Talk Against the Dying of the Light

By Steve Sailer

ON MAY 28, 1942, the *USS Yorktown* aircraft carrier, badly damaged at the Battle of the Coral Sea, squeezed into a Pearl Harbor dry dock needing an estimated 90 days of repair. But with four Japanese carriers steaming toward Midway Island, 1,400 repairman swarmed over her, using so much electricity that Honolulu had to be partially blacked out. Two days later, the *Yorktown* sailed off to the decisive battle of the War in the Pacific.

On Jan. 16, 2003, a chunk of foam broke off the space shuttle *Columbia* during liftoff. NASA engineers asked their managers to have a spy satellite scope out the damage, but the higher-ups assumed, wrongly, that America couldn't improvise a repair or rescue during the 30 days the crew could survive in orbit, so why bother? Two weeks later, the *Columbia* disintegrated upon re-entry.

During the golden age of science fiction in the middle of the 20th century, the predominant plot—the space voyage—was essentially an updated sea story. (It's no coincidence that the greatest American science-fiction writer, Robert A. Heinlein, who was born 100 years ago this summer, was an invalided U.S. naval officer.) Classic "hard" science fiction reflected the can-do culture of an era exemplified by the *Yorktown* repairs and going to the Moon in eight years.

We now live in a can't-do age, when merely building a fence along the border strikes our leaders as beyond our nation's capabilities.

"Sunshine" is a medium-budget ($40 million) science-fiction thriller with art-house pretensions. Eight astronauts on a last-chance-for-mankind mission try to reignite the dying sun with a "stellar bomb" the size of Manhattan. The movie falls uncomfortably between the grand heroism of the old sci-fi and the petty self-absorption of our reality-television shows.

Granted, the physics of the premise are unworkable—for one thing, it takes a half million years for light to jostle its way out from the dense solar core to the surface, so by the time we noticed anything was wrong with the sun, it would be too late—but some of the film's conceptions of how much the freezing folks back on Earth could do if they had to are thrillingly old-fashioned. For instance, this bomb is humanity's final hope because "all the fissile material on Earth has been mined" to make it.

On the other hand, by 2057, NASA appears to have delegated personnel selection to a TV network. The crewmembers of *Icarus II* look great but display all the competence, cohesiveness, and cool-headedness of a losing tribe on "Survivor." With the oxygen running out, they sit and debate whether it's morally justified to kill one person to save the entire species. (Uh, yup.) "Sunshine" isn't quite as inane as last year's apocalyptic "Children of Men," which kept getting distracted from its plot about saving humanity from extinction to protest the plight of illegal immigrants, but it's close.

Only the crewcut engineer (Chris Evans, the Human Torch in "Fantastic Four") has the fighter jock personality you need when a man's gotta do what a man's gotta do. As Murphy's Law sets in with a vengeance, he has the right stuff to lead his squabbling, dithering colleagues, such as the pretty-boy physicist (Cillian Murphy), who, for unexplained reasons, is the only one trained to set off the detonation.

"Sunshine" reunites Murphy with director Danny Boyle and screenwriter Alex Garland. Together, they revived the zombie genre with 2002's "28 Days Later." Many critics are praising the derivative "Sunshine," presumably because it's fun for *cineastes* to play "Spot the Influence" of space and submarine classics such as "2001," "Solaris," "Alien," and "Das Boot."

In contrast, sci-fi fans will find their intelligence insulted by the careless plotting. In last year's "Thank You for Smoking," a tobacco lobbyist and a Hollywood agent conspire to have the heroes of an upcoming sci-fi blockbuster smoke in space:

Nick Naylor: "But wouldn't they blow up in an all-oxygen environment?

Jeff Megall: "Probably. But it's an easy fix. One line of dialogue. 'Thank God we invented the ... you know, whatever device.'"

The makers of "Sunshine," though, just don't care enough about science fiction to hire a script doctor to make the easy fixes. Like too many films these days, it ends up being just another movie about movies, which "2001," for all its pompous flaws, definitely was not. ■

Rated R for violent content and language.

BOOKS

[The Prince of Darkness: 50 Years Reporting in Washington, Robert D. Novak, Crown Forum, 672 pages]

Novak Gets the Scoop on Novak

By Robert W. Merry

SOME 36 YEARS AGO, when I was a student at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, I received a visit from a college chum who had become a congressional reporter for the Associated Press. I welcomed the visit because I harbored an almost desperate ambition to get to Washington myself and emerge as a prominent political writer. "Who in Washington," I asked my friend, "do you absolutely have to read to stay on top of what's going on?"

The unhesitating answer: "Evans and Novak."

Three years later, I got a job as a Washington reporter for a national newspaper, and I asked myself the same question. I gave myself the same answer.

I identified two reasons that the late Rowland Evans Jr. and Robert D. Novak offered the capital's most indispensable journalistic fare: first, they elevated their column far above polemics; and, second, they were both brilliant reporters. Indeed, Novak—the younger of the two and described by many as a rumpled "Front Page" type with a dour demeanor and pugnacious temperament—is arguably one of the greatest reporters to emerge in postwar Washington.

Novak has dispensed more inside information through the cultivation of more high-level sources over a longer period of time than any other Washington reporter of his generation—and he's still at it after a half-century on the job.

Now we have his memoir, a thick bundle of historical sweep, brutal self-assessment, sharp insights into the reporter's trade and ways of Washington, and defiant candor about who in town he considers to have been good guys and who were jerks and phonies. It's a remarkable book emanating from a remarkable career. Over the last 40 years, only Arthur Krock and Katharine Graham have produced journalistic memoirs this meaty and revealing.

Novak's book also offers a few hints into what I have long considered the central paradox of his career—how did this man, who assiduously cultivated a persona as a kind of "Peck's Bad Boy" outsider, become one of Washington's most successful insiders?

I must note, by way of full disclosure, that I am not writing this from afar. I have known Novak for some three decades. Although ours is not the kind of close friendship in which the parties regularly seek each other out, we have been tossed together frequently, and with apparent mutual enjoyment, at receptions, dinner parties, and campaign events. The word that best captures the man, in my experience, is "compelling," like his column and this book.

He grew up in Joliet, Illinois, the son of second-generation, middle-class Jews, who instilled in young Robert an "addiction" to politics and a passion for news. Though the extended family embraced Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal throughout the Depression, Bob's parents remained steadfast Republicans. Their son followed suit, becoming at age 9 a Wendell Willkie backer during the Indiana industrialist's hopeless 1940 campaign against Roosevelt.

In high school, a failure on the athletic field, he became manager of the track team and dutifully penned accounts of track meets for the town newspaper. A career was born. Soon he was stringing for that local publication and writing for his school paper. When he entered the University of Illinois, he set his sights on becoming sports editor of the student daily, a position that conferred substantial status on campus.

To his dismay, he was aced out. Here Novak's narrative veers into a remarkable passage of self-awareness. At his fraternity, he reveals, "there was private rejoicing that I got what I deserved for my arrogance." The younger frat brothers detested him, it seems, and one poor fellow, the butt of Novak abuse "for his lack of sophistication," couldn't wipe the smile off his face. Says Novak with severe matter-of-factness, "I am not a person who is easy for a lot of people to like."

Stung by the defeat, he plunged into journalism with a dedication and relentlessness that have become hallmarks of his career. His only respite from the craft was an Army tour, during which he came under the spell of Whittaker Chambers's famous memoir, *Witness*, which rendered him a Cold War hawk with a deep sense of the epic challenge then facing America and the West. For decades, this struggle gave him his only truly animating political sentiment. He regarded nearly all other issues with a detachment befitting the journalistic sensibility.

His early career was meteoric. Following two brief heartland assignments for the AP, he landed in Washington at age 26 to cover Congress. Here the paradox of his personality again comes into focus. Though he remained unlikable to many, those never seemed to include the people best positioned to advance his career. He proved brilliant at cultivating high-level sources and getting himself invited into their inner sanctums.

He was spotted by the *Wall Street Journal*, then a rising publication with great ambitions but hardly the newspaper of today's reach and scope. In the fall of 1958, he became the paper's Senate correspondent and political reporter. The *Journal* gave him a wider reportorial ambit, and soon he was dispensing not only fresh information (scoops of varying magnitude) but penetrating insights into the personalities and backroom maneuverings inside Washington.

His big break came four years later when he received a call from Rowland Evans, whom he hardly knew. Evans, a bit of an aristocrat from the Philadelphia Main Line, was a correspondent for the old *New York Herald Tribune* and a close friend of the Kennedys. He had