

band and her dog, only one of whom is smart enough to tell the difference.

The trio plot boiled choices down to real basics. *How To Marry a Millionaire* is about a good girl, a smart girl, and a bad girl; representing love and marriage, career, and the primrose path, or as Basinger puts it: "doing it the right way for a living, doing it the wrong way for a living, and just doing it for a living."

Naturally the movies did a lot of paternalistic preaching about good girls vs. bad girls, but shrewd viewers saw through the hackneyed props—e.g., "gum chewing becomes an effective shorthand for: she does something physical with great enthusiasm." Even funnier was the title card producers used for warning women away from really execrable behavior: "This is a story of evil. An evil woman who destroys all she touches. . . ." Bette Davis, of course, was the queen of the title card.

Basinger nails the closet elitism of feminists who are forever touting Katharine Hepburn's strength. "Hepburn could afford her strength. She was rich. She had a family to back her up." Women like Crawford, Davis, Stanwyck, and Rogers, on the other hand, had no one to rely on but themselves. Especially Crawford, who flopped in heiress roles because supposedly unsophisticated audiences "sniffed out the common clay in her":

Much has been written about how Hollywood exploited women, but most of these women would have had miserable lives without their stardom. . . . In Hollywood, they had their own money and their own clout, and not all of them went down the drain. . . . The stars who play the American woman made her strong and capable both on and off the screen.

If movies have been good for women and women have been good for movies, what is there to complain about? Basinger gives us a hint:

In movies about women, all important historical and natural events are translated into the terms of a woman's daily life. World War I is not about the Allies versus the Kaiser. It's about how unmarried women become pregnant when they have sex. The Depression is not about an economic collapse. It's about runs in stockings, no money for carfare, and being forced out onto the

streets. Natural disasters like earthquakes and cholera epidemics are defined by miscarriages and dying children. Everything is couched in terms of what are presumed to be the major events of a woman's life.

This passage supports her thesis that movies have made women feel their lives

are important and exciting, but to this reviewer it also describes the current feminization of American life. The news increasingly consists of "soft" features and "people stories," economics is about the two-career family, and foreign policy is driven by pictures of dying children. What started at the Bijou is now public policy. □

PICASSO AND DORA: A PERSONAL MEMOIR

James Lord

Farrar, Straus & Giroux / 340 pages / \$35

reviewed by M. D. CARNEGIE

On three-day leave from duty as an intelligence officer in World War II, with the Nazis in retreat but the horror of the Ardennes yet a fortnight away, James Lord alit from a train in the Gare Saint-Lazare. It was his first visit to Paris. Homosexual since having been introduced to the predilection as a youth in quite another Paris—the one in Maine—Lord had cultivated a passion for painting in the Museum of Modern Art, on periodic visits to New York to attend to his teeth, the local dentist having been deemed unfit for Lord's aristocratic mandible. With only seventy-two hours to spare and nought but his impetuosity to recommend him, the young officer found his way to the rue des Grands-Augustins, number 7, and presented himself at the studio of the painter Pablo Picasso. Jaime Sabartés, Picasso's secretary and majordomo, invited him in, and when Lord stumbled nervously, Sabartés mistakenly assumed he'd been wounded in the war. Lord allowed the error to pass uncorrected, an instantaneous decision that doubtless served only to better marshal the secretary's favor. For consistency's sake he limped away on his departure, as well as upon his return two days later—when

M. D. Carnegie is a contributing writer for Washington CityPaper.

Sabartés had promised Lord a private audience with the boss.

They met over the artist's breakfast, wartime exigencies limiting Picasso to two pieces of bread and a bowl of coffee. Embarrassed at not having thought to bring along some of his officer's booty, the young soldier anyway made enough of an impression that Picasso invited him to visit again soon. And Lord did, three days later, serendipitously having missed the train to reassignment in Brittany. This time he brought a musette bag full of goodies—including a pencil and drawing paper, which he presented to the artist with a request for a portrait. Picasso assented, promising to execute the drawing over lunch. They dined at a black market restaurant with the artist's mistress, and this was how James Lord met Dora Maar.

Having contrived to get his portrait done by the world-famous Picasso, Lord was nevertheless unsatisfied with the sketch, and afterwards tampered with the drawing by adding three lines of his own. Maar was noticeably cool to him throughout the meal. Picasso executed another drawing on the paper table-covering, and before the three prepared to leave, she neatly cut it out, rolled it up, and put it in her bag. The master smiled, and the party left without being presented a bill.

Lord's frank and engrossing memoir recounts what happened to them all after that December afternoon. Picasso's goings-on, of course, were plastered all over newspapers worldwide. Lord, charmed for good by Paris and the life he found there, returned after the war to write mediocre novels, broker the odd work of art, cultivate the company of artists famed and obscure, and make love to students and soldiers. And Maar, who had been a mistress of the erotic philosopher Georges Bataille and a photographer connected with the original Surrealists, fell apart after Picasso dumped her, entered psychoanalysis with Jacques Lacan, and steadily retreated into her Catholic faith, the Vaucluse house the artist had given her, and a mesmerizing and unconsummated affair with James Lord.

“An aptitude for pretense,” Lord writes of his limping deception of Picasso and Sabartés, “and a readiness to resort to the virtue of false appearances might have seemed to present problems beyond the competence of a young man utterly unversed in the manipulations of point of view that art takes for granted.” But Lord seems always to have been possessed of the soul of the artist, and his sympathy for artistic perspective and temperament—and his facility for limning their allure—steeps this memoir in fascination and grace. Blessed with a certain income and the aristocrat's birthright of laziness, Lord might have been content merely to live as a *bon vivant*, making love and conversation, sipping raspberry cocktails with Somerset Maugham, rubbing elbows with genius, and collecting the art of the known and the soon-to-be.

But there are souls for whom art is so powerful that no order of common truth, no simple mediocrity can suffice them. They enjoy, or suffer, a magnificent magnification of the senses, and their every gesture is a realization of an inner vision, a wonderment at hue and texture, space and shapeliness. It is a sensory hypertrophy, daunting to those who lack it—Lord recounts his awe that on a country road once, Picasso identified him as he passed in the opposite direction at over 60 m.p.h.—but an imbalance nevertheless. Those who possess it might just as fairly be said to be afflicted with it;

they are not souls inseparably allied to the truth, given to prompt payment of debts, or prone to much else we associate with the virtues. The organizing principle of their lives guides perception, not action—what they take in, in other words, not what they give out.

So Lord, keenly aware that the falsehood of his limp may have played a great role in the coup of currying the artist's favor, claimed to Picasso that the portrait he'd executed had suffered a misfortune. The artist made another, as if in payment for another of Lord's prevarications. Indeed, “an aptitude for pretense” seemed a necessary skill in Lord's new-found world; it was Picasso, after all, who had claimed art is a lie that makes us realize the truth.

Those not inclined to see this as other



than sophistry will be put off by Lord's forthright account of the trio's lives. Picasso was a bounder, an egomaniac, a cruel and self-absorbed monster. He “borrowed” the house he gave Maar to take another girlfriend there. He humiliated his former mistress in public, treating her abominably in front of friends, and once sent her a hideously ugly chair he'd bought, knowing she'd cherish it as a gift from the master. And Dora was a troubled penitent, niggardly, aggrandized by her role as mistress to the greatest artist of the century, and insecure about her failure to find another role afterward. She gave Lord a small Picasso sculpture, then took it back; in their travels she made him pay for most everything, though she possessed a priceless collection of art—mostly Picassos.

But what ultimately redeems this tale is Lord's richness of vision, a sympathy for the complexity of existence that lifts this memoir to the level of which Lord for so long dreamed—that of art. *Picasso and Dora* is a seductive evocation of the rough texture of experience, the awfulness that accompanies one man's brilliant vision, the beauty that visits upon another's laziness. As did his ancestor Patrick Henry, Lord chose liberty, and found it in the freedom of Paris and the thrilling unrestraint of its bohemian life.

Like most Americans, however, Lord was ultimately commonsensical about politics. When the Soviet tanks rolled into Hungary in 1956, Lord wrote a bristling open letter to Picasso, whom he no longer saw, demanding that he denounce the Communist Party he'd belonged to for more than a decade. Albert Camus's journal *Combat* published the letter, which read in part:

You have chosen to live before the world. And it is the world today which is going to judge your life. Can you remain silent while the cries of patriots and the screams of innocent victims echo still among the ruins of Budapest? Can the painter of *Guernica* remain indifferent to the martyrdom of Hungary? If so, I say to you that the world can remain indifferent before *Guernica*.

Heartfelt and accurate enough, the letter was perhaps a last gasp of homespun naïveté in the sophisticated environs of artistic Europe. Had Lord not really learned that art was a lie? Alberto Giacometti, a friend who privately criticized Picasso's politics, was outraged. Marie-Lavre de Noailles said, “You have disparaged the honor of a Spaniard.”

Besides Picasso, though, only Dora's opinion of his action mattered to him. They had both worshiped Picasso, elevated him to a deity, and come to love each other in their quirky, unresolved fashion. But they had separated, as well, Lord having sent a lengthy litany of complaints to her before his open letter to Picasso. Two years later, when Maar had a new exhibition of her work, Lord attended the opening and purchased a painting, knowing they were not selling well and that the dealer would tell Maar the buyer's name.

It is a poignant image, the American

who'd become a self-styled aesthete, surrounded by the soigné set of *tout Paris* who once adored him and now reviled him for his heresy. Lord had bought the mediocre painting as a gesture of kindness, but in opposition to the artistes he had already placed his feet firmly on the side of the political. He looked everywhere for Maar. Finally he caught her

eye and held out his hand, thinking she'd let ideological by-gones be by-gones. "My poor James," she said, grasping it. "You're determined to turn the whole world against you, aren't you?" Then, she let go and walked away, adding, "It's a pity." She's doubtless doubly mortified now; she still lives in the Vaucluse, in the house Picasso bought her. □

A DIFFERENT PERSON: A MEMOIR

James Merrill

Alfred A. Knopf/271 pages/\$25

reviewed by CHRISTOPHER CAHILL

James Merrill's eminence among contemporary poets, ratified as it is by an ever increasing burden of awards and distinctions, is still enigmatic, uncertain. Not that there is any question of his ability or his achievements—in addition to *The Changing Light at Sandover*, the long poem of our time most likely to last, he has written a body of extraordinary lyrics of passion and experience. Helen Vendler refers to him as one of our "necessary poets." Harold Bloom calls him "indisputably a verse artist comparable to Milton, Tennyson, and Pope. Surely he will be remembered as the Mozart of American poetry."

Merrill, then, is a national treasure, but of what nation? Like Henry James and Wallace Stevens, he is the sort of American writer who seems foreign to many merely by virtue of his social position and the undemocratic elegance of his art. In fact, as he says himself, he is "as American as lemon chiffon pie." In his poetry, Merrill has drawn on his personal dramas with growing candor and conversational élan, without any sacrifice of metrical virtuosity, making art "out of the life lived, out of the love spent." Now, in a memoir written at the age of

66, he has decided to consider those dramas at greater length.

He evades some of the pitfalls of autobiography (endless childhood, the boring accretion of accomplishments) by concentrating on a few years in late youth when, just out of college, he was living in Europe, undergoing psychoanalysis, trying to become a writer. "Who needs the full story of any life?" Merrill asks. "Biologists are learning how to reconstruct the complete organism from a cluster of cells; the part implies the whole."

This is a canny and innovative approach to the memoir as a form. Through the warm and concentrated attention it pays to a few years, *A Different Person* gives us not only a portrait of the artist as a young man, but, in glimpses, the whole of a remarkable life, from a privileged childhood in a broken home through a long love affair with language. In italicized sections at the end of each chapter, he looks back on his youth from the vantage of experience, considering it with the necessary charity and a certain amusement. "The proper volume for self-assertion," Merrill writes, "is hard to gauge at twenty-five; if a whisper goes ignored, try a howl of pain."

Merrill's circumstances were peculiar for two reasons: money and talent. Less unusual but more troubling was his

homosexuality, an elusive "cure" for which he pursued through much of the period described in this book. His father was a founding partner of Merrill-Lynch, and the disadvantages of privilege, difficult to complain of as they are, bothered him greatly at the time:

The best intentioned people, knowing whose son I was and powerless against their own snobbery, could set me withering under attentions I had done nothing to merit. So I looked forward to distancing myself from all that . . . in places where the family name cut no ice, the firm had no branch office, and I might, if need be, like the Duke of Mantua in *Rigoletto*, pass myself off as a poor student.

In place of such limiting providence, Merrill wanted to find for himself a life which would imitate art of the high, operatic variety—and which would allow him, in turn, to create art of his own. Already a poet of prodigious technical facility, Merrill, before leaving for Europe, realized that his poems "remained verbal artifacts, metered and rhymed to be sure, shaped and polished and begemmed, but set on the page with never a thought of their being uttered by a living voice."

This period in Europe was a dry spell for Merrill as a writer, but in the searching and feints at self-revelation that characterize it, there is a foreshadowing of both the matter and the material of much of his finest later work. Though there is some of each, this memoir does not rely on either gossip or shop talk, tracing gracefully instead the line of personality drawn between the social life and the private, professional life of the artist. Merrill's psychoanalytic sessions in postwar Rome with a certain Dr. Detre, an Austrian Jew waiting for his American visa, provides an ironic narrative framework. "The war's end," Merrill writes, "which found me eager for wicked, blackened old Europe, found him—the rest of whose family had disappeared at Auschwitz—among those millions dreaming of a passport to freedom."

Nothing dates like an eternal truth, and it is alarming to read about the faith Merrill placed in the arcane Freudian mythology of the time. In the end, though, there is something touching and even impressive about the discipline and depth of the antiquated form of therapy these

Christopher Cahill is the editor of the Recorder, a journal of the American Irish Historical Society.