

Throughout these essays, Thomas McGuane's prose prances and capers like a Lippizaner stallion. His next book (*The Longest Silence*) will be a miscellany devoted to another of his passions—fishing—whose component pieces will shine, I'm sure, like freshly caught brook trout.

All well and good, but where is this accomplished sportsman-novelist's next novel?

Bill Croke writes from Cody, Wyoming.

The Seven-League Crutches

by J.O. Tate

No Other Book: Selected Essays by Randall Jarrell

Edited by Brad Leithauser
New York: HarperCollins;
376 pp., \$27.50

Remembering Randall: A Memoir of Poet, Critic, and Teacher Randall Jarrell

by Mary von Schrader Jarrell
New York: HarperCollins;
171 pp., \$22.00



Sideswiped by a car, Randall Jarrell died 34 years ago at the age of 51. That he has remained a presence as a writer and even as a man is vividly testified to by these books, which bring back a lot of memories, and different kinds of memories. Randall Jarrell was a force, even a star of the literary firmament, and when his books came out they were read and they were reacted to, though not always with precision. I remember an undergraduate poet asking me, in 1964, "Have you read *The Owl* by John Crowe Ransom?" I was able to return, "Are you referring to *The Bat-Poet* by Randall Jarrell?" Since then, I believe, that once-young poet, a disciple of Yvor Winters, has been a political scientist.

Randall Jarrell's death in 1965 was a great loss, a particular and even peculiar one. Because of a mental breakdown he had suffered before the disaster, there has been a widespread conviction that actually he committed suicide. Jarrell's widow,

in her memoir, has argued effectively that the circumstances show his death to have been an accident, not self-destruction. Jarrell's biographer, William H. Pritchard (*Randall Jarrell, A Literary Life* [1990]), declared that the exact nature of his death remains unknowable. However that may be, Jarrell's death entangled him forever in the context of the 60's, confessional poetry, and the unambiguous suicides of other poets, such as Sylvia Plath, John Berryman, and Ann Sexton.

But I believe that there was another problematic aspect of Jarrell's death which has not been explored, and that is the matter of its "timing" in the larger cultural context. I find it hard to believe that Jarrell could have remained his old self (not that there was only one of them), both poised and open, in the coarsening that was mega-magnified in the 60's: ranting against the Vietnamese war, Allen Ginsberg, "howling poetry," Woodstock, and all the rest of it. If we had Randall Jarrell around today at the age of 85, would he be feebly directing his walker toward a hip-hop poetry slam? I somehow doubt this.

Well, these two books remind us of what all the fuss was about. Mary Jarrell's memoir gives us an intimate portrait of the man, the poet at home, the writer, the friend. Her book is a fine example of its kind, and it will make its way onto many a shelf beside her own edition of Jarrell's *Letters* (1985) and Pritchard's biography. Through her book and others, we do have Randall Jarrell available to us today, and that is an enrichment of possibility that is both welcome and needed.

Brad Leithauser's edition of Jarrell's essays will stand as the collection for our time of Jarrell's statements on poetry and culture. In the 1950's, Randall Jarrell was the preeminent reviewer of poetry in this country, and he was probably the best we have had since Edgar Allan Poe. But he was more than that. Certain of his essays are unforgettable statements about the cultural situation of America: "A Sad Heart at the Supermarket," "The Obscurity of the Poet," "The Age of Criticism," and others are as exciting to read today as they were when they first appeared. More specifically focused pieces, like "To the Laodiceans" on Robert Frost, "Some Lines from Whitman," and his speculative remarks on T.S. Eliot in "Fifty Years of American Poetry," remind us of a remarkably simple truth: Randall Jarrell did more to establish our understanding of Frost and Whitman and Eliot

than any other critic did.

Not everything is as we would wish it, perhaps. Jarrell did not quite go far enough on Wallace Stevens (R.P. Blackmur did); his essays on Kipling don't quite get to the point, and sometimes Jarrell's enthusiasms were excessive. At others, indeed, his lack of enthusiasm was equally so. I think he was wrong about Richard Wilbur and he was unjust to Roy Campbell, who was a great translator and occasionally "struck by lightning"—Jarrell's definition of poetic success. Nevertheless, for wit, for perception, for passion, Jarrell's essays can't be beat. They are so good they can be read for the sheer pleasure of the experience, regardless of topic. Is it possible that his essays on poetry are better even than his poems? So it seems. In addition to which, Jarrell's one novel, *Pictures From an Institution* (1954), remains a delightful satire and a brilliant performance that makes us wonder not so much at what Jarrell could have done as at what he did.

Today, something of Jarrell's role is performed by people as various as Dana Gioia, Helen Vendler, and Brad Leithauser himself; Daniel Hoffman is an utterly accomplished poet and critic and academic. Looking back at the parabola of the career of Randall Jarrell, we can see that his function was necessary, coming out of the 30's and the background of the New Criticism as he did, writing war poems in the 40's, attacking Eisenhower's America in the 50's for its complacency and philistinism, beating the drum for poetry itself, writing poetry all the way, and, in the 60's, losing his edge before the end. He was as necessary as he was ornamental, and his career, which includes self-contradictions and shortcomings, was a register of the American imagination and of American possibility. Only an American could have gone as ga-ga over Europe as he did, because only an American would have needed to. Translating Rilke and Goethe, Randall Jarrell instinctively flinched from the implications of his own celebrations of Whitman and William Carlos Williams. Jarrell's stressed sensibility, like that of James and Twain and Faulkner, showed once again that to be an American is a complex fate. That's only one reason why, more than three decades after his passing, we still need him.

J.O. Tate is a professor of English at Dowling College on Long Island.

Principalities & Powers

by Samuel Francis

John-John Is My Co-Pilot

Aside from the non-resignation and non-ruin of President Clinton and the non-campaign for the Republican presidential nomination, the biggest non-event of 1999 was undoubtedly the non-survival last summer of John F. Kennedy, Jr., who, true to the traditions of his family, managed to seize international headlines when his own recklessness and incompetence led to disaster—this time not only for other people, which historically has been the major accomplishment of the Kennedy clan, but also for himself. His death was indeed a sad occasion. Gifted with fame, looks, and legend, if not with any discernible talent, John-John was best known to the American public as the small boy who was made to salute his father's funeral cortege on that bare and bitter day in 1963. But that, indeed, was the extent of the young man's achievement. Being dubbed "The Sexiest Man Alive" by *People* magazine and founding a frothy gossip sheet for fashionable Manhattan coffee tables would, for any serious person, be not so much achievements as embarrassments; but for John-John, they were the pinnacles of his grown-up vocation. His death was sad because he seems to have been entirely harmless, much like any other victim of a plane accident, but not because of any significant future that his mind or character had promised.

National mourning of the death of an attractive celebrity who happened to be the son of a former president would have been entirely appropriate, but the propaganda organs of the Ruling Class were unable to leave it at that. From the moment of John-John's disappearance off the Massachusetts coast, the establishment press set off such a howl of grief and so protracted a yelp of pain that one would have thought that Pearl Harbor, the Alamo, and the Holocaust Memorial Museum had all suddenly been vaporized in a nuclear attack by white supremacists from Idaho. The *Washington Post* ran a banner headline about Kennedy's plane crash the day after it happened, and staff writer Michael Grunwald set the tone and pace

of what would quickly become a national mania. "John F. Kennedy, Jr., the dashing celebrity who represents the best-known link to his father's Camelot era, is missing at sea," Mr. Grunwald moaned in what passes at the *Post* for a news story, and Kennedy's apparent death was "another startling blow for the star-crossed family that has become America's version of political royalty."

And so it went in newspapers and on news shows all over the world for a solid week and more. Not since the murder of Gianni Versace had a death in the United States brought so much lachrymose foam to the jowls of the chattering class, and not since the death of Princess Diana in Paris had the mob that pays attention to the mewlings of the chattering class had a chance to wallow and cavort in so much manufactured grief. That the mass mourning for John-John was manufactured is incontestable. For all his cosmetic prettiness and personal harmlessness, the young Kennedy was simply not much of an object of popular affection or even interest. Spontaneous mass grief for the deaths of Elvis and Jimmy Stewart, even of Diana herself, makes sense. For John-John, it just doesn't.

There were many reasons why the death of yet another Kennedy represented a swell opportunity to manufacture yet another mythical hero, not the least being the sheer volume of sales that the fabrication engendered. But there was also a political purpose, which was to formulate yet again the mythology of Camelot as the incarnation of what America is supposed to be but has never been able to become because the vast right-wing conspiracy of assassins that murdered John and Bobby keeps shooting anyone who might make it reality. The latest death of a Kennedy was thus the occasion not only for inventing another hero as fake as the one that crawled out of PT-109 during World War II but also for pouring the old myth into a new bottle from which the mass mind of the New America will be able to swig its fill of cultural and political fantasy.

One of the more interesting, if rather bizarre, reformulations of the Kennedy legend popped up in a long essay on "The Kennedy Myths" by Norman Pod-

horetz in the *Wall Street Journal* of July 29. Mr. Podhoretz, the retired editor of *Commentary* magazine, one of the founders and chief articulators of "neo-conservatism," and now in his old age the *paterfamilias* of a vast spawn of talentless dimwits even less gifted than the Kennedy family, showed little interest in the death of young Mr. Kennedy but a good deal in the image of his father and his father's political legacy. As is not uncommon with neoconservatives of any generation, Mr. Podhoretz mainly managed to distort and miss the real point of that legacy, though not so much from thick-headedness, perhaps, as from a desire to repackage the Kennedy legend in a way that will be useful to neoconservative political purposes.

It was the main burden of Mr. Podhoretz's argument to claim that, while John Kennedy and his politics seemed to Mr. Podhoretz in his radical phase during the early 1960's to be a betrayal of, and an obstacle to, serious social and political change, they seem now, in the maturity of Mr. Podhoretz's wisdom as a neoconservative sage, to be not especially liberal at all. "Indeed," Mr. Podhoretz wrote, "shocking as it may sound on first hearing, the policies advocated by John F. Kennedy made him more a precursor of Ronald Reagan than of his two younger brothers"—i.e., the brutal and swaggering Bobby and the oafish Ted.

It is indeed shocking at first hearing, but Mr. Podhoretz makes a reasonably good case for this claim. Like Reagan, Kennedy campaigned in 1960 on promises of a tax cut, an arms build-up, and a committed antagonism to communism. In Mr. Podhoretz's view, it was not John Sr. who sired the leftism that now struts up and down the cultural and political power centers of the country but his brothers:

So little did Ted's views have in common with those of JFK that it was as though Sir Lancelot had returned from his quest for the Holy Grail and revealed that he had renounced Christianity and become a pagan.

But the resemblance between Ken-