

Literary Lives

Edward Sorel

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In a time when publishers practically cross their fingers and flip a coin to determine whether a book is called a memoir or a novel, it is reassuring that the loyalty oath to speak the truth is still upheld among Truth's most vocal followers—satirists.

The author, an award-winning satirist and caricaturist, was born in 1929 in the Bronx; he has been a regular contributor to *The Nation*, *The New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Atlantic Monthly*, and a collection of his works was exhibited in 1998 at National Portrait Gallery in Washington D. C. His helium-filled Chagall-like figures are instantly recognizable, like windy watercolors tethered to a clever line of thought. Here, he offers all-too-true biographic close-ups of ten stately literary figures, caught in a comic book's quickness.

There's William Butler Yeats, editing the *Oxford Book of Modern Verse*, including three poems by his fellow Nobel Prize winners Eliot and Auden and a whopping seven by a twenty-nine-year-old actress Margot Ruddock, his current mistress. (She was "most grateful.") And behold that rising star in the east, Lillian Hellman, who in 1952 avowed to the House Committee on Un-American Activities that she would "not cut my conscience to fit this year's fashion," (although she offered the press an advance copy of her statement)—wasn't she the same playwright who also pled the Fifth Amendment (it being, of course, that year's fashion)? By 1984, facing lawsuits for extensive fabrication in her autobiography, she died, her four-million-dollar estate largely the result of finagling the rights to Dashiell Hammett's work as creator of Sam Spade, royalties that properly should have gone to his daughters. (At her funeral she was lauded for her "decency, integrity and uprightness.")

Norman Mailer's epic bid for Mayor of New York is remembered, as is Leonard Bernstein's cocktail party for the radical Black Panthers, where the color of the servants counted as much as the canapés. Tolstoy, too, had his servant problems—emancipating the serfs—though Jean-Paul Sartre seemingly did not, as so much of the fetching and serving up of his increasingly younger girlfriends was willingly performed by his long-suffering lover, author of that feminist bible *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir. (Their adopted daughters war on to this day in rival memoirs.) Then there's Carl Jung, Freud's intended heir to the throne of psychiatry (a gentile would make it look less like "a Jewish science"). In 1933 Jews were expelled from the Psychoanalytic Association and he helpfully proposes that Jews in Germany be asked to dress differently so "they are not mistaken for people like ourselves."

Rand, Brecht and George Eliot round out the unusual suspects. With this sly, brisk illustration of great authors, Sorel's legion fans will not be disappointed by his newest additions to this highly acclaimed rogues' gallery.

LEETA TAYLOR (August 18, 2009)

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