

The Most Famous Writer Who Ever Lived: A True Story of My Family

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In the final chapter, Buggeln describes the fates of these churches since the 1960s. Some are treasured “historic” parts of larger church complexes; others, such as Messiah Lutheran Church in Burlington, Iowa, have undergone extensive restoration; still others, such as St. Augustine Episcopal Church in Gary, Indiana, are now included on the National Register of Historic Places.

Buggeln’s previous book, *Temples of Grace*, is the definitive work on the iconic New England meetinghouse. This exhaustively researched book is likely to become the go-to work on postwar churches, and not only modernist ones. Mark Torgerson’s *Architecture of Immanence* and Jay Price’s *Temples for a Modern God* are still important supplements, but Buggeln’s work stands out for its detailed analysis of specific church buildings, richly illustrated pages, and consideration of the buildings’ place in the culture of the suburb. Her case studies give substance to the movement and help us see how these churches came alive. Preservationists, church members, historians, and students of suburbs should all rely on this essential work.

The Most Famous Writer Who Ever Lived: A True Story of My Family, by Tom Shroder. New York: Blue Rider Press, 2016. 402 pp. Family tree, photographs, index. \$28.00 hardcover.

Reviewer Marcia Noe is professor of English and director of women’s studies at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. She is a senior editor of *The Dictionary of Midwestern Literature*, volumes one and two, and is editor of *MidAmerica*, an annual publication of the Society for the Study of Midwestern Literature.

The reader who glances at the title of this very readable book and assumes that it must be about Shakespeare is in for a rude awakening. Its subject is actually Iowa native MacKinlay Kantor, who wrote the New York Times best-selling and Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Andersonville*. But once immersed in the book, the reader comes to understand that the title reflects Kantor’s conception of himself rather than any critical or popular consensus, and that outsized self-image and its consequences function as a thematic emphasis of the book.

Born in 1904 in Webster City, Iowa, Kantor was abandoned by a sociopathic father and raised by an impoverished single mother. A high school dropout, he worked as a reporter for the *Webster City Daily News* and the *Cedar Rapids Republican*, as a columnist for the *Des Moines Tribune*, and as a war correspondent, screenwriter, and novelist, publishing 40 books, including the aforementioned Civil War novel and *Glory for Me*, on which the Academy Award-winning film *The Best Years of Our Lives* was based. For the better part of four decades, Kantor hobnobbed with

movie stars, artists, generals, writers, and politicians, mentored young writers, appeared on television and was featured in liquor ads, and lived high and drank hard. He died of cancer in 1977, broke and nearly forgotten, in Sarasota, Florida, where he and his wife had built a beach home when he became a best-selling author.

Hybrids are trending these days, and this book fits right into that trend. Rather than organize the book chronologically, from the beginning of MacKinlay Kantor's life until its end, Kantor's grandson Tom Shroder has structured it according to the process he followed in researching and writing it and the parallels he discovered between his grandfather's life and his own. Thus, *The Most Famous Writer Who Ever Lived* is more of a memoir-biography than a straight biography. In fact, the book is as much about Tom Shroder and his Kantor and MacKinlay ancestors and relatives as it is about his famous grandfather.

It is this hybridity that makes me so ambivalent about this book. As a scholar, I would have appreciated a detailed, chronologically organized critical biography; as a reader, I found the memoir-biography format to be engaging and a welcome respite from my regular academic reading. Shroder doesn't seek to make a complete record of Kantor's life; for example, there is nothing in this book about Kantor's work with the New York City Police Department (an experience upon which he drew for many of his crime stories), his association with the Boys Scouts of America, or his musicianship. However, the absence of copious facts and details has the effect of foregrounding key incidents, arguably creating a more vivid and memorable MacKinlay Kantor: a 13-year-old Mack, humiliated by his scamster father at a fancy Chicago luncheon; a 23-year-old Mack pounding out one short story after another in a tiny apartment in Chicago; a 45-year-old Mack, reacting viscerally to what he found when he entered Buchenwald.

One of the best features of this book is its honesty. Shroder does a good job of putting family loyalty and personal feelings aside to give us a warts-and-all portrait of Kantor. His love for his grandfather and his respect for his work are evident but do not blind him to Kantor's failings or tempt him to gloss over them, many of which he discovered while undertaking thoroughgoing research at the Library of Congress, the main repository of Kantor's papers. He offers many examples of Kantor's kindness, perseverance, and generosity, as well as of his egotism, selfishness, womanizing, reactionary politics, and financial irresponsibility.

Although I would have liked to have seen less Tom Shroder and more MacKinlay Kantor in this book, I can certainly recommend it, although less as a scholarly resource than as a captivating cautionary tale about a gifted writer whose disdain for intellectual growth, fond-

ness for alcohol, and love of a lavish lifestyle kept him out of contention for literary longevity. The book could have been more carefully fact-checked: Hemingway's third wife was Martha Gelhorn, not "Mary," as Shroder states; and Sidney Poitier is not an "African American actor" — he was born to Bahamian parents and spent his early years in the Caribbean. But these are minor flaws. Anyone making a study of MacKinlay Kantor, Iowa authors, Civil War writers, or Pulitzer Prize-winning novelists should find Shroder's book useful. Anyone wishing to learn how to write a compelling memoir would also be wise to take a look at it.

All the Wild that Remains: Edward Abbey, Wallace Stegner, and the American West, by David Gessner. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2015. 354 pp. Illustrations, notes on sources, index. \$16.95 paperback.

Reviewer James A. Pritchard is adjunct associate professor in the Department of Landscape Architecture and the Department of Natural Resource Ecology and Management at Iowa State University. He is a coauthor of *A Green and Permanent Land* (2001).

This wonderful book is not only an enlightening literary tour through two well-known authors' works but also a thoughtful exploration of the western landscapes they portrayed. Wallace Stegner and Edward Abbey, argues Gessner, "far from being regional or outdated, have never been more relevant" (3).

Using extensive interviews, the author transports readers far beyond the "mummified" reputations of "Saint Wallace the Good and Randy Ed, Wild Man" (279). Stegner's reputation remains more traditionalist, especially contrasted with the free-wheeling Abbey. Yet Stegner broke boundaries, questioning the status quo of the West, striving to "strip away myth" from the ethos of rugged individualism and to "see things as they were" (37). And Abbey, despite trending toward the cantankerous on the written page, was "actually quiet and reserved in person" (7). Abbey accepted himself, embracing his id, while Stegner continually wanted better, embracing culture. Gessner capably engages with biography, following Stegner in understanding our world through people's lives.

Abbey and Stegner (who attended the first Iowa Writers' Workshop) shared a "relish for hard work" with focused creative time, and both taught writing at a university (145). They were informed by Bernard DeVoto's *The Western Paradox* and his view of "too many places where the citizenry was suckered in by the dream of riches, only to be left empty in the end" (120). Gessner engagingly illuminates the literary landscape, describing a continuous heritage from John Wesley Powell,