Always Merry and Bright: The Life of Henry Miller (review)

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Jan Cohn's presentation of Rinehart's adventures and accomplishments makes absorbing reading. Cohn has a good eye for detail—a knack for vivid description—and she writes without affectation; the result is a scholarly book that is gracefully written and moves quickly and smoothly. Also a pleasure is Cohn's scrupulous attempt to be objective and measured in her account. This biography refrains from heavy-handed psychological analysis and avoids sensationalizing even the most tempting material, such as Mary Roberts Rinehart's cook's attempt on her life. Professor Cohn treats Rinehart's life seriously and yet is never ponderous, which is no easy accomplishment.

Where the biography could be stronger is in placing Rinehart's career as a woman writer and her work, particularly as a mystery writer, in historical context. Plot summaries are provided throughout the biography and there is often perceptive comment on individual fictions; but the reader waits in vain for the type of unifying literary discussion that would place Rinehart's mysteries in an aesthetic tradition and thus deal with her contribution to the genre. There is likewise no discussion of Rinehart's context as a woman writer. Yet by the turn of the century writing had become a completely respectable trade for a woman. Willa Cather, Edith Wharton, Ellen Glasgow, Mary Austin, Zona Gale, Gertrude Atherton—not to mention a host of lesser known professional writers who were women—made names for themselves, and in some cases fortunes as well, by becoming authors. Viewed historically, then, Mary Roberts Rinehart's career is not exceptional, although this biography would leave one with the opposite impression.

Perhaps what makes Rinehart's career most fascinating is its reflectiveness. For over fifty years Mary Roberts Rinehart recorded American attitudes and values uncritically. Her vision did not transcend the culture it perceived. When not writing mysteries, Rinehart took up social issues, dealing in her fiction with unwed pregnancy, prostitution, marital infidelity, labor unrest; but she did not bring unconventional judgments to her subjects. In her work craft is first rate. We can feel the raucous atmosphere of the speakeasy roadhouse; we can see the ward of a turn-of-the-century hospital. But the moral perspective is almost always average. Most of the time, Rinehart shares rather than critiques dominant middle-class white values; thus the story of her career becomes the story of mainstream middle-class fantasies and fears in America for roughly half a century.

While *Improbable Fiction* suffers from not being more historical, the complaint should not be overemphasized. This biography fills a gap (there has been no biography of Mary Roberts Rinehart); it is very well-researched and extremely readable. Professor Cohn offers fellow critics and scholars an excellent starting place for continued serious work on Rinehart.

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Martin, Jay. *Always Merry and Bright: The Life of Henry Miller.* New York: Capra Press, 1978. 560 pp. Cloth: $15.00.

"Other people," writes Jay Martin in the Acknowledgments and Notes to his biography of Henry Miller, "have told somewhat different versions of this story." We can expect future biographers to create still different stories from the Miller records, although few of these are likely to duplicate Martin's painstaking review of letters, manuscripts, legal briefs, financial records, and other carefully preserved miscellaneous documents.

This biography is "unauthorized," as the title page proclaims, but no future biographer will have Martin's access to Miller himself, of course, nor his grudging blessing on the enterprise. Certainly Martin's loving labors on behalf of the Miller legend are prodigious and commendable. Indeed, his research appears to exhaust the possibilities of his subject, although I realize that this compliment has a certain academic ring to it. Laborers in academic vineyards, as we all know, were never held in high regard—at least publicly—by Henry Miller. Nevertheless, this casual disdain did not prevent him and his supporters from preserving enough documents to keep generations of graduate students busy if they are so inclined. In fact, Miller never seriously turned away from traditional rewards and recognition however much he derided them or those who enjoyed them.

But Martin tells a story in this biography, and the term *story* is significant. Perhaps no account of the life of the Brooklyn autodidact whose books once seemed so scandalous to American (and French) readers can or should give us the sense of what Henry Miller was "really like." Probably Martin succeeds better than anyone else ever will. Unfortunately, his narrative is disconcertingly intimate at times — not necessarily in the particular events he recounts, but in his frequent obliteration of the biographer's voice. Often the reader finds himself "inside" Miller, experiencing such insights as may be provided by detailed verbal accounts of Miller's sensations during sexual encounters. On other occasions, the reader is treated to summaries of Miller's "thoughts" such as those he experienced when his second wife, June, arrived in Paris. Whether Miller himself could have retrieved such moments even shortly after they occurred seems doubtful. To share them as recreated by his biographer is to experience a curious echo. In Miller's fiction (he would reject the term) such moments enjoy the full significance they achieve in the contexts of the literary works in which they appear — contexts greater than those of the biography. Readers who know Miller's works well will recognize the details of many of these passages, but unless one makes facile connections between the life and the work, they do not carry the authority they have in Miller's best fiction.

This is not to say that one does not profit from this readable and full account of Miller's experiences in Brooklyn, in Paris, in California, and elsewhere. The details of the publication of *The Tropic of Cancer*, the accounts of friends and places (most appear in various guises in the fiction), and the untangling of Miller's marital history, the record of his financial, personal, and artistic struggles on the margins of success all give us a useful and instructive view of the human and social contexts in which the books we know were written. But this biography remains a contribution to the legend, a narrative history. Martin offers only modest explanations and analyses of the forces—principally familial in his view—that haunted Miller and may lie behind his particular creative urges. In this regard, Miller's mother and her failure as a mother in her son's eyes receive the greatest attention, although the issues are not developed beyond some fairly general psychological notions. But we cannot do without such narrative accounts and *Always Merry and Bright* provides an engrossing one. Although it does not finally separate man and legend—may, indeed, serve to fuse them permanently in the overviews of American literature that exist—for many readers it will serve as a substantial introduction to the anomalous figure of Henry Miller.

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