

Yente for the Masses

Walter Winchell: A Novel

By Michael Herr. Alfred A. Knopf, 1990. 158 pp.

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Fifty years ago, THE NEW YORKER devoted an unprecedented six issues to a profile of Walter Winchell – actually, it was more of an attack – by the essayist St.Clair McKelway. It was later published in book form. On the surface, this seems absurd. Winchell was not an artist, a statesman (except perhaps in his own mind), or a philosopher. He was a "reporter" and "broadcaster" in the very loosest sense – his words appeared in a newspaper, and he spoke into a microphone. But much of what he said and wrote had been given to him by others, and most of it was hardly profound – a potpourri of news "flashes," jokes, capsule reviews, political commentary, and above all, gossip about celebrities of the day.

Yet he was impossible to ignore – indeed, at that time, he was arguably the most powerful journalist (however one defines the term) in America. His influence was felt from the halls of Congress to the executive suites of Hollywood; it is estimated that 90% of the adult American population followed his daily columns and his Sunday night broadcasts. His very name had become iconic: when John O'Hara referred to "the local Winchell" in his story "Pal Joey," his readers needed no explanation. As the saying goes, if he didn't know you – and mention your name – you probably weren't worth knowing.

Considering all this, there is no question that Winchell merited serious attention in his day. But what of the present – given the fact that he later fell so far into obscurity that at his funeral in 1972, the only people in attendance were his daughter, Walda, and a rabbi hired for the occasion? Does he still have relevance to anyone other than the most devoted historians of popular culture?

The answer is yes, and not just because his life was the classic American rise-and-fall story. Winchell exploited, and personified, a social phenomenon which predated him, but which he brought to a previously undreamed-of level: the cult of celebrity, the adulation of the famous and/or accomplished by the majority of "ordinary" Americans. The effects of this on American journalism, politics, and society in general are still being debated today; as recently as March of

this year, *Time* devoted a cover story to the "new" American gossip industry... strikingly similar to a *Newsweek* cover piece from the mid-Seventies.

Thus the time would appear to be ripe for another look at Winchell, a true pioneer of that industry. All we have had since his death are a few minor biographies – no one, it seemed, considered his story particularly "commercial." Now comes Michael Herr's *Walter Winchell*, an attempt to make his life compelling by presenting it, in effect, as a kind of movie-on-paper. One could regard this as either appropriate or redundant, since that life, even without embellishment, has all the elements of a traditional Hollywood production: a riveting protagonist, a straightforward narrative, sharp dialogue, supporting characters right out of Central Casting, even a clear moral. Indeed, the real question is why Herr, a writer as skilled at screenwriting (*Full Metal Jacket*, *Apocalypse Now*) as at journalism (*Dispatches*), chose to render the tale in this fashion. Why not do it as a pure, straightforward screenplay?

As it turns out, he did. Herr originally conceived the project as a film, several years ago – at one point, Robert Benton (*Kramer vs. Kramer*) had been penciled in as director – but it never materialized, for what I imagine were the usual myriad Hollywood reasons. Yet as he tells us in his rather tortured, overlong preface, "I always meant it to be read, and in that sense thought of it as something 'more' than a screenplay... You could call it a screenplay that's typed like a novel, that reads like a novel but plays like a movie."

Come again? Well, in technical terms, what happens is that most of the "scenes" are written as if intended to be filmed, beginning with terse settings of time and place ("A delicatessen on Broadway, early afternoon") and filled with asides to the reader-as-audience ("We see a train speeding through the night, hear music on the sound track suggestive almost of flight and pursuit"). Characters both famous and obscure are introduced with capsule descriptions ("A tall, well-dressed man, SHERMAN BILLINGSLEY, comes by"). Few sections go beyond three pages, and some are nothing more than quick snatches of dialogue: "Walter, broadcasting with great force: 'Listen, Adolf and Benito and Tojo - don't think the oceans can protect you... We're coming at you now with everything we've got, and it's plenty! We did it before, and we can do it again...'"

What we have, then, is a cinematic life depicted in cinematic terms. And while it would be stretching things to say that Herr has created a new literary form in the tradition of Capote and Mailer's "non-fiction novels" – in most cases, the "screenplay novel" style would be too clumsy and unsubtle – for this particular subject, it works quite well. The book, like Winchell himself, is fast, loud, aggressive, often funny, sometimes obnoxious, occasionally moving, and never, ever dull (and it would *still* make a hell of a movie). But also like its subject, it often conveys a sense of being all surface and no depth; we are too aware of unanswered questions, of vital points left unraised.

The book begins with a long opening scene: Winchell in 1943, at the height of his power, holding court at his personal table in New York's Stork Club with Billingsley, the owner, and a close friend, Damon Runyon (Ernest Hemingway also drops by). It then flashes back to his childhood in turn-of-the-century Harlem, then still a Jewish neighborhood, before progressing forward. Herr presents the young Walter, trying to escape his early poverty by cracking the vaudeville circuit. His efforts bring him nothing but failure and humiliation, but at the same time, he develops a rather nasty but enjoyable hobby: jotting down bits and pieces of overheard "dirt" on his fellow performers, then posting the stories on backstage bulletin boards for everyone to read. The gimmick gets him attention, then employment on various second-level newspapers... and, in 1929, a column for the *Mirror*, one of several New York publications owned by legendary press baron William Randolph Hearst.

Over the next three years, Winchell was one of the few Americans whose "stock" went up. He was featured on the cover of *Time*, called "a national institution" by Alexander Woolcott; even those who dismissed him as a sort of *yente* for the masses had to concede that his use of language – the bizarre coinages and alliterations ("infanticipating" for pregnant, "phfft" for romantic breakup), the separation of items by three dots to suggest telegraphic urgency – was unlike anything previously seen in print.

With his entry into broadcasting in 1932, his rise was complete; that breathless, machine-gun voice, suggesting barely controlled hysteria, went out weekly to "Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea" – and millions stopped their lives to hear the tribune of the famous, granting them a brief, thrilling glimpse into a realm as distant and fabulous as Camelot, or Oz.

But to extend the metaphor, the wizard was really just a small man behind a curtain, grotesquely puffed up with a sense of his own importance. Some of this may have been rooted in his background; his hardscrabble childhood gave him an overabundance of energy and ambition, common to thousands of young men from similar backgrounds. But Winchell was not only determined to escape the ghetto; he was obsessed with attention, perpetually craving the spotlight – and achieving that aim made him a monster of egotism, selfishness, and near-sadistic cruelty.

Much of this was not, as one might assume, directed at those whose names, and secrets, appeared in his column; many of his subjects were happy to be mentioned as long as he spelled their names correctly. But those with less status in his world – including the press agents who provided much of his material – learned to expect a steady diet of abuse, often for the minutest of provocations. And anyone who crossed him could face professional oblivion ("Barry Gray is *dead*, you got it? Move it around, and make sure everybody understands. Anybody who goes on his show is dead too..."). His neglect of his family was abominable: his wife was literally driven to drink by his philandering, and his son's "acting out" included wearing Nazi regalia in public ("Just ask yourself," sneers Junior, "how would *you* act if you had Walter Winchell for a father?").

And the damage done by Winchell went beyond the realm of the personal; loving power in any form, he was, inevitably, drawn into the political sphere, his near-total ignorance in such matters notwithstanding. At first, the results were praiseworthy: he was ahead of many of his "serious" colleagues in alerting America to the evils of Nazism and exposing its supporters in this country, and his admiration for Franklin Roosevelt – even though it was fortified by FDR's skillful stroking – was heartfelt and honest. But with the end of the war and his cold-shouldering by Harry Truman (again, the personal and the political were mixed), Winchell shifted rightward. He sided with Billingsley, a reactionary bigot, against Josephine Baker when the latter claimed racist treatment at the Stork Club; the ensuing controversy helped drive him into the McCarthy camp, and he became one of the most vicious red-baiters of the era. His more liberal audiences were permanently alienated, and everyone else found him tiresome – he had been a lonely crusader in his anti-Nazi campaign, but as an anti-Communist, his braying was indistinguishable from the rest of the pack.

After that, his fall was precipitous and unbroken... and the causes were numerous. When television supplanted radio as the dominant medium in America, Winchell tried to adapt; but his attempt at breaking into TV, in competition with his hated rival Ed Sullivan, was disastrous – when audiences had an image to go with the disembodied voice, they were repelled by "an angry middle-aged man yelling at the camera." In print, competitors such as the kindler, gentler Leonard Lyons began encroaching on his turf, and the number of papers carrying Winchell's column declined from over 1,000 to less than two hundred. Narrating the popular TV series "The Untouchables" kept him in the public eye for a few more years, but as a voice of nostalgia, as much a part of the past as the events he was describing. His end became official when his last employers, the *Mirror* and the *New York Journal-American*, were destroyed by labor disputes, as had happened to the Stork Club. But in truth, he had long since become irrelevant; as the loss of power fed the loss of access and vice versa, he had been reduced to reporting such marginalia as "Gina Lollobrigida never wears a girdle."

As anyone who knew him could have predicted, Winchell did not go quietly from the scene, but kicking and screaming – and plenty of people were happy to give him a kick of their own on the way down. Yet if he never completely accepted his fate, the shock of it, at least, seemed to lessen with the passage of time. (Or perhaps he had half-consciously expected it; Herr asserts that Winchell "always knew that fate's natural and expected malice would do something awful to him, just as it had to all his friends"). The book's final image is of Winchell retired in Arizona, his wife and son dead, the latter a suicide. He's saluting the flag – a reminder of his patriotism, the one unshakeable value for this child of immigrants who symbolized the best and worst aspects of the American Dream.

In presenting evidence for the "what" of Winchell's importance, Herr has done an excellent job. But as this is a novel and not a critical biography, he inevitably leaves us curious about the "why" and "how." Why would a sixth-grade dropout of unsurpassed vulgarity – his favorite forms of exercise, he said, were "bending, stretching, and coming" – be treated as respected oracle by so many of his countrymen? How could someone who once referred to Paris as a seaport and to Emile Zola as a woman, who walked out on *Waiting For Godot* insisting that it was "a hoax," be taken seriously, to the point where a word from him could make or break careers and reputations?

To answer this, we have to place Winchell in the context of this nation's cultural history. Of course, "dishing the dirt" is a basic human impulse; we've had village gossips for as long as we've had villages. But in America, where individualism and its corollary, privacy, are sacrosanct, gossip – the revealing of secrets, essentially a violation of privacy – has taken on the particular lure of the forbidden.

This is especially true when those being gossiped about are "prominent" in one way or another. Since we are supposedly a nation without fixed classes, where every citizen has an equal chance in life, it inevitably follows that as Kurt Vonnegut once observed, "the [real] political parties in America ...are Winners and Losers," and that the latter will often take a not-so-secret enjoyment in seeing the former brought low (e.g., Donald Trump, Leona Helmsley, Claus von Bulow, etc., etc.).

Thus it is not surprising that publishers first discovered that gossip could sell newspapers in the late 19th century, when a distinct American aristocracy emerged: the "captains of industry" – later "robber barons" – whose lavish entertaining and consuming habits became the stuff of dreams for the less-fortunate reading public. Many papers began running a "society column," a record of the comings and goings of the wealthy (primarily the established wealthy; those whose riches were too *nouveau*, or who had the wrong religion or accent, need not apply).

In those days, the coverage was respectful, even adulatory – it was assumed that readers were content to know about the parties and possessions of the upper class, not their scandals. But Winchell changed all that.

Entering the field at a time when heroes and fantasy figures were suddenly emerging from previously obscure or nonexistent areas – radio, movies, professional sports, even organized crime – he tapped into the new hungers of the public by democratizing the pantheon of fame. Winchell opened his pages to *anyone*, and for any reason; attracting his attention, for anything from a riveting stage performance to a juicy sex scandal, was the only criterion. At the same time, he added an undertone of adolescent nastiness, like someone painting a mustache on the Mona Lisa; sure, anybody could get in, but it could just as easily be as an accused "swish" or adulterer as for writing a literary masterpiece ("Al Capone," he says in the book, "[is] as famous as Al Jolson.").

And the very arrogance that made Winchell so loathsome as a human being helped fuel his professional success. No matter how powerful he became, he always maintained the persona of the outsider, the tough "little guy" exposing and bringing down the big shots. (This was not entirely a fantasy. Though assimilated, and nonobservant, as many Jews of that period, Winchell could still be graphically reminded of his origins; he was once denounced by Mississippi congressman John Rankin as "a little slime-mongering kike" – this was duly entered in the *Congressional Record*.) And as someone who had spent so many years in the futile pursuit of headliner status, he could identify with all those Americans who might, however vaguely, harbor similar dreams – and resentments. It helped that he was operating in an era when such feelings were in abundance: we tend to forget that many Americans in the 1920's weren't invited to the Jazz Age party, and during the Depression, the party crowd had become an even smaller minority. Indeed, the greater social and economic security of Americans in the postwar years could have been a factor in Winchell's loss of popularity.

What about his legacy? A scene in the Stork Club, late in the book, depicts Winchell watching "Roy Cohn... dancing with a pretty young woman." It brings to mind Barbara Walters, who occasionally dated Cohn in the '50s and went on to become, in a sense, Winchell's journalistic "daughter." Walters' celebrity journalism, where Mother Teresa and Eddie Murphy are assigned equal significance – once again, fame in itself, rather than how one attains it, is all that matters – is essentially latter-day Winchellism. And his influence can be seen throughout American media, from *People* to "Entertainment Tonight" to countless local news shows. In Herr's words, "If people go around today treating themselves like celebrities because not to be a celebrity is just too awful, we may have Walter Winchell to thank."

But there are differences, both pro and con. There is no single figure who possesses, or abuses, as much power as Winchell – whatever happened to "Miss Rona" Barrett or Joyce Haber? – which is just as well. On the other hand, gossip itself has become all-pervasive in ways that Winchell never would have imagined, to the point where celebrity dirt is assigned equal or greater status with events of truly historic import. (In that recent *Time* story, Carl Bernstein noted that "supposedly responsible newspapers [gave] over Page One to Donald and Ivana Trump" just as Nelson Mandela was being liberated and the Allies of World War II were approving German reunification.) Winchell, at least, understood the difference between the serious and the trivial; if

Liz Smith or Diana "The Ear" McClelland wouldn't presume to make foreign policy pronouncements, neither would Winchell have tried to get a Trump-like story on the front page. Herr recreates a 1939 broadcast where Winchell spends ten minutes attacking Congressional isolationists before throwing in a tidbit "'just for those of you who think I ought to stick to Broadway gossip'" about a starlet's presumed bed-hopping.

But one similarity between Winchell and his successors is clear: the basic impetus for their work is still negative. Smith et al. may proclaim their essential niceness, just as positive items such as marriages and "legitimate" births were a staple for Winchell. But as any honest editor will tell you, it's the scandals that really boost circulation; and when people refer to "juicy" gossip, they're not talking about parties where no one misbehaved.

And perhaps this is a good explanation for the latter-day revival of the gossip industry. Once again, we are in a period of great economic and social uncertainty, where a small, loud group parties on while everyone else presses their collective nose against the window, hoping to see something embarrassing. Given current conditions, I wouldn't bet on the industry losing steam any time before the next century.

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