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 **Alfred Kazin: A Biography (review)**

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REVIEW

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**In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:**

Reviewed by:

*Martha Kim, Independent Scholar*

Richard M. Cook. *Alfred Kazin: A Biography*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. 452p.

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Richard Cook's *Alfred Kazin: A Biography* is well worth reading. Richard Cook uses Kazin's lifetime of journals and his copious writings and his two major works, *On Native Grounds* (1942) and *A Walker in the City* (1951) to analyze what made Kazin the pre-eminent spokesperson for American literature and arts during the 1930s through the 1950s.

Cook's writing style is crisp, clear, and easy to read. Cook, who is a Professor of English Literature at the University of Missouri, St. Louis, does a good job of interpreting Kazin's life—his interests, views, achievements, conflicts, Jewishness. Cook includes extensive quotations from Kazin's journals and publications. Further, Cook's biography is well documented with extensive notes organized by **[End Page 98]** each chapter and an extensive bibliography, and lends itself to being a source book for further research.

Cook's biography goes into detailed discussions about the political and literary movements that Kazin was involved in during the early and mid-twentieth century in America and abroad, which was every important movement during the time. Kazin made copious notes about everyone he met, about the literary journals that were flourishing in the 1930s and 1940s, and about the literary critics and political radicals that he was friends with. He later turned his journals into detailed and accurate memoirs of his and his contemporaries' involvement in Socialism, Communism, and the Democratic movements of the times. His life was a recordation of the America of the 1920s through 1950s, a mini-history of the times.

Kazin was a great supporter of all that was uniquely American in a time when most Literati worshipped Europe and looked to European artists, authors, and philosophers for inspiration. Kazin realized that he had discovered his life's work at the age of 25, when he was a new graduate of City College and a sometime reviewer for various literary journals. In a journal entry in 1939, Kazin says, "I suddenly realized, and for the first time consciously, that I had a passionate and even professional interest in American culture and literature" (70). Kazin followed up on this

realization by deciding that he wanted to write the definitive history of late nineteenth- / early twentieth-century American literature. The result was *On Native Grounds* published in 1942.

Kazin expressed in his journals lively and insightful opinions about the universities where he taught and faculty and students he interacted with, whether in New York City, Michigan, North Carolina, or Massachusetts. Kazin harbored a special feeling for the Midwest, where he thought the students were sincere but unimaginative, and liked least Amherst, Massachusetts, where he thought professors and students alike were pompous and pedantic.

When Kazin got older, he returned to walk the Brownsville streets of his youth, looking for what defined him from that environment. In an effort to make sense out of the dualities that he felt in his life, he compiled his Brownsville ramblings in *A Walker in the City* (1951), the second of his important works, this one about the effect that a person's childhood experiences has on shaping the adult. The struggles that Kazin had to make a living in the literary world that he had chosen as his life's profession, the difficulties that he had to come to terms with his parents' immigrant status and lack of American ways, lack of English, lack of education, and lack of money are vividly portrayed in Cook's biography, and their influence on shaping the character of the young Kazin, who often hid in the local library to [End Page 99] avoid the conflicts of Jewish Brownsville and his crowded, poverty-stricken home are explored.

Cook's biography explores the personal side of Kazin: his need to reconcile his Jewishness with his life as a nonobservant Jew, his failed marriages, the estrangement that divorce caused between Kazin and his son, Michael, his reconciliation with his son as adults when they both came to realize that they had an intensity for American life and political involvement (Kazin in the Socialist movements of...

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masculinity. Furthermore, each variation of femininity functions to further define (by contradistinction) the single model of masculinity; by the end of the chapter, it is again clear that Martin's primary purpose is to emphasize the coherence of the *Morte*.

This emphasis on coherence unsurprisingly occupies the spotlight in Martin's conclusion. Martin also reasserts her argument that the importance of vision and the various ways it functions throughout the *Mortes* should lead us to think of it not just as a single text but as a single *romance*. As she indicates in her final sentence, genre has been as much her concern as gender. But, apart from suggesting that her book might deserve a more inclusive title, this illuminates the study's greatest strength: that it will appeal to readers with diverse interests. Other medievalists as well as scholars interested in vision will benefit from Martin's explanations of medieval ideas about seeing and being seen as well as the way she employs those ideas to analyze a text. Readers interested in gender, masculinity especially but not exclusively, will likely welcome this addition to the corpus of studies that link gender to performance, whether they focus on the medieval period, another period, or gender theory in general: Martin's argument is a worthy complement to Judith Butler's theoretical work, but also, for instance, to James Eli Adams' study of styles of Victorian masculinities. And those interested in the *Morte* in particular will find a thorough examination of the text, replete with comparisons to its source, that contributes to the ongoing conversation about the way we should classify Malory's work. ✦

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INDEPENDENT SCHOLAR

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Alfred Kazin: A Biography, pop music, as elsewhere in the observable universe, pushes away the crisis of legitimacy.

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