Woman of Letters

The celebrated war reporter Martha Gellhorn revealed another side of herself in her personal correspondence.

By FRANCINE DU PLESSIX GRAY

ONE might well argue that there's considerable advantage, for a gifted woman, in having a take-it-or-leave-it attitude to sex, in being ever ready to abandon the most desirable men to pursue her vocation. An imperviousness to lust is certainly what Martha Gellhorn (1908-1998), the most ferocious (and prophetic) attacks on the lovers met only two or three times a year in "a hotel room high above Central Park." "We played about like ancient kittens," she writes, noting that they would soon be celebrating their "illegal silver anniversary." The Rockefeller idyll coincided with some of Gellhorn's most remarkable and controversial reporting: her dispatches from Vietnam, written in 1966 for The Guardian of London, were the most ferocious (and prophetic) attacks on United States foreign policy yet published in the Western press.

In her 80's, Gellhorn continued to travel obsessively, undertaking adventures that would phase most hardly 50-year-olds. Until her sight began truly to fail, making it nearly impossible for her to read, write or enjoy landscapes, she readily traveled to five different countries in one summer, believing that to "keep moving" was the best cure for depression. In her late 80's she planned to go snorkeling off the Sinai peninsula. In London, which was her home base for her last decades, she was surrounded by a bevy of devoted young intellectuals like Bill Buford and Victoria Glendinning. It took cancer and near-total blindness to defeat her. At 89, she took a pill she'd stored for the last pages of this terrific collection of letters, which won in her late 80's, and lasted until her death. The romance may have been abetted by distance — the lovers met only two or three times a year at most, in "a hotel room high above Central Park." "We played about like ancient kittens," she writes, noting that they would soon be celebrating their "illegal silver anniversary." The Rockefeller idyll coincided with some of Gellhorn's most remarkable and controversial reporting: her dispatches from Vietnam, written in 1966 for The Guardian of London, were the most ferocious (and prophetic) attacks on United States foreign policy yet published in the Western press.

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The Lionesses

From war reporting to movie reviews and political profiles, a century of journalism by women.

JOURNALISTAS
100 Years of the Best Writing and Reporting by Women Journalists.
Edited by Eleanor Mills with Kira Cochrane.

By JILL ABRAMSON

I WORKED for many years as an investigative reporter in Washington, digging into all manner of government grubbiness for The Wall Street Journal and The New York Times. In this trench-coated, gumshoe world, I only occasionally encountered other women among the journalists poring over documents in obscure federal agencies or pounding on the closed doors of K Street, the capital's famous corridor of lobbyists. By long tradition, this was men's turf. It was telling that one of my colleagues once anonymously described me in a published profile as having "balls like cast-iron cantaloupes."

More women have since flooded into journalism, including its investigative and top editing ranks. Still, according to several recent studies, our presence lags on the mastheads, opinion pages and front pages of premier publications.

Into the breach comes "Journalistas," an anthology that bills itself as the best writing by women journalists over the past 100 years. I first picked up the volume with annoyance — I hated the title and still do. It sounds silly and is redolent of all sorts of dopy words for female journalists, including one of my least favorites, editrix. And I'm not a fan of an edition selected by Eleanor Mills (an editor at The New York Times of London) and Kira Cochrane.

A profile by Erica Jong of the Clintons' fascinating, fraught marriage published in The Nation in 1998 is particularly prescient. Jong saw the inevitability of a Monica Lewinsky, at a time when the young and eager intern was still far from Kenneth Starr's net. This Hillary, the simmering wife forced into the background during her husband's re-election campaign, has been so overtaken by Senator Hillary that Jong's perceptive portrait should be required reading for anyone evaluating whether Hillary is presidential timber. Jong captures her unquestionable smarts but also her penchant for striking bargains to acquire power. No one could be surprised by Senator Clinton's multisided utterances on Iraq policy or the steely discipline that helped get her elected.

It is hard to fault an anthology that brings the reader bounty from the likes of Nellie Bly, writing about Bellevue in 1888; Pauline Kael, the celebrated New Yorker film critic, whose 1987 review of "Fatal Attraction" is reprinted here; and Zelda Fitzgerald, writing in McCall's magazine in 1925 about "What Became of the Flappers." The book also features one of Son-tag's final essays, "Regarding the Torture of Others," published in The New York Times Magazine in 2004 after the Abu Ghraib prison scandal unfolded.

And how do you begin to choose among the brilliant possibilities in the oeuvre of Joan Didion, a writer at the very vanguard of the New Journalism? (The editors selected a 1961 Vogue essay, "On Self-Respect," and a profile of Georgia O'Keeffe from Diction's 1925 essay collection, "The White Album.") Another fine and recent article included is Barbara Ehrenreich's "Nickel-and-Dimed," about the working poor, which echoes the work of the female social realists of the first half of the century. Originally published in Harper's Magazine in 1998, it inspired her terrific book of the same name.

I COULD have done without some of the more dated polemics, including one from the National Review'sicy Emma Goldman, opposing World War I. There are also some gaping omissions, most notably Hannah Arendt's "Eichmann in Jerusalem," the stellar essay originally published in The New Yorker that made the term "banality of evil" part of the modern world's psyche and that should be reread annually. In the book's foreword, Mills explains that she and Cochrane excluded Arendt because she wrote mostly in German — a poor excuse.

Carol Gilligan, the psychologist and gender expert, has said that women are less predisposed to judge, and while this could be seen as moral relativism, she argues it's more a recognition of the intricacies of real-world situations. Most of the writers in "Journalistas" do have a special eye for intricacies, but they are also full of brave judgments and passion for political life in all its dimensions. Mills gets it right when she puts forward a simple criticism for this book: "This is not just a women's collection; it reflects the great dilemmas and struggles of humanity in the last century from an often new point of view."
Weapon of Choice

Gordon Parks has photographed white and black America for 60-odd years.

A HUNGRY HEART

A Memoir
By Gordon Parks

By JOHN WRANOVICS

"You're a son-of-a-gun." Gordon Parks's life makes Willie Dixon's old blues song "Hoochie Coochie Man" sound like a documentary. In 1910, a fortuneteller traveling through rural Kansas predicted the arrival and rich life of Andrew Jackson Parks's seventh son — "You're going to have another child — and he's going to be a very special one." That's how the story was told to Gordon Parks by his older brother Clemmie. Gordon, born a window. Years after the auspicious pronouncement, was Poppy Jack Parks's 15th child, the 10th with his second wife, Sarah. And the gypsy lady was right. He would become one of the most celebrated African-American artists of the 20th century, accomplished and revered as a photographer, writer, composer and movie director.

But the child's destiny was by no means obvious. After Sarah died, Parks, then 15, was sent from the family farm in Fort Scott, Kan. (he'd remember it as "the mecca of bigotry"), to live in Minnesota with an older sister and her resentful husband. It wasn't long before he was thrown into the street, hungry and broke, with nothing but a switchblade in his pocket. In the years that followed, he roaming the country, tackling a dizzying array of the grueling jobs available to a young black man without a high school diploma, including shoring public piano player, waiter, busboy, traveling jazz band musician, Civilian Conservation Corps grunt and House of David basketball player.

It wasn't until he was 27 that Parks's future began to reveal itself. While working as a Pullman porter, crisscrossing America on the North Coast Limited, he became transfixed by Dorothea Lange's photos in a passenger's left-behind magazine. Soon after, on a stop in Chicago, a newsreel of a sinking gunship on the North Coast Limited, he became trans­fixed by Dorothea Lange's photos in a passen­ger's left-behind magazine. Soon after, on a stop in Chicago, a newsreel of a sinking gunship while documentation poverty and injustice, his eye for beauty kept him in trou­ble. His eye for beauty kept him in trou­ble.

Life magazine's first black photographer was a one-man wrecking crew of racial barriers.

Parks's attempts to follow the Black 332nd Fighter Group into combat were stymied by government obstacles intended to minimize publicity for the black flight crews. It's at this time that Parks ended his first autobiography, "A Choice of Weapons" (1966). Since then, he has written three additional memoirs. "A Hungry Heart" finds the 93-year-old writer looking backward once more over the groundbreaking victories and painful losses of a long and productive life. In it, he tells old stories anew and revisits key episodes, adding fresh details and perspective in a stripped­down anecdotal style. This is not a book about photos, but about the people in the viewfinder.

Parks was a one-man wrecking crew of racial barriers. After the O.W.I. and jobs at Vogue and Standard, F. S. A. sealed his fate. After the train pulled into Seat­tle, Parks was photographing the black revolution, Malcolm X asked him to be godfather to one of his daughters (accepted) and Eldridge Cleaver invited him to serve as the Black Pan­thers' minister of information (turned down). In 1969, encouraged by John Cassavetes, he be­came the first black American to helm a major studio film when he wrote, directed and com­posed the soundtrack for the movie version of his coming-of-age novel, "The Learning Tree." His next film, "Shaft" ("Hotter than Bond, Cooler than Bullitt"), established the liberated image of the new black male action hero. Both films were named to the National Film Reg­istry, "The Learning Tree" in the inaugural list of 25 films in 1989. (Sadly, it and "The Crow," King Vidor's silent, are the only titles still unavailable in the United States on DVD.)

On the personal front, Parks failed to balance time on the road with a stable family life. Proud that he's remained friends with all three of his former wives, he's also honest about his weakness. His eye for beauty kept him in trou­ble: "Let's just say that an attractive woman was dancing before me, I found it extremely difficult to allow her to dance alone." The greatest loss for Parks, the father of four, was the death of his older son, Gordon Jr., the di­rector of "Superfly," killed in a plane crash while on location in Africa in 1979. "A Hungry Heart," in addition to being a testimony to Parks's wit, sensitivities and vast armony of talents, is a treatise on the value of encouragement. The miracle of his life is what he's achieved with the opportunities he was given. In 1952, the conductor Dean Dixon, hav­ing premiered Parks's "Symphonic Set for Pi­ano and Orchestra" in the courtyard of the Doge's palace in Venice, told Time magazine: "We should hear more from Gordon Parks." Happily, we have again.

John Wranovics is the author of "Chaplin and Agee: The Untold Story of the Tramp, the Writer and the Lost Screenplay."
In All Eyes Down, Fay depicts Marines trudging across a field in Afghanistan, looking for mines.

"If you’re a still-life artist, you’re expected to set up a Ceana-like setting, perhaps with interesting fabric, some peaches and a skull or two. A combat artist is expected to go into combat."

The result is work that does in images what Ernie Pyle did in his World War II newspaper columns: Convey the experiences, both frighten-
In the darkest days of the London blitz, Edward R. Murrow (1908-65) made the horror of the Nazi onslaught audible in his broadcasts to America for CBS.

Murrow, right, currently recalled for a new generation in George Clooney's film "Good Night, and Good Luck," was honored in central London on Wednesday, when the state-run English Heritage organization placed a plaque on the apartment house at 84 Hallam Street, where he lived in Flat 5 from 1938 to 1946. Murrow is the first broadcaster to be honored by English Heritage, which protects and preserves historic sites around England and has emplaced about 800 plaques in London. Richard C. Hottelet, now 88, who was hired by Murrow to cover the D-Day invasion, said Murrow was "never one to angle for applause or recognition." But, Mr. Hottelet added, "About this, I think he'd smile."