



The Professor and Other Writings

Terry Castle

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“[Terry Castle is] the most expressive, most enlightening literary critic at large today.” —Susan Sontag

From one of America's most brilliant critics and cultural commentators, Terry Castle, comes *The Professor and Other Writings*: a collection of startling, gorgeously-written autobiographical essays and a new, long-form piece about the devastation and beauty of early love. James Wolcott, contributing writer to *Vanity Fair*, calls Terry Castle a “Jedi knight of literary exploration and lesbian scholarship,” and *The Professor and Other Writings* “a greatest-hits package of show-stopping monologues and offhand-genius riffs.” *The Professor and Other Writings* is a hilarious and heartbreaking exploration of gender, identity, and sexuality in the grand tradition of such feminist luminaries as Susan Sontag, Camille Paglia, and Joan Didion.

The Professor and Other Writings Details

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From Reader Review *The Professor* and Other Writings for online ebook

Buck says

A ‘fag hag’ is a straight woman who enjoys the company of gay men. Even I know that. But what do you call a straight guy who digs lesbians? There’s got to be a slang term for that, right? Whatever it is, I think I might be one. Not that I have a lot of lesbian friends or anything, but at parties I tend to hit it off with outspoken, crop-haired women with alarming neckties. I just have a good rapport with them for some reason. Of course, I also have a good rapport with elderly ladies, pre-pubescent girls and close female relatives. Pattern? There’s no pattern here. What are you talking about?

Terry Castle is my kind of lesbian. She likes and admires men, has an irreverent sense of humour and takes an almost fanboyish interest in cool stuff like jazz and war. Plus, she’s one of the best literary journalists around: her book reviews have that mix of sass and erudition that is, with me, an unfailing erectile aid.

So I went into *The Professor* all excited, thinking it was a collection of her reviews. Nope. Turns out it’s a series of autobiographical pieces. This shouldn’t have been a problem in itself. After all, I’m the guy who’s been making himself obnoxious around here by crapping all over the novel and valorizing the personal essay. But now I see there’s a point where the personal essay can become a bit too...personal. For me, that threshold was crossed early on in *The Professor*, where Castle spends a whole page cataloguing the dozens of CDs she brought along on a road trip. Okay, she has surprisingly catholic tastes for a middle-aged English prof (Sonic Youth and Fatboy Slim had me raising an eyebrow) but a full page? Is this some kind of Rabelaisian list-making thing? Or just self-indulgence?

Maybe what it comes down to is a failure of sympathy on my part. Call it sexism or what you will, but there are certain areas of female experience—or let’s say, white, upper-middle class female experience—that I just don’t care about. Castle has a difficult relationship with her mother; she’s guiltily obsessed with home décor; she’s acutely status conscious—things she has in common with about, oh, 80 million other American women. And that’s fine. I’m not saying my own anxieties and preoccupations are any more interesting than hers, because they’re not. But at least I’m not trying to make a memoir out of them (yet).

Another bias of mine: I view memoirs as a form of disaster tourism. I expect to be appalled and horrified—from a safe distance. Political prisoners, sex maniacs, hopeless junkies: these are the people I want to hear from. I demand exoticism in autobiography. But the contours of Castle’s experiences are all-too-familiar to me. Take away her gender and sexual orientation and her life starts to look a lot like mine: pathetic and mildly awful at times, but mostly sort of mundane and comfortable.

Certainly Castle is amusing about the absurdities of her bobo-lesbian lifestyle (lesbobo?) but is that enough? Do irony and self-mockery make solipsism okay? I want to say yes, if only to enable my own solipsism, but I’m not sure that’s the right answer.

Eric says

Oh, she’s *funny*. Her eighty-one year-old mother “still spends an hour every morning ‘putting her face on,’

with predictably fantastical, Isak Dinesen-like results.” Castle’s stepfamily was grim and horrible, and everything she writes about them makes me laugh—even her description of the short nasty life and shotgun suicide of her hooker-beating sociopath stepbrother, Jeff:

I think of Jeff as someone who had no language, or no language other than brutality. Not that he couldn’t read or write, on a primitive level. One of the strangest things about his death were some crude letters—presumably sent back and forth between him and another Marine—that turned up in a closet afterwards. They could only be described as billets-doux—but sick, obscene ones. Full of things like, *I going to fuck you cunt, you fucking cunt, suck my dick*, scrawled in pencil. My mother told me all about them once, how upset Turk [her stepfather] had been. Turk himself idolized other men but his homoeroticism was sentimental and unconscious. He was diabetic and short and had soft, bosomy breasts. He didn’t like taking his shirt off. He used to say he wanted to kill all the fags. (He politely pretended not to know about me.) The happiest time in his life had been when he was under the North Pole for months in a nuclear submarine. It was so hot and claustrophobic down there, he said, he and the other guys spent most of their time in their skivvies, and sometimes even polished the torpedoes in the nude.

Not only does Castle crack me up, she is, after Camille Paglia’s withdrawal into a predictable punditry (the rote reiteration of her anti-elitist bona fides, of her elective affinities with pop stars and talk radio ranters), our premier Lesbian Critic Who Grew Wanting to be Oscar Wilde. (I write “our” but the title is probably the fruit of a bizarre personal taxonomy.) Paglia and Castle are ambivalent—indebted, disappointed—before the doyenne of their style, Susan Sontag. Castle could be writing for all three women when she recalls the scarcity of lesbian role models in her youth, contrasted with the availability, at least to the bookish, of the gay male personae to be found in English aestheticism and Continental modernism. “I knew more about green carnations, the Brompton Oratory, *The Ballad of Reading Gaol*, and the curious charms of Italian gondoliers than I did about Willa Cather and Gertrude Stein.” Sontag and Castle both read tons of André Gide as teenagers in postwar Sunbelt suburbia—were both precocious mandarins, priggish aliens, amid loutish stepfamilies (Sontag’s stepfather advised her, “Don’t be too smart: you’ll never get married”). Paglia and Castle have written insightful memoirs of Sontag, but I think Castle’s best reveals the dandified, Whistler-Wilde performance art, the self-definitive schtick, that all three writers use. Sontag directed *Waiting for Godot* in besieged Sarajevo, and while Paglia mocks the narcissism of what she sees as a bleak-chic stunt, Castle pays attention to Sontag’s maintenance of her myth, her integration of the event into a personal legend:

The Sarajevo obsession revealed itself early on: in fact, inspired the great comic episode in this brief golden period. We were walking down University Avenue, Palo Alto’s twee, boutique-crammed main drag, on our way to a bookshop. Sontag was wearing her trademark intellectual-diva outfit: voluminous black top and black silky slacks, accessorized with a number of exotic, billowy scarves. These she constantly adjusted or flung back imperiously over one shoulder, stopping now and then to puff on a cigarette or expel a series of phlegmy coughs. (The famous Sontag ‘look’ always put me in mind of the stage direction in *Blithe Spirit*: ‘Enter Madame Arcati, wearing barbaric jewellery.’) Somewhat incongruously, she had completed her ensemble with a pair of pristine, startlingly white tennis shoes. These made her feet seem comically huge, like Bugs Bunny’s. I half-expected her to bounce several feet up and down in the air whenever she took a step, like one of those people who have shoes made of ‘Flubber’ in

the old Fred McMurray movie.

She'd been telling me about the siege and how a Yugoslav woman she had taken shelter with had asked her for her autograph, even as bombs fell around them. She relished the woman's obvious intelligence ('Of course, Terry, she'd read *The Volcano Lover*, and like all Europeans, admired it tremendously') and her own sangfroid. Then she stopped abruptly and asked, grim-faced, if I'd ever had to evade sniper fire. I said, no, unfortunately not. Lickety-split she was off – dashing in a feverish crouch from one boutique doorway to the next, white tennis shoes a blur, all the way down the street to Restoration Hardware and the Baskin-Robbins store. Five or six perplexed Palo Altans stopped to watch as she bobbed zantly in and out, ducking her head, pointing at imaginary gunmen on rooftops and gesticulating wildly at me to follow. No one, clearly, knew who she was, though several of them looked as if they thought they should know who she was.

<http://www.lrb.co.uk/v27/n06/terry-ca...>

Cheryl says

I agree with what most of the other readers have posted about this book.

One of my favorite paragraphs:

" ... I also felt weirdly fatuous, almost paralyzed -- like someone in a jumbo jet when it begins its insane, mind scrambling acceleration down the runway. All of a sudden everything starts to race by and its all you can do to squeeze out some last morbid good-byes: bye-bye terminal; bye-bye little fuel trucks, bye-bye control tower (hope someone's in there), bye-bye scrubby trees and outlying cargo bays; bye-bye long term parking lot; bye-bye ground (I'm hearing those strange shaking noises now and one of the overhead bins has popped open) -- please don't forget that I love you. The Professor did it all. I was both inert and traveling at incalculable speed."

I also enjoyed the author's observations about the works of Georgia O'Keefe and, truly, Agnes Martin. AND there is a great review of this book in Harper's Magazine, August 2010 by Dave Hickey.

City Lights Booksellers & Publishers says

"Unbelievable. I picked this book up because I knew the author was going to give a reading here at City Lights, just meaning to skim it, to get an impression of her writing. I started with the memoir-within-the-book, "The Professor", and didn't put it down until three hours later! The author obviously had to tell this story: it rushes out of her almost conversationally, with both passion and an awe at her own youthful naivete.

A devastating work." —Jeff

Ariel says

I didn't finish this book. Normally I would feel the obsessive need to, but because it is a collection of essays I feel it's OK to put it down after having finished three and perhaps return to it later. I liked it, but not enough to read the essays in which the subject matter itself doesn't intrigue me.

I began with the first essay in the book, Castle on her obsession with World War 1. It was OK, it's usually fun to read about someone's obsession with something, but there were also a lot of unnecessary asides:

"In March I gave a lecture at an esteemed university where I hoped to get a job. (The people there knew that Blakey and I wanted to be together; I had been asked to apply.)"

No one cares. This has nothing to do with the story she's telling.

I also couldn't quite get past Castle's tone, the way she seemed to view herself... not-entirely-sincere-self-deprecation matched with occasional genuine self-loathing... is how I would describe it. Plus numerous references to herself being smart. Castle mainly writes criticism (this is her first book of personal essays) and I imagine she is quite good. There are many references and allusions to various books throughout and those parts are almost always excellent. She's great at plucking out the interesting things in someone else's work and it's frustrating she doesn't realize that many of her own personal details she chooses to include are boring.

After being disappointed with this first essay I skipped ahead to the title piece with the hard-to-not-be-exciting subject of her affair with a female professor when she was 22 and the professor 20 years older. Again, there are a lot of unnecessary details and sections, but the way she captures this woman she was obsessed with is so vivid you become obsessed right along with her. It's a fabulous story. Tragically clichéd in its path, but that's part of the charm, and full of amazing, bizarre specifics and very fun journal entries. The essay also reads as a sort of 70's coming-of-age analysis on various ways to be gay. I loved this:

"To the extent she was willing to talk about it, the Professor's own attitude toward being "queer" (her term, used in the old-fashioned, apolitical sense) was haughty – almost regal. Sleeping with women was about sex, plain and simple, and had nothing to do with politics. Parading around as a "radical feminist" or some other thing was childish. Jo was a loudmouthed dolt. The Professor seemed to view herself, by contrast, as a sort of Ancien Régime lady-libertine, a subtle and inscrutable woman of the old school. She was a connoisseur, a sensualist, skilled in the arts of homosexual love; Jo was a seagull at the dump, squawking and flapping her wings over an old potato-chip bag."

I would have put the book down after finishing this essay except there was also an essay about her friendship with Susan Sontag. This was a true joy. It's only 15 pages, but crammed full of wonderful Sontag moments and quotes. By now I'd also gotten past Castle's aren't-I-a-loser-pretentiousness and was starting to really like her. How great is this:

"...my final encounter with Sontag was possibly more disastrous, my Waterloo. I had come to New York with Blakey and Sontag (to whom I wanted proudly to display her) said we could stop by her apartment one afternoon. When we arrived at the appointed time, clutching a large bouquet of orange roses, Sontag was

nowhere to be seen. Her young male assistant, padding delicately around in his socks, showed us in, took the roses away, and whispered to us to wait in the living room. We stood in puzzled silence. Half an hour later, somewhat blowsily, Sontag finally emerged from a back room. I introduced her to Blakey, and said rather nervously that I hoped we hadn't woken her up from a nap. It was as if I had accused her of never having read Proust, or of watching soap operas all day. Her face instantly darkened and she snapped at me violently. Why on earth did I think she'd been having a nap? Didn't I know she never had naps? Of course she wasn't having a nap! She would never have a nap! Never in a million years! What a stupid remark to make! How had I gotten so stupid? A nap – for God's sake!"

Schopflin says

I absolutely loved this. Castle writes beautifully and her voice - self a deprecating, observant, intelligent yet with obvious affection for popular culture - is immensely appealing. There's a range of topics here, all interesting, but the main essay, which takes up half the book, provides a fascinating insight into 1970s feminism and US Campus life. Yet still manages to reference Little Britain.

Sara says

The best memoir critique hybrid I have ever read. Ever will read. Ever.

Could be mean, as Castle calls herself, if it weren't so painfully honest and self-deprecating. Includes one very uncomfortable dinner with Lou Reed and Laurie Anderson, Susan Sontag dodging imaginary sniper fire on a boutique street in Palo Alto, and one nude, very high and very handsome Art Pepper deliriously admiring himself in a mirror. "The tenderness between lesbians and straight men," writes Castle, "is the real love that dare not speak its name." And just when you get to the title essay, the longest in the book, and think the fun is about to be traded in for a review of the literature, you get a hilarious and excruciating recounting of Castle's youthful affair with a captivating older sociopath, all set amid lesbian softball drama and some really awful poetry. Fear not. You'll wind up more in love with Castle's prose than Art Pepper was with his...sax.

K.M. Soehnlein says

This is a book of lucid, original, sharply funny and intellectually exciting essays by a writer whose work I hadn't previously known (though I was aware of her highly regarded scholarly work). In this book, Terry Castle takes a break from the more academic writing she's been known for, and though the writing remains at a very high level -- keep a dictionary nearby -- there's also a looseness around language and an openness of emotion that makes for a very appealing, juicy read.

Here she turns her gaze on herself (and her family), her obsessions (World War I, jazz) and her relationships (a lopsided friendship with Susan Sontag; and a nearly masochistic sexual relationship, as a naive grad student, with an older, mostly closeted professor).

I especially loved the World War I essay, "Courage, Mon Amie," in which she digs deep trying to understand why this historical period has had such a hold on her; the answers she finds are startling, bringing her face to

face with what it means to be a woman who wishes for opportunities to enact bravery. "My Heroin Christmas" traces a similar fascination with a traditionally "masculine" subject: the mostly forgotten jazz musician Art Pepper, an addict, criminal, womanizer and wasted talent. Her piece about Sontag, "Desperately Seeking Susan," is bitterly funny -- a frank account of the intellectual giant's vanity, pettiness and fame-mongering. (Alongside Edmund White's revelations of Sontag in "City Boy," I'd say we're in the midst of a full scale takedown.)

Finally, the title essay is simply one of the best recollections I've ever read of what it was like to come out as a lesbian in the midst of the lesbian-feminist heyday. It's a great addition to our literature.

Eli says

Often depressing, but always crisp and tart, like a Granny Smith apple. Terry Castle has been punched by the world and gotten up again...and keeps going.

I like her writing so much I ordered her book of essays on women and sex without reading reviews on here first. (!I NEVER buy without consulting GR first now)

It's not so much about pain--it's just that her tone can be dreary even when she's making you laugh. She's brilliant and she makes sure you notice. I have a list of works of art I want to track down because she threw out scraps of thrilling description on her way to whatever point she made. A writer with a kinder eye to herself would be a bit easier to read, sometimes, but harder at the end. Especially in the large piece of the essay book, on her college relationship with a professor, a blithely abusive woman with a thick gray braid and a gun she keeps on the bedside table. Without Terry's cynicism about herself all through the other pieces, you would be blindsided by the things that happen in her relationship. You wouldn't understand how she could not see them on the horizon. She ties in her experiences as a lesbian in the 70s and how it affects her life now, from her love life to her travels and WWI obsession. I enjoyed the look into her head. It's a tidy place in there, with laughter, hate, love, and honesty. Always honesty.

Holly says

It took a few essays before I warmed up to Castle's voice, but I began to sit up a little straighter with the Susan Sontag piece ("Desperately Seeking Susan") and threw off the blanket with "Travels with My Mother," a travel diary of their New Mexico trip. Castle is funny and self-deprecating and smart: *Yet at some point during our remaining days, a lot of the daughter-angst starts to drop away. Like some frantic, dusty, overturned bug, I finally stop waving my many legs about and lie still. I wait, I decide, for someone either to turn me right side up or squash me underfoot. [. . .] To my surprise - my mother and I have gone into the orgone box and I'm spinning her around - she is an Agnes Martin [Sante Fe artist] aficionada. . . My snob-self is frankly stunned at this unexpected display of maternal hip: it's as if Wally and Charlie, my dachshunds, were suddenly to begin discussing Hans-Georg Gadamer. (They were even using the word hermeneutic!)*.

"The Professor" is the big ticket here. This is how you go about writing about a haunting person from your past: by coldly pondering *what peculiar pathos she evinced, and why I was so vulnerable to it* [p. 201-2] though *After thirty years it's hard for me to retrieve more than a weak-signal, evanescent sense of the Professor's presence in the flesh.* [p. 278]

Some of this is a total "hoot" to read: the lesbian-separatist feminist C-R groups of the 1970s (*incorrigibly middle-class young women, all of whom wore self-perpetrated names like Artemis Longstocking, Sarah Margarechild, and Pokey Donnerparty* . . . [p.217]; and the *lesbian hugs* (p. 220) (!). Castle's writing is lively and jaunty, with lots of dashes, parentheses, italicized interjections, sentences intentionally missing an active personal pronoun (done it myself), and unexpected but amusingly sagacious capitalizations (Cruelly Oppressed Women Writers!).

Amanda says

I have a weakness for academic memoirs, and I've also been something of a fan of Castle's writing for quite a while. This is a collection of essays that merge the scholarly and the personal in a way I wish more academic writing did -- or, more accurately, they show how the scholarly develops out of the personal. The long title essay, "The Professor," recounts Castle's disastrous grad-school love affair with a considerably older professor; parts of it had me wincing and nodding in half-pained, half-amused recognition (while I never had any affairs with professors, my 22-year-old self was obsessively overachieving in some of the same ways Castle's was). This book made me want to run out and write a memoir of my own, although my own life has been considerably less interesting than Castle's, and I doubt I could ever match her style and effortless wit.

Fritz says

This book was recommended to me by a leading tax scholar and the editor of Feminist Rental Property Management Studies.

Jason Mills says

Terry Castle is an esteemed literary critic, but this is a book of memoirs. Half the book is composed of shorter pieces about her obsession with World War I, her obsession with jazz saxophonist Art Pepper, her travels in Sicily, her obsession with Susan Sontag (not the most flattering of portraits!), her obsession with interior decorating, and travels with her aging mother. The second half is the title piece, about her romantic obsession, as a student, with a female professor. These are writings obsessed with the author's obsessions...

Interesting, thoughtful and funny throughout, the book's first half nonetheless feels like a clearing of the mental decks before getting down to the main work, the cathartic picking over the bones of her first love at thirty years' distance. Castle is disarmingly candid and self-critical, always ready to give others their due (now, if not in her youth) even as she pokes fun at her own failings. Her writing is liberally sprinkled with famous names and cultural allusions: if many of them soared over my head, they were at least harmless!

Not too challenging a read, but smart, pleasing and endlessly engaging.

Gwen - Chew & Digest Books - says

Have you ever started to read a book and realized that it brought you a bit out of your comfort zone and

frankly, was a bit over your head? This was one of those for me. I stuck with it though and it provoked many thoughts, feelings, and useful tidbits.

Terry Castle was once described by Susan Sontag as "the most expressive, most enlightening literary critic at large today." She is the author of seven books of criticism, including *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* (1993) and *Boss Ladies, Watch Out! Essays on Women and Sex* (2002). Her anthology, *The Literature of Lesbianism*, won the Lambda Literary Editor's Choice Award in 2003. She lives in San Francisco and is Walter A. Haas Professor in the Humanities at Stanford University.

The Professor and Other Writings is a collection of autobiographical essays that while I found often entertaining, came off at times as incredibly pretentious to me. I get that she is a well-known literary critic, but her constantly using French words and her naivety at the times she is writing about, hardly made me want to respect her. Or even like her for that matter.

I mentioned the nuggets of wisdom & entertainment....

"I've come to believe more and more about both writing and music making: that in order to succeed at either you have to stop trying to disguise who you are. The veils and pretenses of everyday life won't work; a certain minimum truth-to-self is required." (in the essay, *My Heroin Christmas*)

Simply said, be who you are or you are going to fail. A lot of us, even in blogland, try to emulate other successful people as opposed to being ourselves. It is tough work and you can't keep it up.

The essay, *Home Alone*, was a hilarious introspective on why we are all obsessed with shelter magazines. Castle refers to it as "house porn" and it kind of is.

I wouldn't recommend *The Professor and Other Writings* by Terry Castle unless you are way more cultured and cooler than I am.

Jean Roberta says

Terry Castle is a professor of humanities at Stanford and an out lesbian with an engaging approach to an eclectic array of subjects. Her better known works include *The Apparitional Lesbian: Female Homosexuality and Modern Culture* and *Nöel Coward and Radclyffe Hall: Kindred Spirits*, a brilliant little study of mutual influence between two early 20th-century writers who have each been reclaimed as part of a homoerotic literary past, but who are rarely mentioned on the same page.

The Professor and Other Writings, a collection of previously published essays and a new, jaw-dropping autobiographical piece about a lesbian affair in academia, is as inconsistent as such collections usually are. But the author's ability to blend her scholarly interests (in the First World War, for instance) with moving details from her personal life and even her ancestry (a British great uncle killed in 1918) offer insights into both her ideas and her life from various angles.

The author describes an uncomfortable childhood in California, where her English parents had emigrated before Terry (named for a distant relative, the great 19th-century actress Ellen Terry) was born in the 1950's. Her parents divorced in 1961, and her mother was persuaded by her parents to move back to England with her children. In time, however, she brought the family back to San Diego and married a widower with five

troubled children of his own. The author's determination to leave home as soon as possible seems to account for her early academic interests followed by her escape into the Ivory Tower, yet her mother and the misfortunes of her stepsiblings are woven through her accounts of her travels and her reading.

The author's self-deprecating wit and her use of "one" as an occasional substitute for "I" prevent these essays from sounding self-indulgent. Here is a passage from "The Professor," the story of the author's affair with a female professor in graduate school in the 1970s: "So who exactly was Terry Castle—now Spoiled Avocado Professor of English at Silicon Valley University—way back in 1975? ... Precocious one was, but also foolishly unguarded."

After meeting "the Professor," a charismatic specialist in linguistics who had been a folksinger in 1960's Greenwich Village when Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were fellow travelers, the 22-year-old Terry bravely decides to act on her feelings: "I couldn't go on, I told myself, without making some decisive move. I needed to shed my passivity; flirt, beguile and disarm with my charm and intelligence. 'Setting one's cap at someone' is how they might have phrased it in the eighteenth century. To fascinate thus I would have to disguise all of my monster-sized insecurities. Likewise block out the absurd and painful truth: that I was a first-year graduate student blatantly pursuing a distinguished (and closeted) senior scholar in my own department."

The author has mined her journals of the time, and therefore we get a detailed, believable account of the affair that apparently developed with surprising speed before spinning into disaster. The "Professor" in the case is not named, but anyone who was present at the University of Minnesota at the time would probably recognize her. By today's standards of professional conduct, and even by those of 1970's lesbian-feminist "sisterhood," the Professor's treatment of female students is hard to defend. Yet the author, now a professor who presumably would never treat a student as she was treated, accepts responsibility for her role in a liaison worthy of an opera. Dyke Drama has rarely been this well described.

Other essays in the book include a wry account of the author's "on-again, off-again semi-friendship" with Susan Sontag, written after her death; a meandering look at the author's interest in World War I; a study of home-decorating magazines; and a personal response to *Straight Life: The Story of Art Pepper* (1979), the autobiography of a jazz musician and heroin addict who was once as famous as Charlie Parker.

One of the author's accounts of trips made with her partner, to whom this book is dedicated, mentions their plan to marry in San Francisco before Proposition 8 recriminalized same-sex marriage in California. Surely this topic is worthy of a future article which, in Castle's characteristic style, would be both subjective and wide-ranging. Her voice has a timeless, transatlantic quality worthy of the best diarists of past eras.
