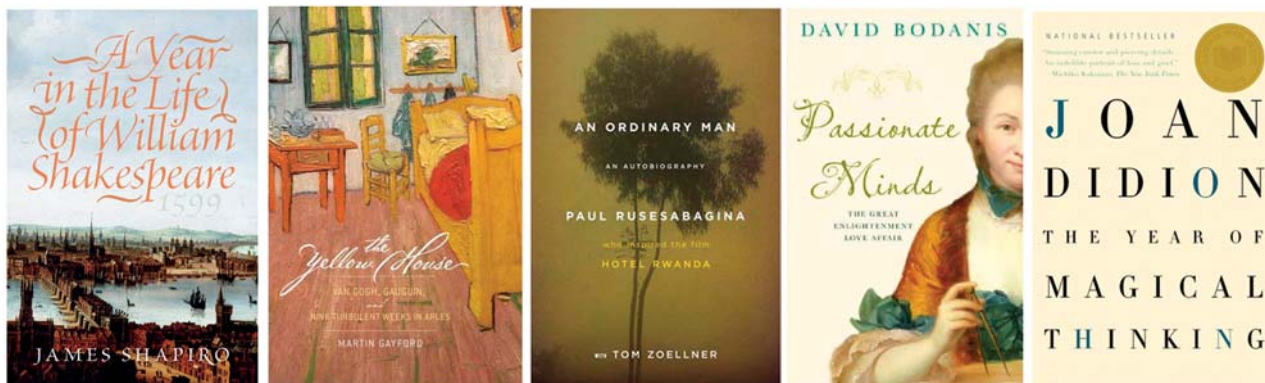


Book Forum

Sandra L. Patterson, Editor



Continuing in the tradition of the Journal's Editors Emeriti ...

The books for this month are a holiday gift list:
books to broaden the library and the mind,
to provide pleasure and enjoyment,
to give to oneself and others.

Cultural icons from the English Renaissance, Post-Impressionism Era, French Enlightenment, and American literature as well as the inspiration for a critically acclaimed film are all highlighted in these reviews. We express a great measure of gratitude to Drs. Andreasen and Nemiah for initiating this annual feature of the Journal.

***A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare 1599*, by James Shapiro. New York, HarperCollins, 2005, 416 pp., \$27.95.**

Perhaps the greatest challenge confronting William Shakespeare's many biographies is why his life is such a mystery. We know many more details about the lives of distinguished, but clearly less talented, contemporary playwrights and poets, including Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Sir Phillip Sydney, John Donne, and Edmund Spenser. Yet Shakespeare was extremely popular and well-known in his day. His plays sold out at the Globe, and the few publications of his work during his lifetime were bestsellers. He was well-known to the royal court and probably performed with Queen Elizabeth I in attendance. He was one of the wealthiest citizens of Stratford-on-Avon and certainly owned one of the grandest homes in the town. Yet despite this, he left us no letters or diaries, and there are few descriptions of him by contemporaries. In essence, the historical record about the greatest writer in the English world, and by some accounts (including mine) the entire Western canon, is nearly blank.

Columbia University professor James Shapiro acknowledges this problem in his fascinating and highly enjoyable new book *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare 1599*. His plaintive refrain at the end of the book's prologue is, "We just don't know" (p. 13). In that prologue alone, I counted 22 instances of phrases like "it could have been," "it must be," and "it's likely," clear indications that speculation will be unavoidable throughout the remainder of the text. Nevertheless, Shapiro boldly sets out to relate the events of 1599 to Shakespeare's mind, emotions, and accomplishments, particularly as reflected in the three plays he wrote that year, *Henry the Fifth*, *As You Like It*, and *Julius Caesar*, and the play Shapiro and some scholars speculate he started, *Hamlet* (although we

cannot be certain that this is the case, as the play was not performed until several years after). Near the end of the book, Shapiro nicely sums up the attempt:

Looking back at the year at Christmastime in 1599, Shakespeare must have recognized how much he had thrived on the highly charged political atmosphere of the past twelve months, when the nation had confronted everything from an 'Invisible Armada' [based on fears that an invasion by Spain was imminent] and an ill-fated Irish campaign [to quell a rebellion] to the banning and burning of books and the silencing of preachers—experiences that had deepened his bond with an audience that had come to depend on the theater to make sense of the world and had found in Shakespeare its most incisive interpreter (p. 331).

Along the way, Shapiro provides intriguing insights into what was going on around the Bard during the year. He speculates upon the special regard the Queen had for him: "A monarch who wrote every day must have been an especially discriminating critic and perhaps better disposed than most to a playwright who did the same" (p. 26). Despite the great victory over the Spanish Armada in 1588, 1599 saw the English people in a frenzy over what they believed was an impending invasion by Catholic Spain. Not unlike current politics, many citizens of England insisted that the Queen make peace with Spain rather than risk an expensive war. Spain did not invade England, but military action did occur as the Irish, tired of English occupation, launched a rebellion that humbled English forces at Blackwater in 1598 and reached a boiling point in 1599. Despite war mongering against the Irish by none other than the

then and now celebrated author of *The Faerie Queen*, Edmund Spenser, the war to crush the rebellion was unpopular in England because of the forced muster of its young men into military service and the huge drain on the country's already depleted treasury. Says Shapiro, "When scholars talk about the sources of Shakespeare's plays, they almost always mean printed books like Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicle's* that they themselves can read. But Shakespeare's was an aural culture, the music of which has long faded" (p. 81). Does he really say this? As a side note (nothing to do with your review), but it really bothers me when scholars go on the "aural culture" tangent—it's not a useful observation for our modern vantage point that necessarily depends on the survival of books and manuscripts to tell us anything about past literary figures and readers—and at this point it's become a cliché—what does "aural culture" mean anyway? Unless he can propose a solution, why bother pointing it out? All of this, Shapiro posits, influenced the creation of *Henry the Fifth*, with its bold call to arms by a king who rallies the troops to defeat the French at Agincourt. Yet here we have one of the many pitfalls into which the Shakespearean biographer almost invariably falls, one that Shapiro acknowledges: "Those seeking to pinpoint Shakespeare's political views in *Henry the Fifth* will always be disappointed ... *Henry the Fifth* succeeds and frustrates because it consistently refuses to adopt a single voice or point of view about military adventurism—past and present." Hence, Shapiro first tantalizes us with the case that external events influenced the play's creation, and then admits that knowing what Shakespeare truly thought or believed is nearly impossible.

Similarly, in his analysis of *Julius Caesar*, Shapiro points to censorship of literary output and attempts by various nobles to gain "popularity"—in Elizabethan times then meaning "courting popular favor"—that were both rampant in 1599 as possible influences. The Elizabethan era was also confused about religion: all of its citizens were of Catholic ancestry and either willingly or by force adopted the new Protestant religion. Yet Shapiro points out that the signs of this conversion were often ambiguous. For example, in the church in Shakespeare's hometown Stratford, drawings of saints inspired by Catholic piety were whitewashed by the Protestants, but not destroyed. This is true! In some manuscripts of a devotional/liturgical nature, we find the names of popes scratched/crossed out! "The whitewashed chapel walls, on which perhaps an image or two were still faintly visible, are as good an emblem of Shakespeare's faith as we are likely to find" (p. 148). Is this reflected in the doubts voiced by the characters in *Julius Caesar* about the heavenly warrant to overthrow an absolute monarch? For Shapiro, the play is at least in part about the tensions among her subjects between Queen Elizabeth as a god or a tyrant.

All of this is great fun to read and often convincing. Later, however, the relationship between current events and Shakespeare's intentions becomes a bit of a stretch. We see this in Shapiro's discussion of *As You Like It*. True, Thomas Lodge had recently written the play *Rosalind*; Shakespeare needed something to counter the success of his rival Ben Jonson's *Everyman Out of His Humor*; the loss of renowned comedian Will Kemp and addition of a new comic actor with different talents, Robert Armin, may have factored into the nature of the play's comic character Touchstone; and the need to compete with the proliferation of boy's theaters in London

around 1599 may have induced Shakespeare to add so many songs to his play. Yet none of these seem all that monumental and after so many pages in which Shapiro has convinced us of the grim situation for Londoners as they faced war, religious upheaval and national debt it seems hard to understand how current events substantially influenced Shakespeare's decision to write a pastoral romance in which the nature of true love seems the central element.

Most problematic may be Shapiro's attempt at linking what was going on in 1599 to the creation of the overarching masterpiece *Hamlet*. Here there are enlightening discussions of the emergence of the personal essay—mastered by Montaigne, whom Shakespeare could have read in the original French—and their possible influence on the brilliant soliloquies that become more of a force in *Hamlet* than in any of Shakespeare's preceding plays; of the major revisions that Shakespeare made in the original text of the play, revisions that have left many scholars and directors puzzling over what version to which they should adhere; of the "the death of chivalry...[and] the birth of empire" (p. 274), as the East India Company was created mostly by members of the merchant class; and even of the invention of "an odd verbal trick called hendiadys" (p. 287), examples of which are "law and order" and "sound and fury." All of this makes for wonderful reading. But the problem here is that none of this convinces us that Shakespeare was as focused on what was happening around him as he was on his own internal struggles. A telling passage in Shapiro's book occurs when he attempts to forge a relationship between a plot to overthrow Elizabeth and the events in *Hamlet*. Shapiro writes:

It's extremely unlikely that more than a handful conspirators [sic] knew anything about this plot...so the fact that Hamlet contains both an abortive coup ... and a neighboring foreign prince at the head of an army ... is sheer coincidence. But it was a time when such things could be imagined ... Hamlet, composed during these months, feels indelibly stamped by the deeply unsettling mood of the time (p. 283).

Maybe so, but there is something unsettling about a link between a series of events that is acknowledged to be sheer coincidence and a literary influence. Here I must admit my own bias, one I am sure is shared by many other readers and even some scholars. I strongly disagree with Shapiro when he writes, "Shakespeare didn't write 'as if from another planet,' as Coleridge put it: he wrote for the Globe; it wasn't in his mind's eye, or even on the page, but in the aptly named theater where his plays came to life and mattered" (p. 319). Coleridge may have been correct, an opinion that still seemed tenable even after reading *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare 1599*.

True, Shakespeare may have made his own opinions so obscure because, as Shapiro wants us to believe, he was attempting to avoid political censure. But I would counter that John Keats' invocation of Shakespeare's "negative capability," the talent of providing alternative viewpoints for nearly every strongly expressed belief in his plays, was equally likely to have been the product of pure literary genius. One comes away from *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare 1599* enormously enriched in at least two ways: Shapiro provides so many fascinating descriptions of the world of Elizabethan England at the

turn of the seventeenth century that the book breezes by in pure pleasure; at the same time, one's conviction that Shakespeare existed and wrote in some dimension outside of and indeed far above ordinary human events remains intact.

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The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Arles, by Martin Gayford. New York, Little, Brown and Company, 2006, 352 pp., \$24.99.

I often walk down a hallway of the Denver VA Medical Center where an inexpensive reproduction of Vincent Van Gogh's *Sunflowers* hangs. My eyes have roamed over the reproduction many times in the years I have worked there, just as many of you have seen it and not seen it many times in public settings as well. I had not realized that the painting was first hung by Vincent as a welcoming decoration in a bedroom that he had prepared for Paul Gauguin. Ten steps further I passed one of Gauguin's South Sea tableaux, whose figures include a woman who looks very much like his portrait of *Madame Roulin*. Gauguin and Van Gogh painted her side by side in a single sitting at the Yellow House in Arles in southern France, where they shared quarters for nine weeks. Vincent had requested that the house be painted yellow, a color that would dominate the paintings that he completed during the months in Arles. He invited Gauguin, because he hoped that they could start a new artists' workshop there that would become a nidus of creativity outside the established Parisian art world.

Martin Gayford describes the remarkable nine weeks that they spent there together, the final weeks of the first major productive period of Van Gogh's artistry, with paintings that include the *Chair*, the *Sower*, *Madame Roulin*, *Monsieur Ginoux*, and *La Berceuse*. Both he and Gauguin painted daily, working side by side, generally painting the same scene or model or each other. Both wrote several times per week to Theo Van Gogh, Vincent's brother and Gauguin's agent, about Vincent's deteriorating mental state. The night that Gauguin moved out because he could no longer tolerate Vincent's irritability, Vincent cut off part of his own ear and presented it to a prostitute at a brothel that both of them had visited regularly together. When Gauguin returned in the morning to the *Yellow House* to retrieve the rest of his belongings, the police summoned by the brothel owner were outside and arrested him for Vincent's murder. Gauguin insisted on going upstairs to the bedroom, where they found Vincent alive, in a fetal position, and took him to a mental hospital. After a brief hospitalization, Vincent returned to the Yellow House alone to paint the *Self Portrait with Bandaged Ear*.

The title characterizes the 9 weeks as turbulent, but they began with *Sunflowers*' euphoria and only at the end descended into madness and the *Bandaged Ear*, probably the two most famous paintings from that period. Gayford formulates bipolar disorder, mixed-type with rapid cycling with DSM-IV-like precision, based on Gauguin's descriptions. But he uses Vincent's own words to conclude that he did not paint because he was mad; rather, he painted to keep from being mad. When his work was grounded in objects, landscape, and people, his art was vibrant. But when he tried to paint Madame Roulin from memory (*de tête*) as *La Berceuse*, a woman in French folk tradition who rocks the infant Christ, he became overwhelmed.

Gauguin was simultaneously painting his own mother *de tête* whose face would become *Exotic Eve* when he moved to Tahiti. Vincent turned to alcohol to calm himself, which provoked the irritability that drove Gauguin away and resulted in his own psychosis. Gauguin had challenged him to paint *de tête*, but Vincent himself had feared losing reality and told Theo that he would rather be a shoemaker than become a "musician of color." Vincent's illness remitted for a while, and many of his greatest works lay ahead of him, but his future painting, beginning with the *Church at Auver* and continuing through *Starry Night*, would be in cobalt blue. Gauguin, on the other hand, would paint his *Yellow Christ* the following year, a crucified Christ in a field in Brittany with a yellow background.

This book, by a London art critic, is ideal for psychiatrists because Gayford lets Vincent and Gauguin speak extensively for themselves, both in their words and in their paintings. His psychiatric formulation is only a few brief pages at the end and not the least intrusive. The question of whether lithium carbonate would have blocked Van Gogh's creative output is appropriately labeled as speculation. More space is devoted to barium oxide, which Gauguin and Van Gogh used as an unfortunate choice of underlayer that allowed the paint to flake off. I was initially disappointed that the 59 illustrations were not in color, but the artists themselves regularly corresponded in detail about the colors of their paintings, with only occasional pen and ink sketches to convey their message. Indeed, it was good to imagine and remember (*de tête*) the paintings as I have seen them in museums, rather than to be tied to the pale reproductions that haunt VA hallways.

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An Ordinary Man, by Paul Rusesabagina and Tom Zoellner. New York, Viking Adult, 2006, 288 pp., \$23.95.

I suspect that most readers have seen or at least heard about the wonderful film *Hotel Rwanda*, which tells the almost miraculous story of how 1,268 persons were saved from certain death during the madness of the frenetic genocide that swept through Rwanda for three bloody months in 1994. Their savior, the manager of a luxury hotel, the Mille Collines, is the author of this extraordinary autobiography, *An Ordinary Man*, and his name is Paul Rusesabagina.

How did it come about that 800,000 people were butchered by their friends, neighbors, and countrymen in the fastest and most efficient genocide in the history of the world? Why did the Tutsis and the Hutus, the two major tribal groups in Rwanda, slaughter each other despite the fact that they shared the same language, customs, storytelling traditions, government and, in most cases, the same outward appearance? There never even was a Tutsi or Hutu homeland. What divided them was an invented history based on superficial observations, the Bible, and the greed of the European colonial powers.

In his 1863 book, *Journal of the Discovery of the Source of the Nile*, the British explorer John Hanning Speke came across Africans who lived together. Some called themselves Tutsis, others Hutus. Speke theorized that the greater height and longer noses of the Tutsis were evidence that they were a lost tribe of noble Christians who migrated from the Middle East. He considered the shorter and flatter nosed Hutus to be the