

Written in the style of a travel journal, *The Devil's Cup* tells as much about the author's adventures as about coffee. Most of his time is spent in the Old World, where he sometimes manipulates or overstates for the sake of entertainment: "The entirety of 20th-century philosophy is simply the result of penny-pinching

Parisians [in cafés] falling prey to a dementia born of boredom, caffeine, and pomposity." Amusing at first, the self-conscious cleverness ultimately wears thin. *Uncommon Grounds* provides a more full-flavored account of how the coffee bean has changed the world.

—Justine A. Kwiatkowski

## Arts & Letters

### GEORGE ELIOT: *The Last Victorian.*

By Kathryn Hughes.

Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 384 pp. \$30

It must be almost impossible to write a boring biography of George Eliot (1819–80). Everything about her tantalizes, seduces, lends itself to narrative: the wise and sweeping authorial voice of the novels, the woman behind it who lived scandalously and fought in the thick of the headiest intellectual battles of her day, the dramatic landscape of the battles themselves and the underpinnings they furnish for today's wars over science and religion. There is no trouble about sources, since the subject left a wealth of self-revelatory letters, along with copious testimony from her great love, George Henry Lewes, and a wide circle of other indefatigably expressive Victorians. The novels, despite having been mined by critics for everything from class struggle to Orientalist bias, hold up pluckily under further discussion; the life remains satisfyingly complex even after having provided the jumping-off point for imaginative excursions on other topics, such as Cynthia Ozick's novel *The Puttermessa Papers* (1997), whose protagonist pursues a comically poignant quest to replicate Eliot's love life.

In this sprightly page-turner, Hughes, a lecturer at several British universities, has come up with what she sees as a fresh way to write of Eliot—or, more accurately, of Mary Anne Evans, the flesh-blood-and-brain woman behind the lifework. Little in the book is altogether new, but there is no sense that the author is rummaging among arcana, or pursuing tangential lines of inquiry somehow missed by other biographers. This is true even though *George Eliot: The Last Victorian* lists a dozen other full-length lives of Eliot in its bibliography and is the third one to appear in three years.

Hughes aims to trace Evans the woman, her

emotional makeup, and the kinds of support she sought in friendship and in love. Hughes's theme—of early family rejection and lifelong vulnerability—is, she concedes at the outset, one that long dominated views of Eliot, based on the testimony of the much younger man she married at the end of her life, John Cross. But despite the use to which it has been put over the years by condescending critics, Hughes argues, the pattern accords with Eliot's behavior and with her own views of herself.

That story starts with the coldness of Mary Anne's mother and the breaking of the young woman's treasured companionship with her older brother Isaac, a kinship she idealized in sonnets and limned more accurately in the relationship between Maggie and Tom Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). A succession of passionate epistolary friendships with older women followed, and, later, crushes on intellectual men who did not love her back, notably liberal philosopher Charles Bray, biblical scholar Charles Hennell, and *Westminster Review* editor John Chapman (with whom Hughes contends Evans had an affair).

Treading gingerly but gamely on the awkward ground of Evans's marked physical unattractiveness, Hughes draws a persuasive portrait of an insecure and intense woman (the word *bluestocking* is used a bit too often) whose search for love finally ends with the odd little man, George Henry Lewes, who gave her the devotion and companionship she needed to become George Eliot. Hughes suggests nicely how Evans's growing intellectual maturity gave her the groundedness to break with society in deciding to live with Lewes, who was legally barred from divorcing his wife because he had accepted her child by another man as his own.

Why Eliot was "the last Victorian" is never made clear, and her caution in regard to women's rights and other progressive causes,

though mentioned, does not receive full attention. But any path struck through a forest this big is bound to miss some areas. Hughes's book comes across as modest in its ambitions, and it is the better for it.

—Amy Schwartz

### THE HOME PLACE.

By Wright Morris. Introduction by John Hollander. Univ. of Nebraska Press. 200 pp. \$12

Little fanfare marked the death of novelist and photographer Wright Morris in 1998. The man whom literary critic Wayne Booth hailed in 1980 as “one of America’s three most important living novelists,” and whose photography was given a retrospective at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art in 1992, died largely forgotten, in his 88th year. “His books are his memorial,” his widow said at the time. Now, at the urging of Morris’s friend Saul Bellow and others, the University of Nebraska Press has reissued one of his most significant books: his 1948 “photo-text,” *The Home Place*. Though not his most polished volume—*The Works of Love* (1951) and *Plains Song: For Female Voices* (1980) vie for that honor—*The Home Place* may be Morris’s most adventurous, pairing photographs and fiction to create a new genre.

In *The Home Place*, Nebraska-born writer Clyde Muncy returns to his Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara’s dilapidated farm, where he had spent summers as a boy. The story is plainly autobiographical: in 1942, Morris visited his Uncle Harry and Aunt Clara’s farm (he returned in 1947 to photograph it), where he had spent two childhood summers. The book’s drama comes from the crystallization of memory, as a physical place is transformed into a remembered place. Documentary photographs face each page of text, demonstrating the reality of what the novelist imagines, and leaving the reader/viewer in a limbo between fact and fiction that is Morris’s comment on the problems of memory—and a rebuke to the propagandistic New Deal photography that turned its Dust Bowl subjects into sentimental heroes.

For Morris, as for many authors, home and family were bottomless subjects. The Nebraska relatives in *The Home Place* repeatedly tell Muncy that they are all connected by behavior and blood, even “small-town expatriates” like him. Not long before Morris returned to the farm in 1942, his father died (his mother had

died in childbirth), attenuating his connection to the home place. Morris’s redolent photographs of the place would be his home thereafter, to which he returned in subsequent books of fiction, photo-text, and memoir.

*The Home Place* has been a difficult project to get right. Nebraska last reprinted it in 1968, with cropped pages and photos in some printings that, Morris complained, were “as pale as phantoms.” The pages have been restored to their proper size in this edition, and the photographs reshot from the best available reproductions, but these improvements are undercut by the use of a flat, matte-surface paper that makes the photographs look like photocopies. The Proust of the plains does not yet have a proper memorial, but perhaps it is fitting that his meditation on memory should resemble a faded artifact.

—Stephen Longmire

### ARTHUR KOESTLER:

#### *The Homeless Mind.*

By David Cesarani. Free Press. 646 pp. \$30

The story of the postwar New York intellectuals has been told in a number of histories and autobiographies and even a film, but the saga of their European counterparts, who were on the frontlines of the intellectual battle against communism, has not received as much attention. Perhaps the most intriguing member of this cohort was the journalist and novelist Arthur Koestler (1905–83). A brilliantly talented Hungarian Jew and lapsed communist, he is most famous for *Darkness at Noon* (1940), the novel that helped explain communism’s powerful hold on intellectuals.



Koestler was born in Budapest to a middle-class Jewish family. After dropping out of the University of Vienna, he linked up with the leader of revisionist Zionism, the charismatic Vladimir Jabotinsky, whom he later called “the first political shaman in my life.” He

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