

Survivors:

RECENT, VENERABLE, LONG GONE

by Peter Skinner

The three books noted here are totally disparate, but each is a standout that crackles with energy and fires up the imagination. In **Stalin's Children: Three Generations of Love, War, and Survival** (Walker & Company, 978-0-8027-1714-6), Owen Matthews packs heart-wrenching content into a well-structured, finely balanced, and utterly memorable narrative.

The driving force of the book is indomitable will. In the early 1960s Mila fell for a young Welsh-born, Russian-speaking British Embassy employee. After Mervyn Matthews rejected an elaborate and extravagant KGB attempt to recruit him, he was expelled from the Soviet Union. In the white heat of total commitment the relentlessly self-educated Mila risks livelihood, family, and friends; meanwhile Mervyn, implacably determined to rouse his supine government to action, embarks on a reckless crusade, badgering unctuously avuncular and painfully embarrassed British politicians. Near-illegal visits to Russia and dealings with elusive “fixers” heighten the drama. Victory is won; marriage follows—with a somewhat delicately negotiated domesticity.

Owen Matthews intersperses his rediscovery of his parents' dramatic past with acute comment on the crushing weight of Soviet government and the near *rigor mortis* of post-war Britain's society and attitudes. He skillfully counterpoints his own later search for self against his parents' crusade for each other—his journey from the dangerous, even deadly, pleasures of the Moscow night to the haven of marriage.

Stalin's Children is a bravura performance that shatters the paradigm of true love first thwarted and then rewarded. Nothing is labored; every scene is crisp and direct; even the walk-ons are driven characters; Mathews has a great future as a broad-canvas memoirist. Read—and let this triumph of will resonate.

The legendary, protean Studs Terkel, chronicler, talk-show host, and author, died at ninety-six on October 31, 2008, only days before the publication of **PS.: Further Thoughts from a Lifetime of Listening** (The New Press, 978-1-59558-423-6). Ironically, though titled *Postscript*, it is also a preface—a short, brilliant teaser to the work of the prose-poet laureate of Chicago, “a town more celebrated for its heels than its heroes and heroines.” Studs Terkel celebrated everybody because he saw uniqueness in every living soul—and in many dead ones. He explored their unique amalgams of hope and fear, pain and joy, imprisonment and freedom, reveling in the untidy lives of unlikely people: “Johnny Chch, the Croatian dishwasher. Not only was he penniless; he didn't have a vowel to his name” and “Jack McGurn...dispatched by a Cupid's dart in the form of lead.”

Terkel is an artist; in an extended interview he can draw out of James Baldwin all the passion and anguish that fueled his writing; he can look at Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks* and see “every man's lonesome valley.” The major works—*Division Street*, *Hard Times*, and *The Good War* among them, will survive. But grab this gathering of small gems.

A two-century leap back in time brings us to an exuberant, picaresque, myth-shattering exploration: Thomas Hope's extraordinary **Anastasius or Memoirs of a Greek** (Long Riders' Guild Press, 978-1-59048-282-7). Byron wept “because he had not written it.” The wealthy aesthete Hope, who had traveled widely in the Near East, created his ever-inquisitive, amorously-inclined, disputatious Anastasius to discover the East and blast open the Western mind with his record of his hero's experiences. Young Anastasius flees Chios (where the seminary loomed), joins the Turks in fighting the Albanians, is welcomed in Constantinople, visits Rhodes, joins slave-traders in Alexandria, travels up the Nile, converts to Islam, visits

Medina and Mecca, joins the Mamluks, and more—this Pandora's box is bottomless. Our hero makes exotic friends (frequently young and female), knows love and loss, meets high adventure at every turn, experiences imprisonment and escape. No wonder Byron wept. Thankfully, when painfully widowed, Anastasius becomes wed to memoir-writing.

Hope transformed the imagined East, often into an even more exotic reality, and re-shaped European travel, writing, and analysis, making the East an inexhaustible theme. The Long Riders' Guild Press deserves plaudits for a handsome re-issue of this long out-of-print classic. Thanks to the press's efforts, it comes complete with introductory essays, map, notes, and appendices. **F**

Peter Skinner was born and educated in England, and came to New York with a degree in European history from Oxford University. In America, he has taught and worked in PR and corporate communications, and has always been involved in editing, reviewing, writing, and text-doctoring. Peter is the author of World Trade Center, a book on 9/11 that sold over a million copies in twelve languages.

