

Nonfiction

SPEAK YOU ALSO: A Holocaust Memoir

PAUL STEINBERG. *Holt/Metropolitan*, \$24 (176p) ISBN 0-8050-6064-2

★ In *If This Is a Man*, Primo Levi describes Henri, a fellow inmate at Auschwitz, as a strategist of survival: flattering, stealing and endlessly manipulating the *kapos* and other prisoners for his own survival. Levi's empathy is challenged as Henri instills in Levi "a slight sense of defeat" and the fear that Levi has been "not a man to him, but an instrument in his hands." Now, 40 years later, Steinberg—the "Henri" of Levi's book—has written his own memoir, which is both an answer to the other man's work and an explanation of his life and actions. Written in spare, highly unsentimental prose not unlike Levi's, balancing stark, horrific descriptions of life in the camps with self-critical meditations on the very purpose of writing such a memoir, Steinberg's book stands as a shocking rejoinder to Levi. Detailing his arrest—he was a brilliant 16-year-old student in France when he was deported to Auschwitz—and his life at the camp, Steinberg describes himself as crossing the "gulf that separates adolescence... and adulthood" by deciding to "become a player in the game": "that cold and calculating creature singled out by Levi." Unrelenting in his descriptions of his plans for survival—befriending and sharing choice food with a brutal camp *kapo*, using violence against an elderly Jewish inmate to reinforce Steinberg's own position of security, and lying about being Jewish—the author is unapologetic for how he survived. With brutal honesty and frightening self-examination, Steinberg dissects himself and forces readers to reexamine what morality means in the face of unrelenting horror. (Oct.)

COOL RULES: Anatomy of an Attitude

DICK POUNTAIN AND DAVID ROBINS. *Reaktion*, \$19.95 (190p) ISBN 1-86189-071-0

What do Humphrey Bogart with a cigarette, Bertholt Brecht, Marlene Dietrich's cheekbones, Billie Holiday, James Dean, Lenny Bruce's irony, Eldridge Cleaver, Chrissie Hinde, heroin and gangsta rap all have in common? They are, for lack of a more precise word, cool. Taking their cue from Susan Sontag's germinal 1964 essay "Notes on Camp," Pountain and Robins attempt to delineate that ambiguous and elusive entity, a cultural sensibility. Declining to investigate the "ontological status" of cool ("is it a philosophy, a sensibility, a religion, an ideology... an attitude, a zeitgeist?"), they claim that we all know cool "when we see it."

Their working definition is that "cool is an oppositional attitude adopted by individuals to express defiance to authority"—and while this might seem obvious, the pleasure of their brief, elucidating study is in the delicious details. Casting their net widely, to include films like *Trainspotting*, Hollywood icons, obscure books (e.g., an Italian Renaissance etiquette guide), British punk bands, Dadaists, pornography, the American Beats and gay sensibility—they chart how rebellions against standards of sexuality, gender, race, class, artificiality and "decency" lead to coolness. The most adventurous and insightful aspect of their investigation emerges when they trace a concept of "cool" back to the ancient Yoruba and other West African cultures. This is a cool book on cool. (Oct.)

DEREK JARMAN

TONY PEAKE. *Overlook*, \$40 (614p) ISBN 1-58567-066-9

★ In 1986, at the height of his career, Derek Jarman was rigorously denounced by right-wing censor Mary Whitehead for promoting homosexuality and violence after his earlier films, *Sebastiane* (1976) and *Jubilee* (1977), were shown on the BBC's Channel 4. The attacks were emblematic of the fire the filmmaker drew as a radical artist and sexual provocateur from the beginning of his career in the late 1960s to his death from AIDS in 1994. This intelligent, graceful critical biography traces Jarman's colorful life and art in detail. Born to middle-class parents (his father was in the RAF), Jarman spent his youth abroad and in boarding schools, where he became aware, at a young age, of his gay sexuality and his artistic talents. Early efforts at theater design and conceptual art led to working with Ken Russell on *The Devils* and then a brilliant and very controversial film career of his own. Peake, who was Jarman's literary agent, deftly weaves together his subject's many artistic facets (Jarman was a director, designer, painter, sculptor and writer) with the intricacies of his public and private lives. Though openly gay, Jarman was on the fringes of the gay movement until his diagnosis with AIDS in 1987, when he began vigorously to protest



A history of bananas by Virginia Scott Jenkins (p. 85); an eccentric study of mating by Tim Birkhead (p. 81). Jackets by Amber Frid-Jimenez and Tim Jones.

antigay and AIDS policies in the U.K., both on the streets and in his work. Jarman's dedication to both his films and his controversial politics (he attacked Ian McKellen for accepting a knighthood from an antigay government) makes for lively reading, and reveals as much about the impact of the artist's world upon his work as it does about his effect on that world. (Oct.)

PROMISCUITY: An Evolutionary History of Sperm Competition and Sexual Conflict

TIM BIRKHEAD. *Harvard Univ.*, \$24.95 (304p) ISBN 0-674-00445-0

When mammals have sex, many sperm race to fertilize one egg. Does chance alone decide which sperm succeeds? What happens when sperm from different males chase the same egg or eggs? How are things different for the male and female gametes of squid, poultry,

starfish or sharks? And how might female organisms benefit from choosing more than one mate? Such questions are the province of biologists who study sperm competition, an intriguing, sometimes bizarre field that draws on evolutionary theory, biochemistry and old-fashioned animal watching. Birkhead (*Great Auk Islands*), professor of behavioral ecology at Britain's University of Sheffield, has written an engrossing, accessible explanation of sperm competition and related elements of animal biology. Birkhead succeeds on two levels at once. He sets out evolutionists' nuanced arguments about sperm competition and sexual selection, and shows how their hypotheses have been tested. He also offers a fantastic array of biological believe-it-or-nots. The fish called capelin in effect mate in threes; two males at once assist the female capelin in pushing spawn out of her body. Male giant squid shoot long needlelike spermatophores from a penis nearly three feet long; the spermatophores stick in the female's skin, and no one knows how the sperm reach the eggs from there. Nobody's sure why such systems evolve: studies of house mice, Australian fairy wrens and Panamanian pseudoscorpions, though, might help explain them. Birkhead's work is

BOOKS

Derek Jarman: A Biography

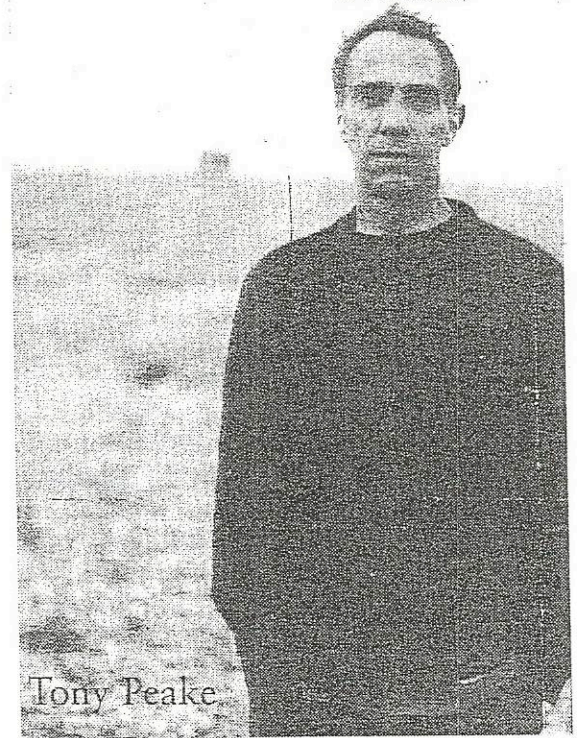
By Tony Peake

(Overlook Press, \$40, hardcover)

Derek Jarman, as this dense but highly readable biography shows, was truly a renaissance man: a filmmaker, writer, designer and gay activist. Seems he could find a use for whatever his quick, impatient eye spotted, whether it was rusted junk from the Thames or plastic raincoats that he would turn into wall pieces. Although his life was tragically cut short in 1994, when he died of AIDS at the relatively young age of 52, he managed to pack in several lifetimes' worth of work. Perhaps, as has been suggested by other AIDS chroniclers, he worked so feverishly because he knew even before diagnosis that his time was short. His often outrageous, critically polarizing films, which either enthralled or infuriated his audiences with their fragmented, heavily symbolic images, have obscured his accomplishments in other areas, such as painting and set design. Judging by the full-color examples in this generously illustrated book, he not only had a clever eye cocked toward big trends in the art world (especially the gay art world of Warhol and Hockney, two artists whom he both envied and emulated), but also a bracing sense of scope and adventure in pushing the frontier of whatever medium in which he chose to work. All of this relentless energy came at a price in his personal relationships. Jarman had the classic hyper-artistic temperament, which made him a strong director, a selfish friend and lover, and a ruthless seeker of perfection, as he filmed, fucked and filigreed his own way across the world. Peake, who knew Jarman personally, tells this complicated story well and provides a wealth of detail that brings to life one of our premier gay artists. In this age of increasing corporate control (and lessening government support) of the arts, aesthetically timid and obsessively profit-oriented as they are, one has to wonder if a future Jarman would even be given half a chance.

—Harry Eugene Baldwin

Derek Jarman



BOOK

SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 12, 2000

Lights, Camera, Reflection

DEREK JARMAN A Biography

By Tony Peake
Overlook. 613 pp. \$40

Reviewed by LOUIS BAYARD

The film director Derek Jarman was fond of (among other things) Christian iconography, so he would be pleased to know that the first major rendering of his life surpasses the combined length of the four gospels. For the less reverently inclined, the epic scope of Tony Peake's biography raises a knotty puzzle. How much is too much?

First a proposed yardstick: A book that spreads 52 years across 613 pages, that takes 120 pages to spring its subject from school and more than 200 pages to get to his first directorial effort is most likely too much. And then a caveat: To a British reader,

613 pages might seem about right. Jarman, after all, is much better known on that side of the Atlantic, where he was one of England's first openly "queer" artists and one of the first to go public with his HIV status. A unique melding of martyr and scold, he could face down his impending death with great bravery and fire off volleys at anybody who was insufficiently interested in that death. The quality of his fury was not strained; it fell on straight and gay alike, stung both Margaret Thatcher (for her homophobic policies) and Ian McKellen (for accepting a knighthood from the Thatcher government).

Jarman, in short, was the scorpion in everybody's shoe. He was also, right up to his

death in 1994, a gifted artist who wrote, painted, planted gardens and designed sets with equal fluency. And by making such challenging, experimental films as "Jubilee," "The Angelic Conversation," "The Last of England" and "War Requiem," he gave the British film industry a much-needed underground alternative to the stifling gentility of Merchant-Ivory and David Puttnam.

So if Derek Jarman is a worthy subject, why is *Derek Jarman* such a slog and a half? Probably because Peake wants us to have it all: the juvenilia and the senilia, the film scenarios that got produced and the ones that rotted out their lives in a desk, every trip and dinner party and film festival. He's especially

keen to document the 1960s mod scene from which Jarman emerged—a jaunt down Carnaby Street that soon degenerates into too many names with too little resonance, too many parties and too little fun. Nothing dates so quickly, they say, as yesterday's avant-garde, and such is the fate of Jarman and his boho mates, whose idea of a happening was to dress as your favorite artistic school and crawl across a living-room carpet to the strains of "Thus Spake Zarathustra." Sorry I missed it.

Luckily, the biography begins revving up just as Jarman's career does. The early forays into Super-8 film, the cultivation of a non-narrative and increasingly political sensibility that embraced "the ambient tapestry of random images"—Peake is on fruitful ground here. And Jarman's long, cruel descent into AIDS makes for inescapably moving reading, as

Continued on page 5

This is also a man whose "Wittgenstein" actually squeezed entertainment from the dry gourds of language theory and logical positivism. Even after his death, Jarman's impish use of anachronism could be felt in films like Sally Potter's "Orlando."

Continued from page 4

does the devotion of Jarman's (mostly platonic) lover Keith Collins.

Peake handles these matters with verve and compassion. He's a fine, even witty stylist who is not afraid to stand aside and let Jarman's own raw eloquence stride to the fore. If this biography does nothing else, it will make you hungry for Jarman's memoirs, for aphorisms like "Gender is a prison" and "In all home movies is a longing for paradise," for set pieces like a yacht club with "ghastly middle-aged men in shorts, their wives deserted on the verandah, making do" and a British public school "dominated by bells, prayers, bullying, and everything that

brings a chill."

Peake has been generous with this material but stingy with the one task that is most properly his: taking measure of Jarman's artistic legacy. His takes on the individual films are surprisingly qualified—he largely dismisses "Caravaggio," for instance, for its "whiff of staleness, even flatness"—and he implies that Jarman's greatest work was not a film at all but the garden he planted outside his Dungeness cottage.

In this and this alone, he may have done his subject an injustice. Here is a man, after all, whose adaptation of "Edward II" made Marlowe's play watchable for perhaps the first time in its history (by shearing off the

vast bulk of Marlowe's verse and turning the rest into a masque of gay martyrdom). This is also a man whose "Wittgenstein" actually squeezed entertainment from the dry gourds of language theory and logical positivism. Even after his death, Jarman's impish use of anachronism could be felt in films like Sally Potter's "Orlando," and his free-associative couplings of sound and image provided a perfect template for the modern music video. (Jarman himself filmed videos for the Smiths and the Pet Shop Boys.)

But Peake, in the end, is less in thrall to the artist than to the man. "If Jarman had genius," he writes, "it resided as much in the sheer incandescence with which he existed

as it did in the fruits of that existence." Unfortunately, the things that made Jarman memorable to the people who knew him—quicksilver wit, pedagogic enthusiasm, the ability to talk "nineteen to the dozen"—are precisely the qualities that vanish in Peake's chronology grinder. And we are left wondering if the dogged scholasticism of this biography—its determination to nail down every date and datum—isn't the quality most antithetical to Jarman's own spirit. ■

Louis Bayard is the author of a novel, "Fool's Errand," and a new novel, "Endangered Species," forthcoming next spring. He writes frequently on film

KIRKUS REVIEWS

September 1, 2000

Peake, Tony
DEREK JARMAN: *A*
Biography
Overlook (613 pp.)
\$40.00
Oct. 2000
ISBN: 1-58567-066-9

An evenhanded, pleasingly earnest, and terrifically thorough biography of the English filmmaker, artist, writer, gay advocate, and all-around mischief-maker.

Novelist Peake (*Son to the Father*, not reviewed) served as Jarman's literary agent before his death in 1994 and had full access to his letters and journals, which the author combines smoothly with interviews and all manner of published material to draw a fascinating portrait. Peake avoids speculation like the plague, preferring to let Jarman himself (through the copious paper trail he left) explain his wild sexual antics, the motivations for his artwork and his writing, his reasons for shooting his movies in Super-8, even his own totemic potency and allure. Mind you, Jarman engaged in self-mythologizing to a fare-thee-well, endeavoring to be as notorious and flamboyant as possible during his short life (1942–94), but Peake does a fine job of flagging for readers the embellishments he made to his biography over time. The author also charts in great detail the making of Jarman's films—*Jubilee*, *Sebastiane*, *The Last of England*, *Caravaggio*—as well as the subsequent attacks and positive responses in the press. Considering Jarman's sexual energy, there can't help but be plenty of material on these escapades, often short-lived and incendiary. ("Public toilets were never Jarman's style," Peake remarks. "He preferred his casual sex either in a club, in the open air, or on the street.") Once he learned he was HIV-positive, the director made another lasting contribution as a heroic example of how to live under a death sentence with purpose, courageous voice, and enormous dignity. In Peake's admiring but unvarnished depiction, Jarman's very public fight against Britain's sexuality laws is as noble as his cavorting with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence is outrageous.

Jarman was a bad boy, no doubt, but Peake makes it plain that he was also an inspired, exciting (and excitable), and deeply principled man. (48 b&w and 22 color photos)

The New York Times

Book Review

November 5, 2000

DEREK JARMAN

A Biography.

By Tony Peake.

Overlook, \$40.

In 1976, the English filmmaker, painter, set designer, writer and gay activist Derek Jarman faced eviction from a London apartment. As revenge on the landlords, who were owed back rent, Jarman did what came naturally — he gave a party. On the eve of his departure, the apartment was “redecorated,” the walls covered in graffiti, the mirrors broken, the windows engraved with crosses. Jarman led much of his life much the same way, transforming the bleak and uninviting environs of his world, then leaving it prematurely — he died from AIDS in 1994 at the age of 51. In his biography, Jarman’s literary agent, Tony Peake, describes a man who responded to the turmoil and anti-gay sentiment of late 20th-century Britain with celebration and art, a man capable of bacchanalian hedonism but also austere. Many of Jarman’s controversial movies profiled artists of meta-

morphosis, like Prospero and his intimate alchemy in “The Tempest” (1979), or a painter who transforms common contemporaries into gods and saints on canvas in “Caravaggio” (1986). Jarman himself demonstrated a predilection for rewriting history in his often unreliable accounts of his own life. He thus presents a formidable task for the biographer, which may explain why “Derek Jarman” seems obsessively informative: a forest of names, dates and scrupulously detailed accounts is buttressed by a meticulous catalog of Jar-

man’s works. In many respects this is a definitive text, but we often find ourselves lost in the fun house.

CHRISTINA CHO

The Village Voice

October 31, 2000

Derek Jarman: A Biography

By Tony Peake

Overlook, 613 pp., \$40

[Buy this book](#)

Derek Jarman was not only a filmmaker, painter, set designer, horticulturist, gay activist, socialite, and self-proclaimed "controversialist," but an obsessive chronicler of his own life (he published a series of diaries) with a decided flair for reinvention. This unabashed mythmaking presents obvious problems to a biographer, but Tony Peake captures the contradictions with clear-eyed admiration.

In researching *Jarman*, Peake, Jarman's literary agent, had full access to his late client's papers, and his book boasts the painstaking detail of a labor of love without falling into hagiography. Contradictions are noted, personal legends deflated. Peake reveals for instance that Jarman's writings contain at least four versions of a childhood trauma—being caught in the same bed as another boy in boarding school. A 1979 fire that supposedly destroyed most of his possessions in fact happened a month after he'd moved out—but, Peake surmises, the image of a phoenixlike rising proved irresistible.

The young Jarman is portrayed as a product of middle-class postwar English repression who eventually found solace in painting. After art school, production design opportunities beckoned—a commission by the Royal Opera House was followed by movie work with Ken Russell. Jarman's film career is exhaustively annotated here, from the late-'70s causes célèbres *Sebastiane* and *Jubilee* to the post-HIV-diagnosis battle cries, beginning with the bleak fury of *The Last of England* (1987) and culminating in the transcendently radiant void of *Blue* (1993).

Though Peake's prose can seem drab alongside his subject's extravagantly poetic musings, Jarman's life is colorful enough to withstand even the most pedestrian retelling. We learn that a frequent sexual fantasy involved homosexuals from history—Edward II, Caravaggio—looming over the bed. Peake, whose reportorial rigor isn't always matched by analytic prowess, attributes this to Jarman's "need to belong." The author fares better with more straightforward psychology, notably Jarman's relationship with his strict, distant father, a Royal Air Force officer who exhibited kleptomaniac tendencies late in life.

Jarman died in 1994, and his final years were a flurry of urgent, tireless activity; in describing them, Peake is as breathless and uninclined to wallow as his subject. "Life now is a little like eating the leftovers from a feast," Jarman wrote as he was making his funeral plans. Peake leaves no doubt that he cleaned his plate before leaving the table. —**Dennis Lim**

RAIN TAXI

review of books

Winter 2000/2001

DEREK JARMAN
A BIOGRAPHY
Tony Peake
The Overlook Press (\$40)

by Thomas Fagan

Derek Jarman is the first full-scale biography of the painter, filmmaker and activist to be published since his death in 1994. Tony Peake, Jarman's literary agent for the last seven years of his life, has created a vivid and compelling account of Jarman's life and work, expertly capturing his journey of personal, artistic, and political transformations. His book is also an incisive social and cultural history of England during the last half of the 20th Century, from the bleakness of post-war England to the post-industrial wasteland of Margaret Thatcher's Britain (expressed in the nightmare vision of Jarman's 1987 film *The Last of England*).

Always a man in motion, Jarman channeled his reckless, restless energies into art, fueling the change from his middle-class suburban upbringing to his life as a bohemian London artist; from abstract landscape painter to avant-garde filmmaker; from furtive participant in London's early shadowy underground gay scene to out, proud, and fearless queer activist. It was Jarman who led the



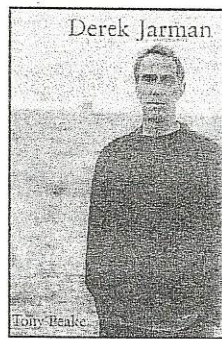
public criticism of gay actor Ian McKellan for accepting a knighthood in 1991, writing, "As a queer artist, I find it impossible to react with anything but dismay to his acceptance of this honour from a government which has stigmatized homosexuality . . . and which is poised to take important steps to recriminalize homosexuality . . . Why have you accepted this award, Ian? It diminishes you."

Jarman's diagnosis as HIV positive in 1986 did little to slow him down; he was yet to write and direct four feature-length films as well as make numerous collages and paintings, many now with queer- and AIDS-related themes. He also turned his attention to a new medium, directing several pop music videos for artists as diverse as Marianne Faithfull and the Pet Shop Boys. Despite failing health, he was able to create a famously idiosyncratic garden out of the slate and gravel of his cottage in Kent, where he was accorded his last and perhaps greatest public honor in 1991—canonization by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence as "Saint Derek of Dungeness of the Order of Celluloid Knights."

Saint Derek faced his final illness with grace and courage, continuing to create art until AIDS robbed him of his sight (but not his vision) and his energy and intelligence gave way to weakness and dementia. With its meticulous research and many illustrations, *Derek Jarman* is a fitting tribute to its subject. Tony Peake has accomplished a most difficult task—he has fully captured the complexities of Jarman's creative, impassioned life and has presented a deeply felt portrait of a man, an artist, and an age. ♦

FILM
BILL
BOOK
CASE

By Gary Kramer



DEREK JARMAN

By Tony Peake

Overlook Press, 613 pages, \$40

In this meticulously researched biography, Tony Peake recounts the life and influences of iconoclast British filmmaker Derek Jarman with decidedly mixed results.

Offering many interesting stories—such as the director's undying passion for gardens, and the impact of his father's kleptomania—*Derek Jarman* best explains how the filmmaker's most fertile creative period came to him after being diagnosed with AIDS in 1986. Jarman's last film, *Blue*, in which a spoken-word soundtrack accompanied a single blue image, was crafted in response to the blindness he suffered as a result of the disease.

Yet prior to contracting the HIV virus, Jarman was able to transform his image of being an enfant terrible who made the homoerotic *Sebastiane* and the punk anthem *Jubilee*, to become a celebrated filmmaker that successfully reimagined the life of Caravaggio and dazzlingly reinterpreted Marlowe's *Edward II*. Peake describes the history of these projects (as well as all of the director's unre-

alized productions) with such painstaking detail, readers not completely fascinated will quickly lose interest.

While Jarman, who published several autobiographical volumes himself, may need to have his life chronicled, Peake is perhaps too close to his subject to offer a fair perspective. (Peake was Jarman's literary agent for seven years, and even appeared in the director's film, *Wittgenstein*.) Episodes such as Jarman's long-standing rivalry with David Hockney and his falling out with Sir John Gielgud over a production of *Don Giovanni* are titillating, but his brief rift with actress Tilda Swinton (his muse) and the extent of his relationships with some of his lovers are not fully explained—a surprise considering the book is so thoroughgoing.

Ultimately, however, *Derek Jarman* appears to be simply an extension of the canonization the director received from the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, an order of his drag-queen friends posing as nuns. Peake, too, obviously worships Jarman, but readers who slug through this lengthy book may not feel like genuflecting.

genre

November 2000

Also this month, Tony Peake sketches the life of one of the gay world's most notorious filmmakers in **Derek Jarman** (Overlook Press/ \$40) This rich chronicle (in 613 pages!) provides an intensive look at this multifaceted chameleon who lead a life even more outrageous than his art. Written with verve, empathy and the inimitable insight that only a close confidant could possibly possess, Peake delves into the hedonistic depths of Jarman's impassioned life, from his bohemian early years through his later Ecstasy-fueled years and culminating in his painful, protracted death from HIV. Worldly, intelligent, salacious and highly indiscreet, this is riveting reading!

Torso

April 2001

STACKS

BOOK REVIEWS BY STEVEN MARSHALL

DEREK JARMAN: A BIOGRAPHY

By Tony Peake

It's almost always disheartening when, on the death of a celebrity, the biographies begin to roll out, written by their chauffeurs, managers, family members, etc. They are usually written quickly—slim volumes of gossip and titillation

Derek Jarman



that all but ensure the whirring sound of bodies spinning furiously in their graves. *Derek Jarman: A Biography*, written by Tony Peake, the late Jarman's literary critic, is in no way such a book. On the contrary, it is a towering brick of

a book, elegantly written and exhaustively researched, which all but guarantees its place as the definitive work on the subject of Jarman's art, life and philosophy.

The British Jarman, who was born in 1942 and died of AIDS-related causes in 1994, seemed to move between art forms with an almost-insatiable furor. Best known as the director of such gay-themed films as *Blue and Edward II*, Jarman was also an accomplished set designer, actor, landscape artist, photographer, painter and writer. When he was diagnosed as HIV-positive in 1986, he, unlike most at the time, was outspoken about the disease and allowed it to infuse his work with urgency, sexuality and a palpable rage. Reading Peake's biography, one becomes evermore aware that Jarman may one day be regarded as one of the great artists and thinkers of our age, and the tragic loss of his life increasingly grows almost too tragic to bear.

If anything else, Jarman was unquestionably good at stirring up debate and controversy. When his 1976, gay- and religious-themed film *Sebastiane* was broadcast on British television, it caused such outrage that it brought about legislation. After his HIV diagnosis, he became a tireless spokesperson and activist, and through it all he still managed to be a prolific artist.

On reading Peake's book, it becomes

apparent that his grand-scale approach to documenting Jarman's life is, quite possibly, the only way he could have done it any justice. Jarman's life's work was such an unwieldy mass of ideas, words and emotions that any attempt to "summarize" it or put it into any kind of neat category would prove futile. It would appear that Jarman spent his whole life working with every tool available to him to express his own experience as a gay man living life at the end of the 20th century, no one else could have done it better. Peake simply stands back, places Jarman's life before us, laid out simply and cleanly, and allows the man's work and words to speak for themselves. (Overlook Press, \$40)

UNCLE MAME: THE LIFE OF PATRICK DENNIS

By Eric Myers

Believe it or not, there once was a time when the word camp defined nothing more than a place you went, pitched a tent and built a fire. Then Patrick Dennis came along and introduced us to a world of makeup, attitude and impeccably delivered one-liners topped off with lots and lots of attitude.

He was born Edward Everett Tanner III in 1921. The nickname Pat was a nod by his father to famous heavyweight boxer Pat Sweeney when young Everett was (an unusually large) child in his mother's womb. He never escaped his father's hopes for a tough manly son, and responded, authoritatively, with the same smirking humor that would infuse almost all of his work.

He was the author, under the pseudonyms of Patrick Dennis and Virginia Rowans, of 15 unusually breezy, funny novels, including *Little Me* and *Genius*. In 1955, however, lightning struck with the publication of Dennis's most famous and influential novel, *Auntie Mame*. The novel told the story of a young orphan, Patrick, who is adopted by his freewheeling aunt, and the ensuing adventures of the two. The novel cut a swath through the stuffy pretensions of Eisenhower-era America, poking fun at almost everything and anything in its path. The novel was adapted countless times into just about every medium imaginable: plays, musicals, films, and was a success in almost

every single one of them. It made Dennis a literary star as well as a millionaire.

True to the spirit of his most famous character, however, Dennis didn't let his life thereafter settle into anything resembling a familiar pattern. First of all, he spent his money as quickly as he made it. Secondly, despite his loving wife and family, he slowly became more and more aware of his homosexuality, visiting notorious New York bathhouses and engaging in a series of affairs with other men. Eventually, his headlong rush through his life started to take its toll on Dennis. He left his family and wound up completely broke after numerous stints in hospitals and institutions, eventually finding work as a butler, before his death in 1975.

The light comic novel is almost a dead genre as we begin the 21st Century, replaced by the dour humor of Bridget Jones-style realism and the more angry, politically slanted humor of such writers as Fay Weldon and Tom Wolfe. The simple pleasures of the writings of Dennis and his contemporaries are all but forgotten now, and Eric Myers's biography serves to remind us of them. He does so by writing his

book in a cheeky, fast-moving manner that would, one would imagine, please Dennis greatly. A certain sadness runs through the book as well, but always with a crooked eyebrow at the seriousness of the proceedings. One thinks back on Dennis himself, telling a reporter of his experience during one of his many hospital trips: "It's very pleasant here. Private room, fine food, good service, restful atmosphere. Even the trip here was nice. I had a chauffeur. Why, I don't think I've ever been to Staten Island before. Very nice country, really." (St. Martin's Press, \$24.95)

UNCLE MAME



ERIC MYERS

Books



Derek Jarman: A Biography

by Tony Peake [BUY IT](#)

When he died in 1994 of AIDS-related causes at the age of 52, Derek Jarman left behind a body of work that included not only his renowned films (among them *The Tempest*, *Jubilee*, *Caravaggio*, *Blue*, *Edward II*, *Sebastiane*), film sets for other films (most notably Ken Russell's *The Devils*), paintings and sculptures, but several published volumes of autobiographical writings (*At Your Own Risk*, *Modern Nature*, *Dancing Ledge*, and *The Garden*). The appearance of a biography on the great British director may seem at first glance an excessive and perhaps too-recent addition to this legacy. However, this biography, written by Jarman's literary agent, Tony Peake, brings a fresh perspective to the life of one of the most important filmmakers of the last century.

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This is a hefty book, and in it Peake communicates the staggering breadth of Jarman's life, from his endeavors in the world of visual arts in the '60s and his association with the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence to his punk opus *Jubilee* and his dealings with rockers as diverse as Throbbing Gristle and the Pet Shop Boys. Peake chronicles Jarman's avowal as a "queer" director during the emergence of a new kind of activism in the U.K.

For all Jarman's sex-positive and radical political positions (his criticism of Ian McKellen's knighthood is enlightening), his vision was also unabashedly romantic. Peake does a good job revealing some of this ambivalence when writing about the passionate friendships he developed: "Asked around this time if he had regrets about how his sexuality had determined his friends, Jarman answered revealingly: 'If I hoped to find orgies, they weren't orgiastic; if I hoped to find permanence, it wasn't permanent. Deep down it was unsatisfactory, neurotic, but this was forgotten in the excitement.'"

Peake also reveals the profound respect that Jarman seemed to have for all those he worked with and for the devotion his contemporaries and proteges had for him. It is worth noting how many of Jarman's proteges have prospered (aesthetically if not always financially): John Maybury, Cerith Wynn Evans, and Tilda Swinton to name a few. Peake is unsparing in his details about Jarman's final days and the way he incorporated his loss of sight and other bodily functions into his work. Jarman finally succumbed to a "necklace of illnesses." He refused to eat on his final day. When his partner asked him if there was nothing that would tempt him to eat, Jarman uttered his last words: "I want the world to be full of fluffy little ducks."

-- [Lawrence Chua](#)

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Derek Jarman



Review

Derek Jarman: A Biography Tony Peake

Overlook

Biography

ISBN: 1585670669

Sometimes the best way to find out something about someone's life is to ask their friends to tell you a story. That is essentially what DEREK JARMAN: A Biography by Tony Peake is --- a story about an artist's life by someone who knew him well and often collaborated with him on the works that made him famous. From Jarman's English boyhood to his randy days as a fine artist and then filmmaker and AIDS activist, Peake offers up tiny slices of the man's history with a generous and gracious spirit, filled with love for a complicated human being who offered the planet his very soul in his work.

Jarman was a rampant homosexual playboy at a time when it wasn't exactly in vogue. He was also a sensitive and talented gardener whose cottage landscape became a famous stopping-off point for gardening enthusiasts (of which there are many in England). He covered the lives of other famous, complicated men in his work, with films about Caravaggio and Edward I and St. Sebastian. At the end of his life, blind and ruined by AIDS, he made a film called *Blue*, in which the screen is bathed in blue colors and with a soundtrack that mirrored the way he saw the world at the time. Jarman was a renegade whose every move reflected the place he was in his life --- he was truly a working artist.

Peake's writing isn't exactly the type of sophisticated reportage you would expect from such a lengthy and detailed biography of a recent art world star. However, it is just that perspective that makes DEREK JARMAN: A Biography such a compelling read. Again, it is as if you were sitting around a coffee table in a homey kitchen with an old friend telling you stories about someone who isn't there anymore who added so much to the world when he was; and whose voice, through his work, would linger after him forever.

--- Reviewed by Jana Siciliano

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amazon.com

Derek Jarman: A Biography

Tony Peake

Overlook Press

613 pages

Derek Jarman died from AIDS-related causes in 1994; this monumental work is the first full biography of the controversial filmmaker, artist, author and well-known gay-rights activist. Tony Peake, Jarman's literary agent and friend for the last seven years of his life, has written a well-researched and carefully detailed study of this complex and popular man. Jarman had a traditional middle-class English upbringing, and, as a boy, was coddled by an overindulgent mother and eyed with growing suspicion by his cold, patrician father, a Royal Air Force captain. In recounting Jarman's youth, Peake takes us on a journey through the repression and privations of the war years to the bohemian excitements of the sixties, when Jarman first discovered his true nature as an artist. Working on such radical films as *Sebastiane*, *Jubilee*, *Caravaggio* and *Wittgenstein*, Jarman collaborated with the most important members of the creative avant-garde, including actors, designers and fellow artists like David Hockney and Robert Mapplethorpe. In his final incarnation as angry gay-rights activist and public AIDS victim, Jarman severed his always ambivalent relationship with "establishment" culture—ironically, increasing his public profile enormously. Peake offers a study that is every bit as fascinating as Jarman himself.

—Mikita Brottman

Loving Graham Greene

Gloria Emerson

Random House

208 pages

Molly Benson has more than a passing interest in Graham Greene. Molly lives a comfortable life in New Jersey yet her "fixation" on the British novelist "makes her want to see a world different from the one she knows, and find out new things about people." She admires how Greene "took sides" and was "fearless." For her own personal crusade, she decides to take on the freeing of an imprisoned writer in Algeria. Emerson, who won the National Book Award for *Winners & Losers*, structures this novel, her first, as a dramatic diptych. Part one provides background to Molly's moral commitment. It also introduces the two companions who join her on her soulful journey: her lifelong best friend and a young British historian. In part two, the naive trio arrive in Algeria in 1992, where they are instantly drawn into the political intrigue and brutality of an Islamic-fundamentalist movement that sorely tests their loyalties. The tense narrative deftly moves toward a violent confrontation in the narrowest confines of the Casbah. Molly endures tests of faith, courage and moral sensibility during her baptism of fire. The novel is a resplendent homage to Greene's literary ethics, and a penetrating exploration of the movement from innocence to experience.

—Robert Allen Papinchak

Chomsky on Miseducation

Noam Chomsky

(edited by Donaldo Macedo)

Rowman & Littlefield

176 pages

In a time when educational reform is on every politician's empathetic lips, we, as a nation, seem united by the idea that our schools are in need of drastic change. Of course, the changes that are inevitably brought up have to do with concrete issues—class size, teachers' salaries, metal detectors and school funding. Never mentioned, except by the occasional home-schooling advocate, is the possibility that the educational system itself is flawed; we are teaching our students the wrong things. That's the bracing premise floated in the newest collection of essays and lectures by the anti-authoritarian iconoclast, Noam Chomsky. At the outset, Chomsky states his thesis "Schools have always, throughout history, played an institutional role in a system of control and coercion." Chomsky has always been a stubborn force for the American left, attacking the remotest hints of totalitarianism, regardless of which way the winds are blowing, and he would have been the perfect pin to pop the hot-air bubble that is the current educational debate. Unfortunately, Macedo, the book's editor, has chosen pieces on Chomsky's usual themes: the spreading of misinformation, manufacturing of consensus, the illusion of the free market. There is hardly anything here specifically addressing educational reform, which is a shame, as Chomsky would have brought a unique perspective to it as an MIT professor. This book portrays Chomsky at his best—bitingly sarcastic, relentlessly logical

The definitive Jarman

by Jim Nawrocki

Derek Jarman: A Biography by Tony Peake; Overlook Publishing, \$40

For most Americans, the late Derek Jarman is best known as a filmmaker. His movies such as *Sebastiane*, *Caravaggio* and *Edward II* were noted for their rich visual texture and haunting, dreamlike quality. Were he known only for his films, Jarman would still be deserving of a serious biography or two. But Tony Peake's substantial life of Jarman reminds us that the openly gay filmmaker was also a painter, designer, diarist, writer, and an early, prominent gay activist. In short, Jarman lived a life immersed in art, a life that at times became art.

Rather than gloss over Jarman's early years, Peake dives in, immersing us in the details of Jarman's ancestry and upbringing. The child of an RAF officer, Jarman had a peripatetic childhood. His family moved frequently, living in or traveling to such locales as Italy, Greece and India, among other places. Peake traces these many moves, and attempts to understand their psychological impact on young Jarman. He also provides reasonably astute analysis of the personalities of Jarman's parents, his sister, and other relatives.

Peake is aided in his project by the many letters, photos, journals and other materials that he had access to. Jarman was a devoted

diarist, and Peake's narrative is often complemented by extensive excerpts from Jarman's own written reflections. Jarman also wrote two autobiographies, so Peake had the additional advantage of having Jarman's own recollections and assessments of his early years. As a result, this is a richly detailed biography, and the roster of Jarman's many friendships and relationships is long and fully fleshed out. The book also includes anecdotes about many of Jarman's famous friends and acquaintances — artists, directors, actors and others.

Jack of all trades

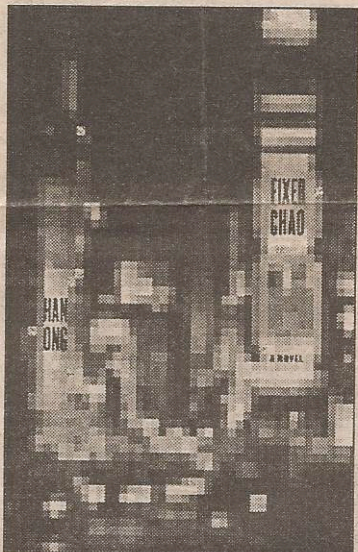
Peake carefully explores Jarman's early artistic influences and inspirations. One of these is Robin Noscoe, the art instructor at the Canford school that Jarman attended as a young man. Peake portrays Noscoe not only as a mentor for the budding artist, but also as a kind of "Renaissance man" role model. "A silversmith, potter, furniture-maker, painter and a keen student of architecture, Noscoe did not value one sphere of artistic activity over another," writes Peake, later noting that Jarman would become similarly versatile in his own artistic pursuits.

Peake also undertakes the rather delicate operation of excavating the realm of Jarman's psyche, particularly his early sexual experiences. One of these was an event that Jarman rarely discussed and never wrote about, which occurred during his stay at one of England's all-male boarding schools. According to Peake, Jarman soon earned a reputation among his peers, and the nicknames "Snake," "Snakeman" and "Hose" for his apparently very large personal endowment. In one instance, he was cornered by the other boys, restrained, stripped and "brought to public orgasm by the stroking of a feather duster." In a later incident, he was caught by a school caretaker while in bed with another classmate, and punished for the incident.

Peake relates these tales by way of explaining some of the sexual themes — particularly sexual violence and rejection — that appear in much of Jarman's later work. Though it is always problematic for a biographer to attempt to psychoanalyze his subject, Peake seems to do so with the appropriate amount of restraint. Though he sometimes engages in clumsy metaphors ("The volcano of repressed and knotted sexuality on which Jarman had been [...] sitting was ready to erupt."), Peake grounds his analysis in the abundant evidence of Jarman's many personal writings.

Peake's description of Jarman's illness and AIDS activism is sobering and moving, but also somewhat inspirational. Jarman's heavily homoerotic works often made him the subject of controversy, especially in the conservative Thatcher years in Britain, but he seemed to relish his role as a provocateur. This was especially true when he announced his HIV status and became a vigorous champion of gay rights and AIDS awareness.

A-grift i



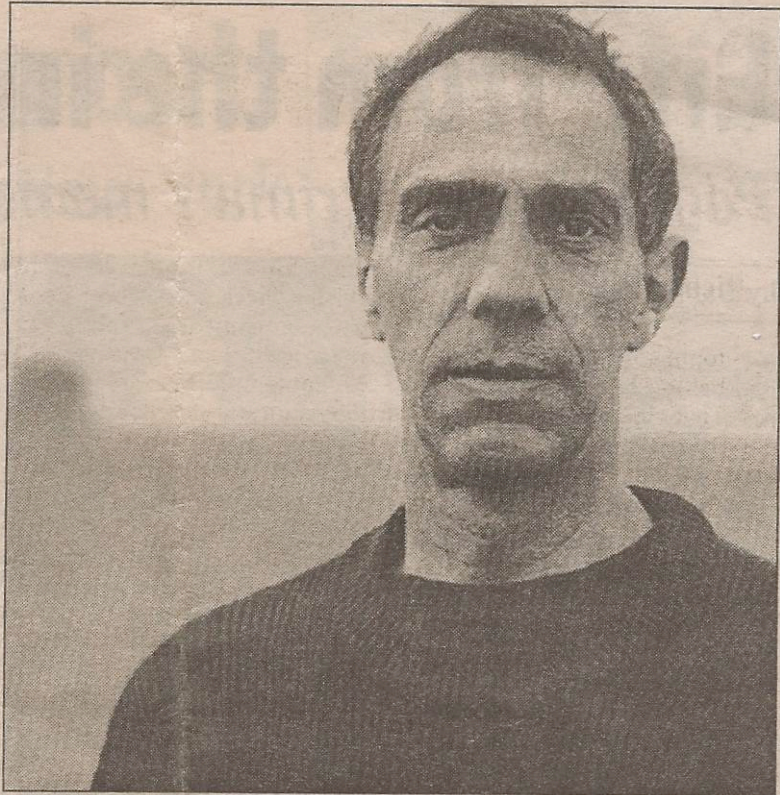
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Howard Sooley

Derek Jarman: "a life immersed in art."

At over 500 pages, with an additional 40 pages of detailed notes, plus many pictures from Jarman's life, work and films, Peake's biography is long destined to be regarded as the definitive life of Jarman. It is well-researched, well-il-

lustrated, and written in a smooth, engaging style. For those whose knowledge of Jarman is restricted to his films, this book reveals the full extent of his artistic career, and it is a revealing portrait of him as a man. ▼

South Morning China Post

January 2001

Derek Jarman: faithful to a freakish vision

A HOSTILE JUDGMENT on the English film-maker and artist Derek Jarman is easy to assemble. The director of a handful of artless and clumsy films, he became the centre of a raffish cult in the 1980s. Destined to be always on the sidelines on account of his dedication to drug-taking and extensive homosexual promiscuity, his films mark an era when the artistic underground thought briefly that it could change the world.

Several factors make such an assessment unjust, though it remains part of the picture. The first is Jarman's background, the second his attitude to England and parallel reception in the United States, the third his relationship to more established and conventional artists.

The director of films that include *Sebastiane*, *The Tempest*, *Caravaggio*, *Edward II* and *Wittgenstein* was born in 1940, and even after the end of World War II his childhood continued to be marked by that bleak era. His father, a Royal Air Force officer, was in reality, or in addition, a kleptomaniac. His mother, whose "smile and charm were the disaster of her time and class", as Jarman himself said, was in the background when he joined London gay groups claiming to have established "nuclear family free zones".

Jarman can be seen as representing a peculiarly British form of conservative avant-garde. Despite inhabiting a Bohemian ethos of temporary housing, insecure finances and visions of splendour, Jarman actually admired the backward-looking romanticism of someone like the poet Sir John Betjeman. Few of the semi-professional actors and photographers he ended up working with could have shared this predilection. For the most part, they huddled together in hallucinating cheerfulness to keep out the cold.

It's therefore hardly surprising his films never made the grade in North America. Even Canada's pioneering gay magazine *Body Politic* called *Sebastiane* "a second-rate skin flick all dressed up in a costume that doesn't fit".

Jarman's supporters fall largely into two categories – gays and enemies of Hollywood. But even there, there are some who believe that his keeping himself permanently on the edge was his own choice, as was his putting himself beyond the pale for an increasing number of establishment, or establishment-friendly, figures.

And Jarman could have worked in better-funded circumstances had he wanted to. When he began his career it was as a stage and set designer, and in this capacity he worked with

Derek Jarman: A Biography

by Tony Peake
Overlook Press \$400

Bradley Winterton

such top-ranking and generously supported figures in the London arts world as film-maker Ken Russell, choreographer Frederick Ashton, and actor and occasional director John Gielgud. He was also well-enough thought of in Europe to have pursued a career as film director there, where the pressures to conform that until recently characterised the Anglo-Saxon film worlds had always been less strong.

But instead he opted to stay faithful to a freakish and hand-to-mouth vision. His films were characteristically acted by outrageously dressed friends, recycling decadent London as a way of doing Ancient Rome on the cheap, as he himself once perceptively remarked.

An evolving sadness is what can be read between the lines of this first biography, written by his former literary agent. After Jarman was diagnosed HIV-positive in 1986, the film-maker's life became more embattled. His last film, *Blue*, consisted simply of 79 minutes of unpeopled colour to accompanying words and music. Even as a painter, he could surely have done better than fixing gilded glass pieces into black pigment, inscribing them with gnomic texts, and then smashing them with a hammer (as he did in one period), had things gone differently.

Many friends felt his real love was the garden he managed to create from the inhospitable ground outside his cottage on a stony headland. Perhaps he felt it a symbol of how a wistful beauty can be coaxed out of the least promising of materials.

At his funeral in 1994, some months after he had been canonised as a "saint" by a bawdy group of gay men called the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, someone placed a bottle of amyl nitrate (known for heightening sexual excitement) beside his body in the open coffin. Surely a man of great gentleness and no little talent deserved better than that. But it does indicate something of the cleft stick in which his life, as it evolved in circumstances he could have controlled differently had he wished, eventually so cruelly caught him.