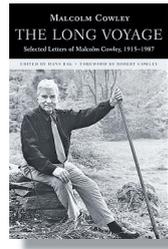


Originally a poet (one of whose manuscripts was retyped by his close friend Hart Crane), Cowley was at the height of his influence in the 1930s, when he succeeded Edmund Wilson as the literary editor of *The New Republic*. Alfred Kazin, in his book “Starting Out in the Thirties,” vividly describes the impact Cowley had on the ink-stained wretches who depended on Cowley, not just to further their literary ambitions, but for money to survive during the depths of the Depression (Kazin reports that Cowley “would sell the books there was no space to review and dole out the proceeds among the more desperate cases haunting him for review assignments”).



The Long Voyage

By Malcolm Cowley, edited by Hans Bak, Harvard, 848 pages, \$39.95

During this period Cowley was, if not a member of the Communist Party, at the very least an enthusiastic fellow traveler (later claiming that “I was pretty crimson, or at least deep pink”), and his Stalinist past would come back to haunt him. Decades afterward, Cowley would struggle with a memoir of the period (“God, how blind we were in the 1930s,” he exclaimed at one point), but was never able to complete it.

But after a difficult few years in the early 1940s, when a WWII-era job in Washington (part of which consisted of writing for President Roosevelt) was scuttled by right-wing attacks on his radical past that left him shooting squirrels and rabbits in order to feed his family, Cowley’s fortunes began to revive. He wrote a profile for the *New Yorker* of the legendary editor Maxwell Perkins, and edited the anthology “The Portable Faulkner,” whose introduction pointed out the unity of Faulkner’s work and which was instrumental in Faulkner’s being awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.

At a time when even so percipient a reader as Perkins (who had nurtured the careers of F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and Thomas Wolfe) declared to Cowley that “Faulkner is finished,” Cowley was able to convince a reluctant Random House to publish the anthology that, almost overnight, turned a neglected writer whose books were mostly out of print and who was widely considered a has-been into a world-famous author and Nobel laureate.

While editor Bak has done on the whole an astounding job of effectively boiling down Cowley’s voluminous correspondence (keep in mind that these are his selected letters) into a single volume of 697 pages of text and 64 pages of notes, inevitably, he misses a few things. The seemingly odd word “exagminations” on page 595, which Bak prints with a “[sic]” after it, doesn’t need one: it’s a Joycean joke (part of the title of a critical anthology devoted to “Finnegans Wake”). When Cowley reacts to John Barth’s novel “Giles Goat-Boy” by saying “This is spinach and to hell with it,” he’s paraphrasing a famous 1928 *New Yorker* cartoon. And when Cowley lapses into French to claim, “Je ne propose pas, je ne dispose pas, j’expose,” he is misquoting a supposedly famous French saying that was, in fact, invented by

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Lytton Strachey at the end of the preface of his “Eminent Victorians.” (The actual, fraudulent quote is: “Je n’impose rien; je ne propose rien: j’expose” or “I do not impose anything. I proposed nothing: I expose.”)

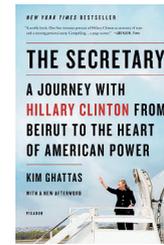
To delve into Cowley’s letters is to get a rare behind-the-scenes glimpse at how the literary life, with its glittering prizes, really operates. Cowley was a long-term member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was instrumental in determining who got the down-on-his-luck poet Delmore Schwartz a Bollingen Award over the arguably more deserving Robert Lowell by telling the other jurors, “Look, Lowell will publish other books and he’s certain to get the award some time, but this is Delmore’s last chance.”)

His judgments of other writers are usually sound, and on his occasional friend and correspondent Ernest Hemingway he is unusually perceptive, stating that “The point is that for twenty years Hemingway was a frightened man — or so I gather — continually fighting his fear and continually seeking out danger to test himself again and again.” His advice to Jack Kerouac concerning his deliberately slapdash prose style is so obviously true (“Automatic writing is fine for a start, but it has to be revised and put into shape or people will quite properly refuse to read it.”) that it’s a pity Kerouac wasn’t smart enough to pay attention to it.

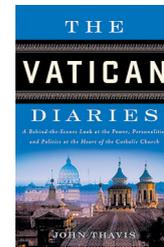
Throughout this lengthy but not overlong volume, one finds one’s literary judgments challenged if not overturned by Cowley’s cool, common-sense appraisals. One can’t help but wonder if the neglected novelist Elizabeth Madox Roberts will receive an uptick on the literary stock exchange as a result of Cowley’s advocacy here, and his assessment of his longtime friend Conrad Aiken makes one want to reread that perhaps undeservedly underappreciated poet.

Overall, this volume is a permanent addition to American literary history the likes of which we may never see again. If the telephone made letter-writing a luxury, email and texting have rendered it as obsolete as the manual typewriter, and we as readers are undoubtedly the poorer for it. That is all the more reason to cherish this invaluable collection.

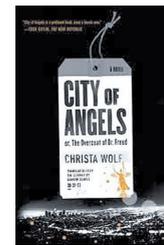
Tom Moran is a freelance writer who lives in New York.



The Secretary by Kim Ghattas, Picador, 372 pages, \$17
BBC foreign correspondent Ghattas recounts stories of her time traveling with Hillary Clinton during Clinton’s tenure as U.S. secretary of state. Ghattas focuses on major events, including the WikiLeaks scandal and the Arab Spring.



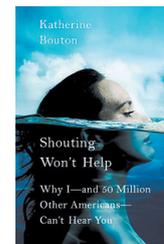
The Vatican Diaries by John Thavis, Penguin, 336 pages, \$17
Thavis, a journalist who covered the Vatican for more than 25 years, offers insight into the religious and political powers living and working inside the city-state. The paperback edition includes a new afterword about the transition from Pope Benedict XXVI to Pope Francis.



City of Angels by Christa Wolf, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 315 pages, \$15

This autobiographical novel follows Wolf during a year living in Los Angeles after realizing that she may have been a communist informant for East Germany. The book focuses on the nature of memory and the disconnect between living in 1990s

Los Angeles and 1960s Berlin.



Shouting Won't Help by Katherine Bouton, Picador, 276 pages, \$16

Bouton recounts the experience of suddenly losing her hearing at age 30 and her efforts to regain it through technology and medicine, even as her symptoms became progressively worse. She also examines why similar hearing loss at a young-

er age may be a growing phenomenon in the United States.



Mary Coin by Marisa Silver, Plume, 322 pages, \$16

In this historical novel inspired by Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” photo, a history professor discovers a family secret surrounding the famous Depression-era image. In the *Printers Row Journal* review of the hardcover edition, Beth Kephart wrote that Silver “never rushes her story” and treats her characters with “palpable care.”



Every Contact Leaves a Trace by Elanor Dymott, W. W. Norton, 395 pages, \$15.95

A lawyer returns to the University of Oxford, his alma mater, to try to piece together the circumstances surrounding the murder of his wife, Rachel. He meets with his wife’s godmother, old friends and her mentor to discover their impact on

her life and death.

— Caitlin Wilson