

# Memoir of a Pugilist

*Hitchens in light and shade*

BY SCOTT SHERMAN

IN EARLY 1966, SHORTLY AFTER HE moved to the United States, the witty and urbane English journalist Henry Fairlie wrote an extended essay about the American newspaper scene for *Encounter*, the London-based, CIA-sponsored periodical. Fairlie extolled the range, depth, and professionalism of American newspaper reporting. Halfway through his treatise, however, he delivered a tart observation: “That most American journalists have yet to learn to write is an accepted fact of American journalism, of every kind and at every level.” What mystified Fairlie, a veteran of London’s newspaper skirmishes, was the Americans’ “lack of style.”

Fifteen years later, another witty and urbane English journalist arrived in the U.S. with a single suitcase. His name was Christopher Hitchens, and he immediately began to offer—in the pages of *Grand Street*, *In These Times*, and *The Nation*, where he was soon given a column—master classes on the very subject that had vexed Henry Fairlie: literary style. Before long, his elegant and acrobatic prose drew the attention of leading New York publishers, and in 1988, when he was thirty-nine, his first collection appeared. *Prepared for the Worst* ranged far and wide: dispatches from the battlegrounds of Nicaragua, El Salvador, Lebanon, and Argentina; political pieces, etched in acid, on subjects from the Iran-contra affair to the rise of neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz; and essays on Thomas Paine, George Orwell, Noam Chomsky, and Conor Cruise O’Brien.

Also impressive were the blurbs on the back cover from four notables: Oliver Stone (“a breath of Tom Paine for our time”), Salman Rushdie (he “deserves, in spite of his inexplicable wrongheadedness on pages 225–27, to be celebrated with much gusto”), Martin Amis (“When I see Mr. Hitchens’s name among a magazine’s contributors, I want to save him until last but always end up reading him first”), and Leon Edel (“Hitchens has wisdom colored by wit”). On a cursory glance, Edel’s endorsement seemed out of place. Surely the eighty-one-year-old scholar—who wrote a towering five-volume biography of Henry James and edited the journals of Edmund Wilson—represented the old guard. But Edel’s blurb was a telegram aimed at the American literary establishment, and its meaning was clear: here is an

## **Hitch-22: A Memoir**

By Christopher Hitchens  
Twelve  
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extremely precocious young writer fully at home in the quarterlies, the weeklies, the op-ed pages, and in the realm of literature. Look out.

THE BRITISH THEATER CRITIC KENNETH Tynan kept the following words above his writing desk: “Rouse tempers, goad and lacerate, raise whirlwinds.” In the 1980s and early 1990s, it seemed that Tynan’s credo had been tailored to fit the young Hitchens, whose persona in print somehow combined the wit of Oscar Wilde, the steely intelligence of Susan Sontag, the hard-bitten anti-imperialism of Gore Vidal, the bitchy humor of Truman Capote, and the swagger of Norman Mailer.

His rise was inexorable. In 1992 Hitchens became a columnist for *Vanity Fair*, and no writer in the country deserved the job more. He went on to write for every major periodical except *The New Yorker*, and produced a shelf of books. To be sure, his aura was partly the result of his exertions outside journalism: Hitchens loaned his linguistic firepower to a frail and demoralized American left, and was an electrifying (if ruffled and grandiloquent) speaker at countless rallies and public events from Berkeley to Madison to Manhattan. In front of a microphone, his only real competition was the Reverend Jesse Jackson.

“Journalists cannot expect their work to last,” James Salter wrote in his introduction to A. J. Liebling’s memoir of Paris, *Between Meals*. “Even Dreiser’s or Hemingway’s articles are of little interest to us.... Autobiography, though, is another matter, as is memoir....” With his sixtieth birthday behind him, Hitchens has now written an account of his life. And the first chapter of *Hitch-22*, which concerns his mother, contains some of the most stirring prose of his career.

Trapped in a stale marriage to a tight-lipped career Navy man (“The Commander”) and forced to reside, for the most part, in provincial towns, Yvonne Hitchens sought pleasure and freedom in stylish attire (she made an ill-fated attempt to run a dress shop) and glittering conversation (“The one unforgivable sin,” she said, “is to be boring”). But she had large ambitions for her children, and Hitchens, at a very young age, once heard her remark to her husband: “If there is

going to be an upper class in this country, then Christopher is going to be in it.” When her sons were grown, Yvonne took a lover—“a poet and a dreamer”—but her life was headed off the rails. In 1973, Hitchens got a rare call from his father: “Do you happen to know where your mother is?” She was in Athens, where she had just committed suicide, with her distraught lover, in a hotel room.

Hitchens’s account of his subsequent journey to a Greece reeling from political upheaval is unforgettable. (Even on a trip to identify his mother’s body, he couldn’t resist a literary errand: he lunched with Chester Kallman, the poet and companion of W. H. Auden, who had died a few weeks earlier. Kallman, we are precisely informed, was afflicted “with an almost grannyish trembling and protruding lower lip.”) To his mother’s life, Hitchens adds this coda:

She was the cream in the coffee, the gin in the Campari, the offer of wine or champagne instead of beer, the laugh in the face of bores and pursemouths and skinflints, the insurance against bigots and prudes. Her defeat and despair were also mine for a long time, but I have reason to know that she wanted me to withstand the woe....

Nothing in the book equals the chapter about Yvonne Hitchens, but there are reasons to keep reading. *Hitch-22* includes sprightly pages on the author’s years at Oxford (where he would protest by day and raise glasses with the dons at night); his expedition to Cuba in 1968 (a tray of daiquiri rum cocktails greeted him at the airport, but he still managed to educate himself about the revolution); and his early years as a journalist in London (during a job interview at the *Times*, Hitchens confessed that he was a socialist, which brought this reply from his interlocutor: “Fine, fine, my dear boy: don’t look so defensive. More socialists on the *Times* than you would probably guess”). There is a haunting chapter about his travels in Poland, Argentina, and Portugal in the 1970s. And yes, there is a pug-nacious chapter on Iraq, in which Hitchens reaches deep into his bag of literary and rhetorical tricks to justify his support for George W. Bush’s war.

Reading this non-apologetic apolo-

gia, which is more than a little defensive, I was reminded of a quote from his wife, Carol Blue, that appeared in Ian Parker’s incisive *New Yorker* profile of Hitchens in 2006: her husband resembled “those men who were never really in battle and wished they had been.” At least one young man in battle took Hitchens’s prowar declarations very seriously. The decision of Mark Jennings Daily, a UCLA honors graduate, to fight in Iraq was partly inspired by an article in which, by the author’s own account, he “poured scorn on those who were neutral” about the war. Daily was killed in Mosul in 2007, and Hitchens’s guilt is palpable.

SINCE HITCHENS CARES SO DEEPLY about literary judgments (his oeuvre is almost devoid of references to painters, dancers, musicians, and filmmakers), let it be said that, at the level of the sentence and the paragraph, the writing in *Hitch-22* is mostly gorgeous. But the book feels too long and too uneven: some chapters are lean, others are bloated. In the latter, Hitchens is like a jazz saxophonist who crams too many notes into his solos. Names clog the pages: “My later friend Jessica Mitford... my Argentine anti-fascist friend Jacobo Timerman... my beloved friend Christopher Buckley.” My patience gave out when I reached the chapter about Martin Amis, in which the speed of the name-dropping—and the intensity of the backslapping and self-satisfaction—becomes insufferable. We are supposed to be impressed that the young Amis recited, from memory, “a spine-tingling rendition of Humbert Humbert’s last verbal duel with Quilty,” and that “Martin has done the really hard thinking about handjobs.” If an enemy of Hitchens were to write about a friend in such gushing terms, Hitchens would annihilate him.

*Hitch-22* is a book I looked forward to reading. Since the 1980s, the two journalists who have brought me the most pleasure and enlightenment, and whose books would accompany me to that fabled desert island, have been Christopher Hitchens and Murray Kempton, who wrote for *Newsday* and *The New York Review of Books* before his death in 1997. The two had certain things in common: both traveled in the sectarian left (Kempton in the Young Communist League and

the Socialist Party in the 1930s, Hitchens in the International Socialists); both could effortlessly summon an exquisite aphorism from Flaubert, Chekhov, and Yeats; and both were prolific. Hitchens’s writing has more clarity and thrust, but sometimes that clarity leads to rhetorical overkill, as in his many polemics against Bill Clinton. Kempton’s prose could be opaque—in the way that Joseph Conrad’s prose was sometimes opaque—but he had a greater sense of ambiguity and nuance, and a more acute, novelistic grasp of human psychology. Kempton was a writer. Hitchens is a writer, a celebrity, and a showman—and not always in that order.

Sometimes the work of these journalistic icons overlapped. In June 1989, both of them reviewed a major exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art titled “Goya and the Spirit of Enlightenment,” which contained Goya’s phantasmagoric depictions of Napoleon’s conquest of Spain. For Hitchens, writing in *The Nation*, it was a rare foray into art criticism, but his prose was muscular and confident: “Despite its many painterly glories and its bolts of brilliant humor and bitterness, the [exhibition] suffers from the appearance of having been edited to suit a liberal sensibility.” Kempton’s approach, in *New York Newsday*, was more tentative: “I have been three times to the... great Goya exhibit; and I find myself less and less able to understand.” Awed by the mysteries of Goya’s genius, and shaken by the atrocities depicted in the works, Kempton left the show with thoughts of “mists and shadows.”

Kempton valued Hitchens, and vice versa. I think Kempton would have admired the verve and intelligence on display in *Hitch-22*, while turning away from the blustering patriotism and narcissism. (If only Hitchens had the modesty of a James Baldwin, who affirmed in the preface to *Notes of a Native Son*: “I want to be an honest man and a good writer.”) I still look for the Hitchens byline, and probably always will. But these days, when I scan my bookshelves, I find myself drawn to Kempton’s mists and shadows more than Hitchens’s sermons and certainties. **CJR**

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