

author's relationship with her father, a closeted gay man. *The New York Times* named it a notable book of 2006. The tale, which is not dissimilar from a heavy-handed *New Yorker* short story, caters to the taste of readers who wouldn't otherwise like comics. While great comic artists, like great painters and filmmakers, enrich their medium with a paradigmatic visual style, Bechdel's stiff illustrations merely reiterate the text. It's a comic book with closed-captioning. Brunetti's anthology, in contrast, shows how visually sophisticated the strangest American comics can be.

—Ken Chen

The Cold Eye

IN SEPTEMBER 2001, WHEN the call went forth to chasten the ironic impulse in American life, it seemed, well, rather ironic. The nation had been

CHIC IRONIC BITTERNESS.

By R. Jay Magill Jr.
Univ. of Michigan Press.
273 pp. \$25.95

attacked by apocalyptic fundamentalists, and media commentators were blaming the likes of Jerry Seinfeld and Bart Simpson. *Time* essayist Roger Rosenblatt wrote, "The ironists, seeing through everything, made it difficult for anyone to see anything. The consequence of thinking that nothing is real . . . is that one will not know the difference between a joke and a menace." *Vanity Fair* editor Graydon Carter predicted "the end of the age of irony."

Six years on, such pious prescriptions have proven "disastrous," in the view of R. Jay Magill Jr., a writer and illustrator and the former executive editor of *DoubleTake* magazine. If our political leaders had spiked their worldview with a dose of irony after 9/11, perhaps they'd have sensed blunders in the making. How ironic, then, is a war on terror that produces more terrorists. Or U.S. officials' depriving people of rights and liberties to prove that America is a bulwark of democracy.

In fact, it's the "critical tool" of irony that can help address the societal ills for which irony is often blamed: selfishness, civic apathy, hypocrisy, self-absorption, the loss of "our sense of proportion and self-restraint and humility." Magill's "big,

happy irony family"—which encompasses the ways we "express intentions through language [that] are frequently askew of their literal meaning"—includes satire, so formidable in its power to scold while also amuse.

Magill draws a vital line between the thoughtful ironist and the sarcastic slacker. And he places the ironic citizen at odds not only with the religious conservative, but also with the cynic, who assumes the world is hopelessly "brutish" and who "has given up entirely on performing a social role." (The book's title plays off philosopher Peter Sloterdijk's observation that "chic bitterness" is the favored style of cynics just out for themselves.)

The ironist, by contrast, believes that society can be improved. To be effective, though, this reformer must remain true to self, shielded from phoniness by ironic detachment. As essayist Randolph Bourne wrote in 1913, "The ironist is ironical not because he does not care, but because he cares too much."

The mutual distrust between people who are ironic and people who are not is at least as old as Socrates, whose pretense to ignorance for the sake of revealing truth offended the forthright Aristotle. Magill deftly traces the evolution of intellectual thought about irony, parsing Kierkegaard, Hegel, Nietzsche, and others, and he mulls the achievements of some of the great practitioners of our day, including the ultra-self-reflexive author Dave Eggers and Stephen Colbert, creator of a pompous television alter ego. (Very little is said, though, about how blacks, Native Americans, and others have refined ironic humor to cope with injustice and skewer their oppressors.)

Magill does chronicle how both sensibilities—the one that seeks godly certitude, and the other that tweaks it—have been woven into America's intellectual DNA from the beginning. One grandson of the great colonial fire-and-brimstone preacher Jonathan Edwards was Timothy Dwight, a gifted political satirist. Two centuries before *The Onion* began publication, Philip Freneau was zinging Federalists with his own hilarious fake news stories. The ironic tradition

has been passed from Washington Irving to Mark Twain to Jon Stewart, and Magill declares, "Satire is again serious business."

But as Christopher Lasch noted two decades ago, the ironic stance is more defensive than proactive. It's the natural crouch of a person bombarded with lies in an over-commercialized public realm. If irony is hot again, does this signal that Magill's ideal ironists are on the march, their imaginations revved for political reform? Or has irony become merely a personal style of coping? What does it mean if everyone is in on the joke, but the joke is still on us?

—David Beers

HISTORY

A Road Trip Through History

IN THE YEAR BEFORE THE millennium, Dutch journalist Geert Mak traveled through Europe in a small van furnished with a mattress and a hotplate, on one of the world's most thoroughly depressing journeys. His lively yet erudite account of the continent's preceding century of wars, genocides, and gulags, and of its subsequent recovery, originally published in daily installments in the pages of Holland's *NRC Handelsblad* newspaper, has become a bestseller across Europe.

The chapter titles trace Mak's itinerary of grief and misery. He commemorates World War I at Ypres, Verdun, and Versailles, and World War II at Dunkirk, St. Petersburg, Vichy, Stalingrad, Monte Cassino, Dresden, and Auschwitz. To mark the 20-year truce between those two wars against German ambition he visits Guernica, Mussolini's birthplace at Predappio, Hitler's holiday spot in Berchtesgaden, and Winston Churchill's country house at Chartwell. At each stop Mak digs up historical documents, conducts interviews, and makes his own shrewd observations, producing a rumination that blends diary,

IN EUROPE:

Travels Through the Twentieth Century.

By Geert Mak. Translated by Sam Garrett. Pantheon. 876 pp. \$35

travelogue, and popular history.

In recalling the Cold War, Mak unaccountably avoids Yalta, scene of the 1945 meeting of Churchill, Joseph Stalin, and Franklin Roosevelt, where the contours of postwar Europe began to congeal. Instead, he visits the scenes of the three doomed revolts against Soviet domination—East Berlin in 1953, Budapest in 1956, and Prague in 1968—and then the Gdansk shipyards, site of the Polish Solidarity movement's formation, with happier results, in 1980. Then on to Chernobyl and Srebrenica and Sarajevo, where the history of Europe's suicidal 20th century comes full circle. In one of those coincidences too remarkable for anything but real life, the century of Euro-

pean disaster that began with the assassination of the Austrian archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo in 1914 ended in the 1990s with the Serbs' dreadful siege of that same city.

In the intervening years, Europe had changed beyond recognition. "European unification was—and is—above all a unique peace process," Mak writes. More than that, it has become an economic miracle, spreading prosperity along with peace wherever the paternalistic arm of the European Union bureaucracy may reach. In his travels of 1999, Mak was struck by the poverty of much of Eastern Europe as it underwent the transition from communist inefficiency. Seven years of growth later, the old Warsaw Pact lands are enjoying a boom. Having joined the European Union with a per capita income that was less than a third the EU average, these countries have incomes now above 60 percent of the average and rising fast.

In fact, today's Europeans live rather well. "Europe still cannot hold a candle to the dynamism, flexibility, and energy of American society," Mak notes, "but when it comes to quality of life the average citizen of the Old World—particularly its western regions—has quietly left his

A Dutch journalist gives a lively yet erudite account of Europe's 20th-century wars, genocides, and gulags, and of its subsequent recovery.