

in what was initially called “scientifiction.” (Hugo Gernsback first employed the term in 1926 for his magazine *Amazing Stories*. Later, after he lost control of that magazine and had to start another, he came up with “science fiction” in order to stake a fresh claim to the territory.)

Larbalestier organizes her book around chapter headings drawn from the work of one pioneering woman writer of SF, James Tiptree, Jr. (1915–87). You read that right. Although she was born Alice Bradley and lived much of her life under her married name, Alice Sheldon, she chose a nom de plume at the corner market—“I simply saw the name on some jam pots”—and used it for many years to conceal herself and her previous career as an experimental psychologist. During that time she wrote acclaimed and groundbreaking stories, among them “The Women Men Don’t See,” “Her Smoke Rose Up Forever,” and “Faithful to Thee, Terra, in Our Fashion,” which often carried off prestigious SF prizes such as the Nebula and the Hugo (named after Gernsback).

Since 1991, the James Tiptree, Jr., Memorial Award has recognized “fictional work that explores and expands the roles of women and men.” (Larbalestier herself has served as a judge.) Though you don’t have to be female to win, it helps; the prize has gone almost exclusively to women. If Larbalestier would ever like to play hooky from the stultifying academy and indulge her quite evident penchant for gender-bending SF, she might have a good shot at winning one. Nobody knows the intergalactic landscape better.

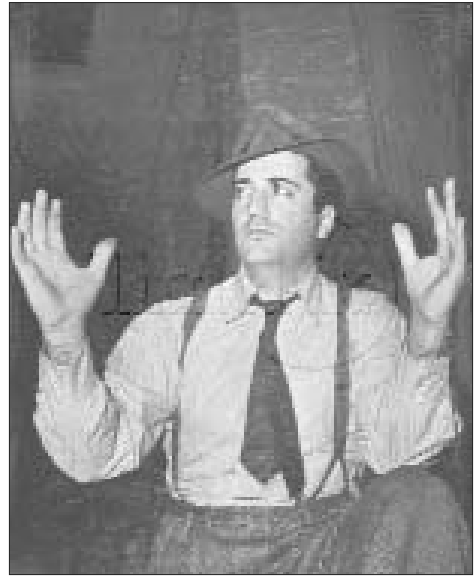
—ROBERT MASELLO

---

**A DARING YOUNG MAN:**  
*A Biography of William Saroyan.*

By John Leggett. Knopf. 462 pp. \$30

Bill Saroyan was somebody once—and never more so than in 1940, when he won the Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award for his play *The Time of Your Life*. Just 31 years old, the California-born son of Armenian immigrants was already known for several collections of fresh and appealing short stories, in particular *The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze* (1934). The stories celebrated life and life’s



*William Saroyan in 1940, directing rehearsals of his play, The Beautiful People.*

outsiders and the large heroism of little people in the face of adversity. Just the ticket for depression-worn America.

Saroyan was in the triumphant first stage of a writing career of boundless promise. He regularly believed that anything he wrote was great, and not just great but maybe the greatest thing he had ever written, and maybe the greatest thing of its kind in American literature. He had the same initials as Shakespeare, after all, and if he wasn’t on the road to greatness, it’s only because he had already arrived.

Well, he lived until 1981 and got to compete with his young self for four decades. He never stopped writing—stories, plays, memoirs, and novels, in staggering profusion and at blinding speed. He might do a story in two hours, a play in a week. Yet his early success proved a height from which the subsequent decades were mostly descent, professional and personal. The descent was sometimes precipitous and sometimes halting, and on occasion it was even reversed. At every stage it was self-propelled.

To the extent that he’s remembered at all today, Saroyan has a reputation as a sentimentalist, and that, says Leggett, is to misread not just the man but much of the work. In fact, the sentimentality of the early writing curdled into anger and resentment at the world’s all-too-frequent failure to share the author’s self-

regard, and, over the years, Saroyan “withdrew to the hermitage of his illusion, where even his children became part of the conspiracy threatening his immortality.”

In this new biography, which draws heavily on a journal Saroyan kept from 1934 until his death, the writer is an unappealing figure. Leggett, a novelist himself and the author of *Ross and Tom* (1974), an exemplary nonfiction account of the perils of literary success in America, has to explain up front why he nonetheless identifies with Saroyan: “because he found that being a writer lifted him out of obscurity and the scorn of family and friends. He also found that self-reliance, the dependence on his own mind and heart to find his way, was the only reliable compass.” In Leggett’s telling, Saroyan’s story, “so gallantly begun, becomes a tragedy of rage and rejection.”

Which may understate the matter. The accumulation of sad and incriminating (and, finally, trivial and wearisome) detail about Saroyan in these pages—the selfishness, the envy, the arrogance, the suspicion, the ingratitude, the hunger for money, the haggling for money, the irresponsibility with money, the body blows dealt love and friendship—keeps you reading all right, the way a highway accident keeps you looking. It also has you asking, with increasing frequency, Why did anyone put up with this man? And why did publishers continue to want to publish him when he offered them work of embarrassingly low quality?

Leggett omits the evidence that might have answered the questions and tempered the portrait. There are no pages, or even paragraphs, from Saroyan’s work, though time and again the book calls for them and even whets your appetite: “[Saroyan] had an ear for the rhythm, sonority, and sensuality of colloquial speech. He had an eye for the precisely right detail that revealed an emotion, a desire, an anxiety. Although a man stoutly opposed to his own formal education, his aim for the bull’s-eye word was a marksman’s.” Where the revelatory, and perhaps redeeming, passages of Saroyan’s prose might appear, there is only additional damning detail. The omission, surely intentional, is astonishing in a biography of a man whose only reason to be was to write. Saroyan

careens through triumph and failure and emotional disarray, and we watch. But we wait in vain to hear.

—JAMES MORRIS

---

*WHY A PAINTING  
IS LIKE A PIZZA:  
A Guide to Understanding  
and Enjoying Modern Art.*

By Nancy Heller. Princeton Univ. Press.

192 pp. \$29.95 hardcover, \$19.95 paper

When Morley Safer made fun of contemporary art in a notorious (at least in the art world) 1993 broadcast of *60 Minutes*, his scorn liberated thousands of people to say out loud what they had long thought. To wit: A child of five could do that; art ought to be beautiful; and, as Al Capp put it, “abstract art is a product of the untalented, sold by the unprincipled to the utterly bewildered.”

A professor of art history at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, Heller wants to persuade the bewildered that the emperor of contemporary art does in fact have clothes—confusing and abstract clothes, but clothes nonetheless. She realizes that people dislike contemporary art because it makes them feel stupid, so she shies away from the conceptual in favor of formal aspects that everyone can appreciate: color, material, composition, and the like.

Pointing out that Monet’s technique, beloved today, once was reviled by critics and viewers, she demystifies the aesthetic choices and technical skills behind such works as Gene Davis’s stripe paintings and Robert Ryman’s all-white ones. She does a terrific job dissecting the brouhaha over the *Sensation* exhibit at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in 1999, when Mayor Rudolph Giuliani fomented outrage over Chris Ofili’s elephant-dung-dotted portrait of the Virgin Mary. She also shows how installation art can recast our perspective on the objects and spaces of ordinary life. She admits to having been duped into thinking that a bronze plaque by Jenny Holzer was “real,” and not a piece of art. “After this discovery, I felt somewhat foolish,” she writes, “but ever since then I find myself looking far more carefully at every bronze plaque I pass.”

Yet for all her jargon-free charm, Heller is unlikely to convince the Morley Safers. In