

## Arts & Letters

### FRANCIS BACON: *Anatomy of an Enigma.*

By Michael Peppiatt. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. 384 pp. \$30

"I have had the most extraordinary life," the British painter Francis Bacon once remarked to his biographer, Michael Peppiatt. "The life is more extraordinary than the paintings." Quite so. Bacon (1909–92) is conventionally viewed as one of



the greatest artists of the 20th century. But his ironic pronouncement on his own life and work has a way of echoing through the pages of even this sympathetic biography.

If Bacon's canvases seem to be populated by mere slabs of meat, his most intimate relationships suggest why. To Peppiatt's credit, he provides glimpses of Bacon's turbulent and bloody sexual adventures, most of which had all the romance of a gruesome bare-knuckled boxing match, without indulging in prurient sensationalism. Though his prose lacks the vigor and lowlife relish of John Lahr's study of that other homosexual extrovert, the playwright Joe Orton, Peppiatt diligently outlines the philosophical and erotic impulses that nourished (if that is the right word) Bacon's impossibly bleak vision.

The editor of *Art International*, Peppiatt has the advantage of having been for 30 years part of Bacon's notoriously broad social circle. (Even by the standards of bohemia, the painter moved in mixed company; as Peppiatt notes, here was a man who would

dine with a duke before going off to be beaten by a bruiser.) And while it is obvious that Peppiatt remains an unabashed admirer, he seldom lapses into hyperbole or opaque curator-speak.

Given the paucity of documentary evidence—Bacon appears to have preferred saloon conversation to letterwriting—the book persuasively hints at such formative experiences as a disastrous relationship with a distant upper-class father and a youthful foray into the sexual maelstrom of Weimar Berlin. Pablo Picasso was a dominant artistic influence, but Bacon also found inspiration in a less likely source: Nicolas Poussin's *Massacre of the Innocents* (1626–28).

How will Bacon's work fare with posterity? As might be expected, Peppiatt regards him as a modern master. More revealing is Peppiatt's quotation from a 40-year-old review by another of Bacon's champions, the distinguished critic David Sylvester: "Many of the things that make Bacon exciting today may render him laughable for future generations." Five years after his death, Bacon's reputation still stands, especially in France. But for how much longer? Despite its scholarship and reasoned advocacy, this book may ultimately be most valuable for the light it throws on the spiritual exhaustion of the mid-20th century.

—Clive Davis

### THE HUNDRED THOUSAND FOOLS OF GOD: *Musical Travels in Central Asia (and Queens, New York).*

By Theodore Levin. Indiana University Press. 318 pp. \$35

If you are not familiar with the city of Tashkent, Levin will guide you through the crooked streets of the Muslim Old City, the broad avenues of the 19th-century Russian quarter ("planned with colonialist precision"), the featureless vistas of the Soviet zone ("creeping out like a fungus"), and finally "the new Uzbek Tashkent," where "the Uzbek *nouveaux riches* try to outdo one another" in grand houses that nonetheless have outdoor privies and, in a surrealistic touch, are modelled on "the mansions in the immensely popular Mexican soap opera, 'The Rich Also Cry.'"