

divide between monogamous and promiscuous."

But her argument about choice fails to acknowledge that heterosexuals do not freely choose to marry as long as their families, peers and other cultural, economic and legal institutions validate only marriage, and neither will lesbians and gay men once that "choice" becomes available to them. And her equation of opposition to marriage with promiscuity is off the mark. Unmarried couples (like the one I'm in) may choose monogamy. Married couples may choose promiscuity. The issue is whether a state-created and -sanctioned institution should exist to exalt one type of relationship above all others, for all purposes, with far-reaching legal and economic consequences.

Graff clearly supports the existence of such an institution: a chapter on "Order" explains the role of marriage in deciding about the allocation of society's resources and the enforcement of private rights and obligations. She argues that the law should recognize "the single most important relationship that human beings throughout history have had: the one in which we share our bodies and our daily lives."

Graff's exhaustive review convincingly demonstrates that there is nothing new in today's opposition to same-sex marriage. Allowing women to hold property, legalizing contraception, permitting interracial marriage, granting legal equality to wives and allowing divorce have all been viewed as changing the very definition of marriage. And they have.

[D]efine marriage as a lifetime commitment, and divorce flouts its very definition. Define marriage as a vehicle for legitimate procreation, and contraception violates that definition. Define marriage as a complete union of economic interests, and allowing women to own property divides the family into warring and immoral bits. Define marriage as a bond between one man and one woman, and same-sex marriage is absurd. But define marriage as a commitment to live up to the rigorous demands of love, to care for each other as best as you humanly can, then all these possibilities—divorce, contraception, feminism, marriage between two women or two men—are necessary to respect the human spirit. (p. 252)

And it is the refreshing of the human spirit—what Graff calls the most spiritual purpose of marriage—that marriage in Western democratic society is ultimately about. On those grounds, she can easily conclude that same-sex couples "belong."

In spite of my aggravation with Graff's relentless defense of marriage, this is an important book. It reminds me of Stephanie Coontz' 1992 book, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, a readable history of the family life we obscure when we select the white, middle-class, American family of the 1950s and call it "traditional." Both writers provide vital ammunition in the cultural and political battles over "family values" by making "the family" and "marriage" into complicated historical phenomena, rebutting the over-simplified, often inaccurate and usually patriarchal claims of the radical Right. Read both books. But for an inquiry into whether marriage should be stripped of its centrality as a legal institution, readers will have to look elsewhere. Martha Fineman would be a good start. ♦♦♦

Writing for her life

by Susan Koppelman

Fannie: The Talent for Success of Writer Fannie Hurst, by Brooke Kroeger. New York: Times Books, 1999, 400 pp., \$27.50 hardcover.

FEW EARS PERK UP at the sound of Fannie Hurst's name these days. Ah, but things used to be very, very different. Once, that name headlined across the cover of *Cosmopolitan* guaranteed a sold-out issue.

Hurst (1885-1968), promoted as the highest paid short story writer in the world, earned enormous amounts of money for her writing, both in the United States, where she lived and shaped her brilliant career, and in more than a dozen countries where her eight volumes of short stories and eighteen novels appeared in translation. When she went to interview the leader of the Russian people in 1924, Leon Trotsky greeted her by quoting from memory long passages of her 1923 novel *Lummo*.

Always Hurst's favorite of her own novels, this story of an inarticulate domestic worker whose labor and sexuality were exploited and whose child was stolen became a movie in 1930. It was the stuff of a Zola or Maupassant. In it, as in so many of her short stories, Fannie Hurst gave a voice to a class of silenced American women—poor and working-class, minimally educated, multi-ethnic white women. Their voices were as unfamiliar to the literary establishment of her day as the voices of the rural villagers popularized by the regional writers of the previous century. When *Lummo* was published, Hurst was already a commercial, popular success, but *Lummo* brought her literary critical acclaim as well.

Now, once again, Fannie Hurst is getting serious attention. I convened what was probably the first academic panel on Fannie Hurst at the annual conference of the Midwest Modern Language Association in the mid-seventies. Other panels followed at conferences of the National Women's Studies Association and the Popular and American Culture Associations. Simultaneously, scholars in Jewish American literature and film studies discovered Hurst.

Why? Because this German-Jewish-American writer offered promising opportunities for scholars seiferted with Philip Roth's misogyny, Bernard Malamud's mystical melancholy, or Saul Bellow's introspective journeys. In film studies, "women's films" and "ghetto films" became the focus of intense inquiry. The 32 films made from Fannie Hurst's stories and novels include the thrice filmed novel *Back Street* (1931) and the twice filmed *Imitation of Life* (1933), and two powerful ghetto short stories: the twice filmed "Hunoresque" (1919) and "The Gold in Fish" (1925), transformed into Frank Capra's 1929 *The Younger Generation*.

In the quarter-century preceding the publication of Brooke Kroeger's *Fannie: The Talent for Success of Writer Fannie Hurst*, increasing attention from the scholarly world yielded several dissertations and literary biographies, the "Fannie Hurst Newsletter" and inclusion of Hurst's short stories in several anthologies. Reprints of two of her novels appeared—and disappeared: *Imitation of Life* and *Lummo* (with an introduction by the remarkable Alice Childress). And finally, we have a first major biography of Fannie Hurst.

Journalist Brooke Kroeger has carried out original and corrective biographical research, organizing Hurst's story into a fast-paced narrative. So often taken for granted as being "what a biographer ought to do," the quality of research is seldom commented on in discussions of biographies. But Hurst was a master of the art of hiding out in the open. The "cover story" of the celebrity Fannie Hurst was of a middle-class girl from a loving, stable, financially comfortable family who raised their only daughter on Cates Avenue in St. Louis. Kroeger separates the facts of Hurst's life from 75 years of details deliberately obscured, misrepresented and, finally, reworked in Hurst's ultimate meta-story—her 1958 autobiography, *Anatomy of Me*.



On *Thinking Out Loud*, Fannie's radio program for the NBC Blue Network, 1942. From *Fannie*.

fansson (and why, ultimately, she broke off the affair with this adoring man, reputed to have been a superbly competent lover) is revealed for the first time.

Her many friendships with creative, politically astute and active, professionally groundbreaking feminists are given even more space than the relationships with Jack and Stef. The chief legacy of the affair with Stef was his introduction of Fannie to the woman who was to be her best friend: Ruth Bryan Owens, sometime congressional candidate, public speaker and political power broker, the dynamic daughter of William Jennings Bryan. Hurst also counted Eleanor Roosevelt among her dear friends. A staunch supporter of the Roosevelts and the New Deal, Hurst was often a guest at the White House, able to claim that she had slept in every bedroom there except the presidential suite. Her long friendships with Rebecca West and Zona Gale are explored. The timeline and details of her controversial relationship with Zora Neale Hurston, of whom Hurst was an early patron, are carefully recreated, although Kroeger takes no sides in the debate over whether and which one of them was using the other.

Despite her life-long effort to project her own shapely persona on the screen of the public mind, Fannie Hurst's voice was nearly lost to us. Kroeger has done the primary job of a first biographer: she has located those still living who knew Hurst and she has interviewed them skillfully and at length. One of the most detailed sections of the book covers the four years during which Ethel Rabinowitz Amateek, a 21-year-old when she was hired in 1936, was Hurst's secretary. But Kroeger's most remarkable achievement on behalf of Fannie Hurst is to establish her during her time and for ours, as a major guide to key social movements, persons and trends of her time:

Fannie's... life epitomized what was exciting, important, and forward-thinking about her times. Fannie Hurst was a human nexus of creativity, success, and powerful access to everyone who mattered. She was usually at the forefront on matters of vital national, local, or humanitarian concern... To lead a stranger through the first half of the twentieth century in gritty and glamorous New York, there is no better hand than Fannie's. (p. xv)

Kroeger names her chapters with the titles of particular Hurst stories and novels. The history of their publication and reception—from *Cosmo*'s exclusive and



Fannie in the 1920s. From *Fannie*.

Who was this remarkably successful woman who came "east, young writer," migrating with a suitcase filled with manuscripts, dreams and not much else?

FANNIE HURST'S DREAMS became reality. She Made It Big! Hurst understood how the right "back story" of her life would help sell her books. (Young heroine goes to the big city and conquers the world. "New York, New York—if I can make it there, I can make it anywhere.") Kroeger has peeled away the Sheherezadian facade and given us our first clear glimpse of the real Fannie Hurst: a young woman from an emotionally troubled, financially unstable family uncomfortable with their Jewish identity, struggling as second- and third-generation Americans with assimilation.

Kroeger also pieces together the details of Hurst's professional success, including how much she was paid for various stories, her serialized and then published novels, film rights, lectures, reprint rights and radio and TV shows. She delves into Hurst's most important adult relationships. The secrets of her unconventional marriage to Jacques Danielson, a Russian Jewish immigrant musician and her financial manager of 37 years, are unraveled. Her sixteen-year affair with the famous Arctic explorer Vilhjalmur Ste-



Fannie during the war years. From *Fannie*.

lucrative contract for her stories, to their inclusion in Edward O'Brien's *Best American Short Stories* annuals, to audience responses via letters and reviews, to the filming of them—form the structural skeleton of this biography. And the dozen-plus stories she chooses to focus on are ones that scholars find increasingly admirable and provocative.

BUT KROEGER'S ATTITUDE towards Hurst and her literary work wavers. She is not always sure she likes either the woman or the writing. Kroeger succeeds at separating the myths about the celebrity from the truths about the woman, but she doesn't separate herself from the harsh judgments of Hurst's work, which were rooted in contempt for much we have since learned to value: the voices of urban working women in the world of retail trade, sex workers, and the first and second generations of eastern European Jewish immigrants. Hurst's immigrant generations struggle with assimilation; their emotional and interpersonal behavior is linked to an ethic and an ethnicity foreign to and rejected by the dominant Protestant white northeastern upper-middle class. WASP ideas of propriety influenced which lives and stories "deserved" to be the subject of literature; the ethnic opinions of this dominant group were enforced by their literary gatekeepers; consequently, Hurst's literary merit was denied.

Kroeger does not always distance herself from the harsh judgments of those

who continue to dismiss Hurst as a "Sob Sister," although unlike those detractors she knows that "Sob Sister" (1916) is the title of one of her most acclaimed short stories. This heart-wrenching exposé of the last desperate days of a sex worker, thrown out on the street when the man who has kept her for years decides to marry a "good" girl, transforms the "whore with the heart of gold" from a cliché into a tragedy.

Kroeger introduces the sensitive issue of Hurst's personal struggle with internalized anti-Semitism, placing it in the context of her background and her times, but she does not judge it. She allows Hurst the final word on this subject:

"Generations of the hunted and driven seemed to rise in me; a cold resentment toward the world that had driven them, mixed with a sense of humiliation at belonging to an unwanted people.... I hold no brief for that fact that I was one of those for whom it took a Hitler to blast out of regarding the Jew and his problems objectively," she confessed... But in Israel... [s]eizing the "tribal men and women out of Yemen and the long-eyed Sephardic Jews... [t]he homeland to which they had returned, it came to me as if up from the Biblical soil: These are my people, and Mama and Papa and I from Cafes Avenue in St. Louis are their people." (pp. 334-335)

Hurst's life, as well as many of her short stories, provides fascinating evidence of twentieth-century North America's increasingly maniacal obsession with women's embodiment. Much of her early unhappiness had to do with her youthful plumpness. Her mid-life discovery of a high-protein, low-carbohydrate diet, obsessive dieting, subsequent weight loss, and hiring of a personal trainer (all reminiscent of Oprah's saga) became subject matter for public consumption: in 1935 she wrote a small book about it, *No Food With My Meals*. As with Hurst's internalized anti-Semitism, Kroeger locates the evidence and records it: she doesn't editorialize.

The absence of interpretation in this biography, in combination with the breadth of information and factual revelation, is a gift to us. Kroeger does not take advantage of her role as first biographer to impose interpretations that will forever have to be addressed by future biographers. Having assembled the facts and unraveled the prejudices and mythologies about her subject's life, she weaves a layered and engaging yarn that should bring Hurst the serious new attention she deserves. ♦♦

Very popular culture

by Shannon Jackson

Rank Ladies: Gender and Cultural Hierarchy in American Vaudeville, by M. Alison Kibler. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1999, 304 pp., \$45.00 hardcover, \$16.95 paper.

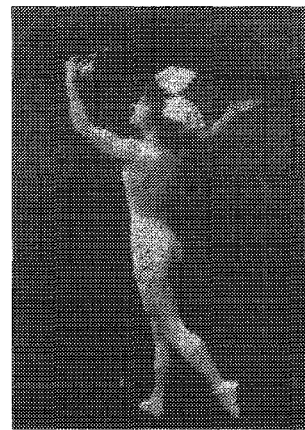
Ziegfeld Girl: Image and Icon in Culture and Cinema, by Linda Mizejewski. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999, 241 pp., \$49.95 hardcover, \$17.95 paper.

THE LANGUAGE USED to express anxieties about women is inventively broad, surprisingly malleable and unselfconsciously contradictory. So, too, is the language used to express anxieties about the stage. Consequently, figures of femininity and figures of theatricality often appear in tandem, each used to describe or to condemn the other in a convenient and obfuscating tautology. Theatre is feminine; women are theatrical. Both are artificial, decorative and emotional. Both manage simultaneously to be excessive and constrained, overly secretive and overly indiscreet. Both are scandalously cheap and impossibly high-priced; both are copied derivatives of a (masculine) original. Both are bad for you; both are good for you.

Such competing associations are quite resilient and variously useful, even as they assume different shapes and dimensions with the pace of historical change. For both M. Alison Kibler and Linda Mizejewski, the United States from the late nineteenth century into and through the early twentieth provides a wonderful illustration of that fact. This period felt the effects of rapid industrialization, increased immigration and a rising consumer economy. These transformations propelled and were propelled by a reorganization of work and leisure, itself a phenomenon that intersected with changing conceptions of women's place in domestic and public spheres.

In this thorny network of structural and psychic displacement, American cultural historians have manufactured an oft-repeated story, one that laments the destruction of a masculinized popular vaudeville culture both by an encroaching feminized morality and paradoxically by an encroaching feminized mass culture. Together, *Rank Ladies* and *Ziegfeld Girl* suggest that this two-pronged story could do with a little revision.

Alison Kibler's study enters earlier chronologically, unsettling received ideas about vaudeville by looking for women and reading for gender. As her subtitle suggests, Kibler particularly wants to show how the highs and lows of popular



Ruth Budd, circa 1916. From *Rank Ladies*.

culture ride with and upon a host of gendered metaphors. Focusing on the records of the Keith circuit—one of the largest chains of vaudeville theatres in the United States—Kibler documents efforts to attract women in order to manufacture theatrical "respectability." Vaudeville managers ostensibly cleaned up scandalous routines and eliminated vulgar acts in order to appeal to the moral temperament of women both on and offstage.

Kibler demonstrates, however, that these sanitizing efforts were always uneven and ambivalent and that the story of vaudeville's capitulation to "female censorship" is something of a myth. Rather than reproducing the image of a monolithically vulgar, masculine audience on the one hand and a monolithically moral female audience on the other, Kibler argues that vaudeville was most often a complex and hybrid social form where members of different groups experimented with a range of identifications.

With women cheering on boxing matches, "hoi polloi" paying attention


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