

THE ART OF ALIENATION

ARTIST EDWARD HOPPER MIRRORED MODERN SOCIETY'S DETACHED LONELINESS IN HIS PAINTINGS, PERSONALITY

"Edward Hopper: An Intimate Biography"

By Gail Levin

Alfred A. Knopf, \$35, 678 pp.

Review by Edward J. Sozanski

The painter Edward Hopper is regarded as a great American realist, in the tradition of Thomas Eakins and Winslow Homer. Yet a close examination of his paintings indicates that in his case, realism refers mostly to his language of description, not to what he described.

Throughout his career, Hopper edited his daily observations and experiences to create visions of America that are primarily expressions of his feelings and enthusiasms rather than commentaries on American life. He was not a social realist like John Sloan. The implied narratives in his paintings are inventions, not transcriptions.

Hopper was a painter of light, of silence, of space, of alienation, of repressed erotic tension. He had an eye for architecture, but no interest in ordinary human activity. He lived in cities all his life, but his art rarely conveyed any concrete sense of 20th-century urbanity.

The real subject of Hopper's art is Hopper himself. The body of his work constitutes a collective self-portrait of his obsessions, his personality, and his responses to natural phenomena. His paintings confirm that Hopper was a quintessential puritan, as the philosopher George Santayana defined the term.

In her splendid new biography of Hopper, Gail Levin offers this observation from Santayana's 1935 novel "The Last Puritan":

Describing a character in the book, Santayana writes: "His puritanism was a deep and speculative thing: hatred of all shams, scorn of all the mummies, a bitter merciless pleasure in the hard facts. And that passion for reality was beautiful in him."

As Levin recounts, Hopper lived his entire life as we expect a puritan might. From 1913 until he died in 1967, two months shy of his 85th birthday, his home was a rented fourth-floor walk-up on Washington Square in Greenwich Village. It was 74 steps up from the street. Until 1961, he relied on a coal stove for heat and cooking; coal had to be hauled up from the basement.

In 1934, he built a summer house at Truro on Cape Cod. That house wasn't electrified until 1954. Hopper was a thrifty soul, and apparently he could get along without refrigeration and lights.

His art isn't as straightforward as it appears to be. Levin uncovers its sources and its agenda in the artist's personality and experiences. The genesis of each major painting is noted and explained. After a while, his method of living and working assumes a logical symmetry.

Hopper doesn't waste effort on any activity that isn't related to his art. He

See **HOPPER** on **PAGE I-10**



LEVIN: A "puritan" character

Painter's work inspires collection of poetry

"The Poetry of Solitude, A Tribute to Edward Hopper"

Poems collected and introduced by Gail Levin

Universe Publishing, \$17.95, 80 pp.

Review by David Steinberg

American realist Edward Hopper has cast a long shadow on painting.

But he has also had an abiding influence on American writing in the 20th century,

witness this collection of poetry.

Thirty poets are in this anthology gathered by Hopper scholar Gail Levin, and it is no surprise that the artist's 1942 painting "Nighthawks" has drawn attention from four of the writers.

The subject of the painting is one of Hopper's most recognizable, most moving, most introspective and perhaps the most alienating.

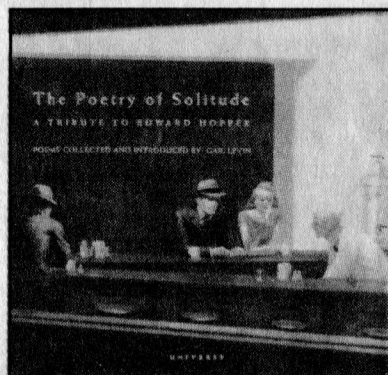
Here's the scene. Streets cool, untrodden by car tires, sidewalks untouched by shoe leather. A late-night diner for coffee drinkers. The talk, if any, hushed, brief.

Let some of the poets give their own vivid impressions and interpretations of the work.

David Ray's 1970 poem "A Midnight Diner by Edward Hopper" focuses on the man sitting alone at the counter. Ray writes, "He's sought the smoothest counter in the world/And found it here in the almost empty street./Away from everything he has ever said."

Joyce Carol Oates' 1989 prose/poem "Hopper's 'Nighthawks'" considers a presumed relationship between the man and

See **PAINTINGS** on **PAGE I-10**



today at Hastings Superstore.

Judyth Hill of Santa Fe. PBS's "The Language of Life with Bill Moyers" returns Sundays starting at 11 a.m.

lectures on "Making Peace — A Creative Process: The Arts and Activism" 2:30 p.m. today at the Unitarian Church,

hosting a performance at 1:30 p.m. today of "Bubbe Meises, A Celebration of the Jewish Short Story," by local

his new book "Chapultepec" 4 p.m. Saturday at Garcia Street Books, 376 Garcia St., Santa Fe.

Hopper biography demonstrates art of alienation

from PAGE I-12

was a dour, uncommunicative and undemonstrative person — one might even say a misanthrope — who avoided human contact whenever possible. The alienation and loneliness that many see in his paintings come from within.

A recent exhibition of Hopper's paintings at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York advanced the notion that Hopper painted the alienation of 20th century industrial society. There is evidence in Levin's biography to confirm his antipathy to progress. His city pictures never show a skyline, or skyscrapers. The views of drugstores, diners and offices could be set in a Midwestern town.

But there is even more evidence that the emotional detachment that characterizes so many of his pictures reflects his own cramped personality. The most convincing proof of this connection lies in his relationship with his devoted but despairing wife, Josephine Nivison.

son.

Hopper didn't marry until he was nearly 42. He doesn't appear to have had much intimate contact with women before marriage, as poor Nivison would discover.

The female artist who sacrifices her career to her husband's used to be a familiar phenomenon. Nivison was the archetype of this long-suffering type. She had been an artist before she met Hopper, but after their marriage she struggled continually and unsuccessfully to maintain her identity.

As Levin recounts, it wasn't only that the art establishment ignored women artists, especially the wives of painters. It was that Hopper himself squelched her ambition at every opportunity. He denigrated her work and monopolized whatever studio space they had. Their Truro house, which they built, had only one studio — his.

The story of the Hoppers' tempestuous marriage is the parallel text of Levin's biography. Much of her narrative is drawn from Nivison's

diaries. His progress is always tied to Nivison's struggles to assert herself and gain some respect. Rarely was she successful, even when it came to their car. Hopper wouldn't let her drive.

Women of the '90s will marvel that she put up with his outrageous chauvinism and cruelty for 43 years, not to mention the coal stove, the kerosene lamps, and the 74 steps. Nivison's diaristic testimony indicates she believed in her husband's greatness, and after a while came to see herself as his collaborator — she posed for all the women in his paintings.

One has little doubt after reading Levin's account that Hopper was indeed a painter to be ranked with Bakins and Homer. And the reader is gratified to discover that in one of his last major paintings, a picture of a costumed couple taking their bows after a performance, he finally acknowledged her contribution.

Edward J. Szanski is the Philadelphia Inquirer's art critic.



PRIVATE COLLECTION

HOPPER SKETCH: "Le Reve de Josie" is a 1936 pencil on paper that's a caricature of himself

Paintings inspire poets

from PAGE I-12

woman sitting together at the counter:

"... she's contemplating a cigarette in her right hand thinking her companion has finally left his wife but can she trust him? Her heavy-lidded eyes, pouty lipsticked mouth, she has the redhead's true pallor like skim milk, damned good-looking and she guesses she knows it but what exactly has it gotten her so far, and where? ..."

Ira Sadoff's 1975 poem "Hopper's 'Nighthawks'" views the painting in the context of an unnamed city.

"Imagine a town where no one walks the streets. Where the sidewalks are swept clean as ceilings and the barber

'Rice' a compelling tale of one man's rise in China

"Rice"

By Su Tong, translated by Howard Goldblatt

William Morrow, \$23, 266 pp.

Review by Mark I. Pinsky

Before the 1949 Communist revolution, rural Chinese who embraced Western religions were often referred to as "rice Christians," implying that the sustenance they sought from missionaries was more nutritional than spiritual.

Such charges were understandable. For millennia in China, rice was life: Dynasties that could fill storehouses survived; those that couldn't respond quickly enough to floods and droughts and the resulting famines did not.

"Rice," a compelling first novel by Su Tong (whose novella "Rice

young man, leaving him surrounded by substance that fuels his existence:

"Five Dragons's head drooped; he was getting drowsy. Oddly, he didn't feel like leaving the store-room. Resting against the mound of rice was like lying in a big cradle. Rice must be the best sleeping potion in the world, he sensed, certainly more effective than a woman's body. And it was right there beneath him."

Su Tong's tale recalls the gritty, desolate realism of two of the masters of early 20th-century Chinese literature: Lu Xun, the beloved author of "The True Story of Ah Q."; and Lao She, who wrote "Rickshaw Boy" and "Teahouse."

"Rice" follows Five Dragons as he struggles ruthlessly from survival to domination at the rice

emporium — largely through his liaisons with both Feng daughters — and beyond. Life remains precarious, and the threadbare social fabric is easily frayed. At one point, pirates needlessly drown a man hired for a pittance to watch over a shipment of rice, sending the hapless guard to "Yellow Springs," the Chinese hereafter:

"The spirits of countless wronged people descend to the Yellow Springs during wars, rebellions, and famines. Stupid people. Five Dragons would not be among them. To him nothing was more important than life itself, unless it was improving the quality of that life. I'm not stupid, he reminded himself."

There is more sex in "Rice" than one normally expects from a Chinese novel, some of it brutalizing

rather than sensual. The translation, by Howard Goldblatt, is colloquial but not jarringly so. For two nights, he and Su Tong kept me awake, drawing me back to the surviving alleys and courtyards of Beijing I knew as a resident more than a decade ago.

It is one of the anomalies of China under the present dynasty that fiction set before the 1949 revolution is virtually immune from government criticism, as long as it does not deal directly with shortcomings of the Communist Party. If Su Tong continues to look back, he has a bright — and safe — future.

This review appeared in the Orlando Sentinel.

Crossword solution