

ST. LOUIS POST-DISPATCH

Prolific reviewer Myron Marty closes his books

By Sarah Bryan Miller
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Myron "Mike" Marty didn't set out to be a book reviewer, but he's retiring as one of the best – and most prolific – ever to write for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

His first critique, in 1967, was a favor for the book editor of *The Christian Century* magazine. "The book editor happened to be my brother," the Lutheran religious scholar Martin Marty. "The first one was a terrible book; the next was a good one."

A couple of years later, while Marty was teaching at Florissant Valley Community College, someone gave his name to Clarence E. Olson, then the Post-Dispatch's book editor.

"In December of 1969, I wrote a review of a not-very-good book," Marty says. "Then he sent me another, and another."

Marty went from nine reviews a year to 13 to 16 to 24. He often covered more than one book in a single critique, which is how he can claim a total of 475 reviews of 571 books for the Post-Dispatch. He's also written an additional 100 reviews or so for other publications.

"It's sort of my calling to be a reviewer," Marty says.

He is the only reviewer to have covered all eight volumes of the collected papers of the late senator and presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson. He's also the only one to have reviewed all four volumes of Robert Caro's history of Lyndon Baines

Johnson, published from 1990 to May of this year. "He will have a fifth one," Marty says, "but I won't review it."

Jane Henderson, the Post-Dispatch's book editor since 1992, says, "I doubt there are very many reviewers, especially for daily newspapers, who have reviewed long enough to have written about every one of those Caro books. His depth of knowledge, the fair way he approaches books, are rare, I think, in newspaper reviews. We have been so lucky to have him writing for us."

Marty, 80, was born in 1932 in West Point, Neb., the youngest of the three children. He married his wife, Shirley, in 1954; they have four children, four granddaughters and five grandsons.

A LIFE IN ACADEMIA

Marty made his career in academia, with advanced degrees from Washington University and St. Louis University.

Now retired, he started his teaching career at St. Louis' Lutheran High School Central, went on to Florissant Valley Community College and then worked at the National Endowment for the Humanities. He moved on to Drake University in Des Moines, Iowa, where he taught and served as dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and director of the School of Fine Arts.

Although Marty wrote assorted articles and a half-dozen books, notably on architect Frank Lloyd Wright, during his academic career "it was hard to find the time to do scholarly research and scholarly writing. I enjoyed the challenge of reviewing books."

Reviewers have their beats, just like other writers. Marty's was American history and American politics, with an occasional diversion to review books on education. In the world of academia, "book reviewing is not respected," he says. "I did it because I enjoyed it." He typically devoted Sunday afternoons to it; when his wife was asked why, she replied, "Some people like to go fishing on Sundays."

Shirley Marty has edited the drafts of most of his books, and was co-author of one. "One writer's advice on writing," Marty notes, "is to marry an English major. I did."

A REVIEWER'S APPROACH

Early in his reviewing career, Marty took note of the foreword to a book by the late American revisionist historian William Appleman Williams. Williams, unhappy with

reviews of the first edition, argued that the responsibility of writers and readers is to engage in a dialogue about the book.

“The reviewer’s responsibility is to assist the reader in dealing with the author’s thesis, and the way he or she lays out the book, without getting in the way,” Marty says. “That’s what I’ve tried to follow, to connect the author with the reader in the best possible way.”

The reviews Marty dislikes are the ones that say, “This is the wrong book; the author should have written this one instead.’ I always try to take the book the author has written.

“The first thing I look for is the author’s thesis, what he’s trying to show. Then, (I ask) how well did he do that? I tip the reader and give some help in trying to find the thesis. Sometimes there’s a good idea that didn’t get carried out as well as it should have been.”

Asked about recent trends in publishing, Marty doesn't find much to celebrate. As university presses close or find themselves on the ropes, he says, fewer books are available that interest him.

He finds progress in the world of Abraham Lincoln studies (he's reviewed 30 Lincoln books for the Post-Dispatch since 2000), with good writers taking advantage of new documents and other resources that weren't available even 20 years ago.

Still, the rise of self-publishing and the waning of the university press has led to a decline in overall scholarship, Marty believes. “The market is flooded with self-published books, some very good and some not so good.” Self-published books usually have little or no editing, to say nothing of fact-checking or peer review, and that's not a good thing for works of erudition.

It may be an indication of Marty’s gentlemanly approach to his work that he says he only received one really hostile letter from an author whose book he reviewed, from a woman whose book dealt with her transition from urban to rural life.

Marty has one more bit of advice for would-be reviewers: “You always have to keep the potential reader of the book in mind. You can’t read it just as you would read it; you have to go at it as if a variety of people will read it.”

Reviewing was his hobby at first. “Then it became an addiction, and the Post-Dispatch kept feeding it.”

For the first time since 1969, he doesn’t have any books on hand to be reviewed. But not to worry: “I’ve got a stack of books that I’m going to read just because I want to read them.”

Marty recommends six books of lasting value

“A World on Fire: Britain’s Crucial Role in the American Civil War” (Random House, 2010), by Amanda Foreman • “This book tells a big-picture story of the Civil War by weaving together vignettes of people who played significant roles in it, some of them previously unrecognized.”

“Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America’s Struggle for Equality” (Knopf, 1976), by Richard Kluger • “Thirty-six years after its publication, I recall how deeply moved I was when I read and reviewed it.”

“The Past is a Foreign Country” (Cambridge, 1985) by David Lowenthal • “In my teaching years I needed help in moving my students to a new understanding of history; this book provided it.”

“Truman” and **“John Adams”** (Simon & Schuster, 1992 and 2002) by David McCullough • “My students at Drake had the memorable experience of hearing the author describe, in a classroom setting, how he approached researching and writing these biographies.”

“A. Lincoln: A Biography” (Random House, 2009) by Ronald C White Jr. • “This is the best single-volume biography of Lincoln to appear since David Donald’s in 1995.”