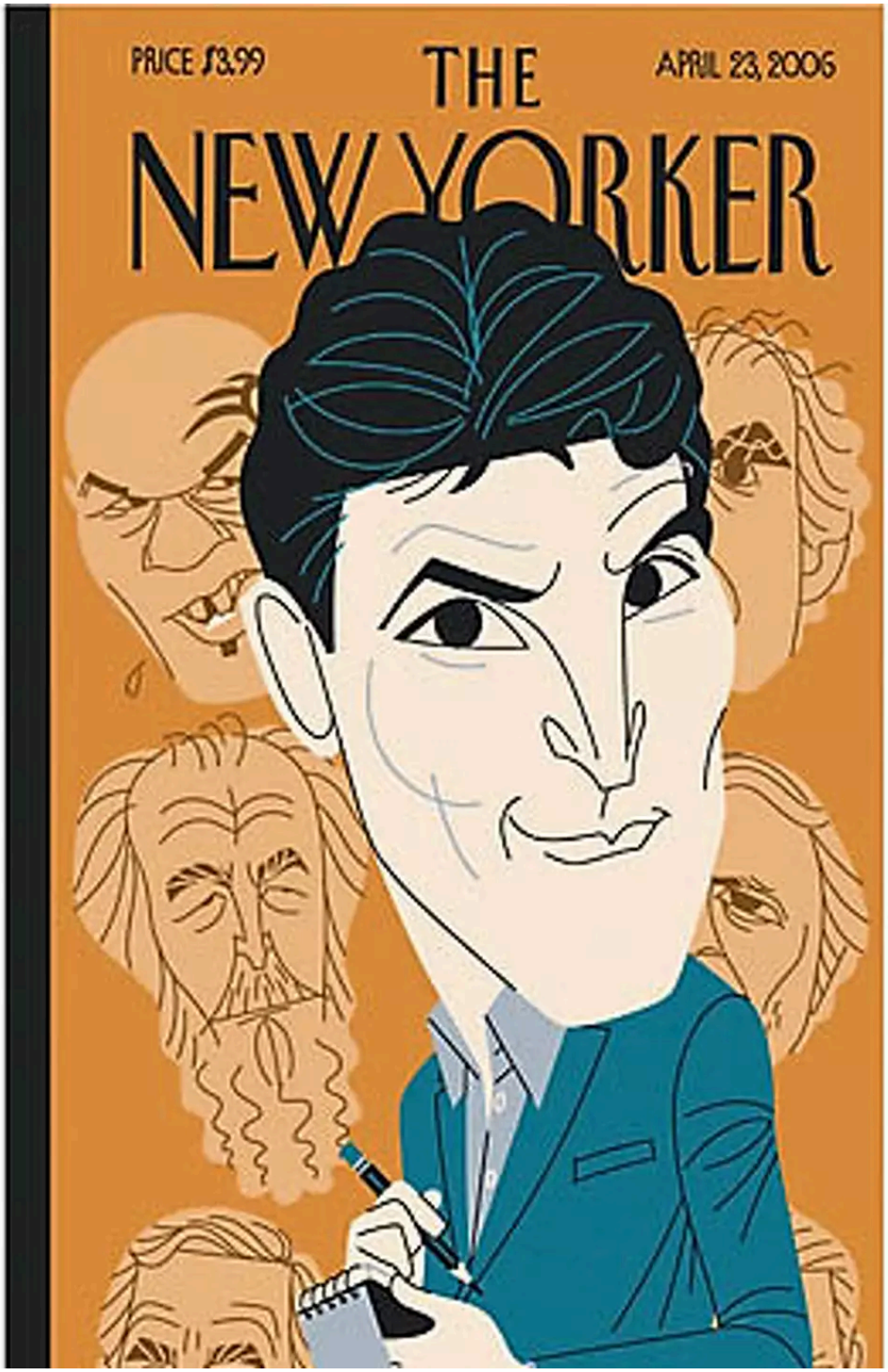
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Talk of the world / New Yorker Editor David Remnick covers the grand figures of our age

By **Reviewed by Gideon Lewis-Kraus**
April 23, 2006



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Reporting

Writings From the New Yorker

By David Remnick

KNOPF; 483 PAGES; $27.95

In "Reporting," David Remnick's new collection of New Yorker profiles, recent historical figures gain a scriptural presence. As he sits with Alexander Solzhenitsyn on the eve of his return to Russia after decades of exile, Remnick wonders, "Is it too much of an embarrassment in the age of irony to think that his homecoming is somehow Biblical?" Of another Soviet dissident, Natan Sharansky, Remnick writes that Sharansky's path from prison camp to Israel "became the symbol of a historic exodus, Biblical in scale." Biblical themes appear in the childhood of former Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and in the lives of Hurricane Katrina survivors as they march out of a destroyed New Orleans.

The word "biblical" risks melodrama or self-congratulation. In "Reporting," however, the description seems neither overblown nor immodest. It seems right, and it is the book's ability to carry, free of irony, that adjective that makes it such an achievement. Remnick's attention to the possibilities of ecclesiastical promise gathers an otherwise diverse series of character sketches into a codex on moral grandeur. The arrangement of pieces is so natural, and so symphonic, it's hard to recollect their discrete appearances: It seems as though "Reporting" is less an amalgamation of individual articles than it is a previously serialized volume at long last published whole.

In his preface, Remnick writes that these are profiles of "figures in the public arena, people who are in the midst of a crisis, passing out of one, or anticipating one on the horizon." The crises Remnick addresses tend to be the result of a conflict between a heightened moral sensitivity and the expediencies of political action, or, conversely, between a pragmatic disposition (such as Tony Blair) and a crowd desperate for public valor (a British electorate longing for liberation from a perceived subservience to America).

The canvas of this book is thus stretched along two axes of greatness: The vertical runs between aloofness and engagement, the horizontal from single-mindedness to elasticity. Vaclav Havel and Solzhenitsyn, who have similar origins yet traced divergent curves through this terrain, are the book's crucial archetypes, and they appear and reappear throughout. For subjects such as Solzhenitsyn, the biblical arcs are lapsarian: Solzhenitsyn as Russian citizen cannot maintain the moral purity of Solzhenitsyn as Soviet dissident. Havel's story, on the other hand, is one of exhaustion by compromise.

Occasionally, Remnick takes up contrasts like these directly. Toward the end of one of the two Solzhenitsyn profiles, Remnick observes that "Vaclav Havel is almost universally admired, even loved, in the West; Solzhenitsyn is not." By Remnick's

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embodiment of principle. "If Solzhenitsyn was the great witness of Communist oppression within the imperium," Remnick writes, "Havel was its most acute moral clinician." The Czech was less invested in an unearthly self-image; Remnick uses Havel's embrace of the shaggier icons of the West -- Frank Zappa and Lou Reed -- as a way to describe the eclecticism and flexibility that augured political success. But that success sapped Havel, and Remnick's notes on his last days in office capture a man too tired to keep juggling.

Remnick was a Moscow reporter for the Washington Post before he went to the New Yorker, and one of the book's five sections is devoted wholly to Russia; the other sections take up Western politics, literary figures, Israel and boxing. Russia, and now Israel, suit Remnick as societies whose histories are particularly inflected by moral trajectories. The finest piece in the Israel section is the profile on Sharansky, a human rights activist in the Soviet Union who became a prominent political figure in Israel; unlike Solzhenitsyn, whose pedestal seems so integral to his sense of self, Remnick remarks that "Sharansky, for his part, shows no sign of wanting to be a curator of his own outsized image." Sharansky's story is of a messianic expectancy from without rather than a messianic drive from within. When Sharansky is accused of political opportunism during an election scandal, his supporters -- who have staked so much on his being superhuman -- bear the brunt of the disappointment.

Remnick's profiles on Americans offer a different take on the relationship between what he calls "the gap between private life and public ambition." "Reporting" opens with a magisterial 12,000-word profile of Al Gore after the 2000 election. Gore does not come across as a heroic figure -- or a figure with heroic pretensions -- as the book's Russians and Israelis often do. But his thread in Remnick's warp is no less significant: He is a practical, earnest, almost Job-like character, whom the electorate punishes for an apparent haughtiness. The other Americans Remnick writes about are Philip Roth and Don DeLillo, two unabashed moralists. Both of them seem content to be ignored by an American public uninterested in granting its novelists the consequence bestowed upon their Russian and Israeli counterparts. They are more than happy to have the time and space to get on with their own work.

In each of these cases, what ultimately earns Remnick the right to call these stories biblical is their success on two levels, the allegorical as well as the manifest. Remnick's subjects exist on the page as themselves and as emblems, as historical actors and folkloric spirits, and this simultaneity is what creates a sort of fabulist urgency. This is not an easy tension for a storyteller to sustain, but Remnick neither

depletes his characters' fullness for the sake of abstraction nor tamps down on resonance in pursuit of the particular.

Most of the profiles in this collection were written since 1997; thus, with a few exceptions, his book "The Devil Problem" (1996) collects the pieces written while Remnick was a staff writer at the New Yorker, and "Reporting" features his work since becoming its editor. That transition seems to have encouraged a shift in his tone and narrative persona. The narrator of the older pieces, for the most part, was a more complaisant character: He included autobiography, digression and self-deprecation. There was greater evidence of the generous curiosity animating Remnick's fearsome intelligence.

Though no less absorbing, the majority of the newer pieces evince a more elusive and pared-down Remnick. For the first four parts of the book, he only rarely intrudes on the scene. When he does, it is usually to own up to a difficult and awkward question he's put forward. He asks Havel if "in some way, he had become what he had pitied" -- that is, always occluded within a Gorbachevian entourage -- and seems apologetic for having to pose such a painful question. Havel shrugs and dodges. Remnick asks Solzhenitsyn "if he thought the new order of things in Russia had diminished his moral authority."

Solzhenitsyn hazards a half-answer and curtails the interview. What presence Remnick does maintain has a modest but unbroken self-assurance. In the 1993 Gary Hart profile in "The Devil Problem" -- perhaps the closest in style and substance to those in "Reporting" -- Remnick admits, upon arrival at the Harts' home in Colorado, "they had invited me for dinner and to stay the night, and, in a clumsy attempt to thank them, I'd bought flowers in Denver and brought them as a gift." Hart makes gentle fun of the offering. It's unlikely that the older Remnick would describe such a scene.

In seems as though Remnick has decided that his journalistic bearing ought to be commensurate with both his chosen subjects and his office as editor of the New Yorker. If his work has taken on a graver cast, it may be because of the obligations entailed by the access and respect he invites; his reportorial seriousness betrays a sense of his own moral responsibility. In the preface, he writes that "the hope, as well as the vanity, is that eventually even public figures will let down their guard, they will be themselves, they will cross the line." Remnick's hope, however, is not so much vain as it is realistic and self-possessed. There are, after all, very few people who can write, matter-of-factly and without arrogance, "One of the first things I did on arriving in Jerusalem this time was to call Yitzhak Shamir, the previous Likud Prime Minister. Shamir picked up his phone on the first ring, as if he'd been waiting for the call all week."

Which is not to say that Remnick no longer knows how to enchant. The final fifth of the collection is given to his recent pieces on boxing: a story about the end of Mike Tyson's career, profiles of Lennox Lewis and the trainer Teddy Atlas. After a bracing 400 pages, these bits have a confectionery gleam. Here Remnick's debt to A.J. Liebling is clear; Remnick's comic range -- from naively astonished to dryly bemused -- is in this final section at least the equal of his great New Yorker predecessor. Right before Tyson's fateful, and second, chomp of Evander Holyfield's ear during a bout, Remnick reports from ringside that "Tyson once more nuzzled his way into Holyfield's sweaty neck, almost tenderly, purposefully, as if he were snuffling for truffles." That's a sentence Liebling might have been proud to write.

Despite their relative levity, the boxing profiles don't seem out of place in "Reporting"; they make a knowing coda to his biblical chronicles. Where his other profiles deepen our sense of these figures as they exist both within history and outside it -- by discussing public lives in terms of their mythical careering -- his writing on boxing is often about that very expansive urge; it mistrusts the allegorical impulse and provides an outlet for Remnick's wry self-doubt. "Like mediocre fiction," he writes in

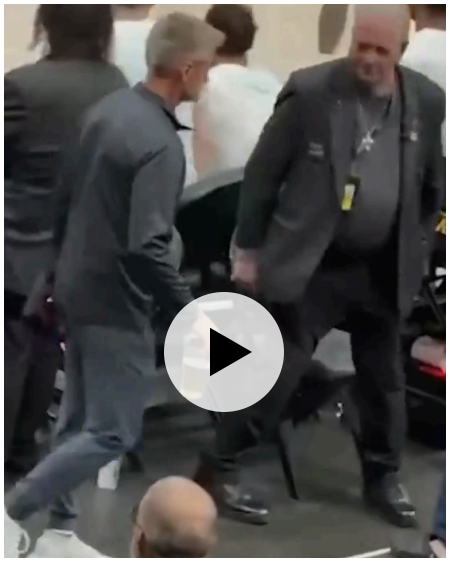
the Tyson piece, "fights for the heavyweight championship of the world are invariably freighted with the solemnity of deeper meanings." Remnick knows that some stories deserve that solemn biblical freight, and some stories are just about how much fun it can be to watch two guys knock each other around.

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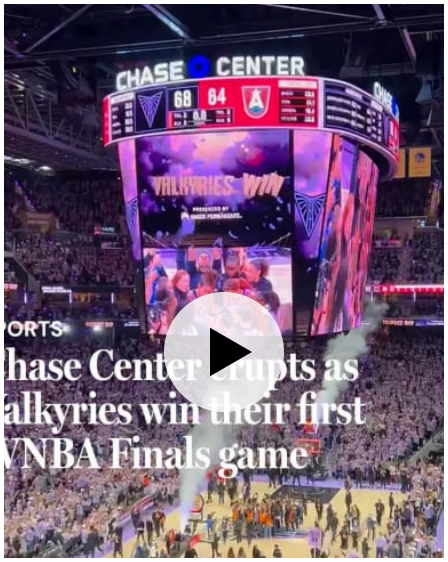
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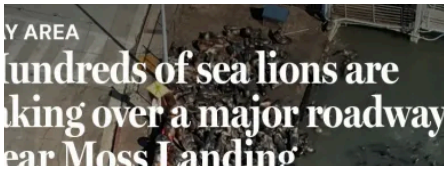
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