

It's a thousand pages, give or take a few,  
I'll be writing more in a week or two.  
I can make it longer if you like the style,  
I can change it round and I want to be a paperback writer,  
Paperback writer.

The Beatles

## **“Syd Barrett: A Very Irregular Head”**

by Rob Chapman

*The boy sent to The Pat Boone Show*, January 4, 2011

Most biographies are just a long description of the subject’s life. Not the one Mr Chapman wrote. He tries, and succeeds, to make a deep analysis of Syd Barret’s creative work and, at the same time, shed some life on what led to his being sacked by his band mates.

The life of Syd Barret was a great tragedy and one may think of Rimbaud’s, both having reached the top of their creativity very young. So, regarding their lives, a lot of ”what if” questions can be formulated.

Not being a musician myself, I paid special attention to the analysis of the lyrics. When people like Susan Sontag, T. S. Eliot or Ezra Pound are mentioned and not just name dropped, it is clear that we are in for some deep work. The connection with Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear and others is certainly meaningful and adds to the quality of Syd’s work. Inevitably, from now on, my way of looking at his songs will be more interesting due to all the information I have now acquired.

Syd Barret was sacked from the band he had founded, for which he had found the name. Why?

In rough terms, at the end of the day, one gets the idea that he was too creative for a pop group and not particularly interested in the glamour, front page news or whatever that comes with success (see page 200, meeting with former girlfriend Libby Gausden). That he was not mad or had burnt out at the time is clear from chapters 5, 6, 7, (”Only on the ”Jugband Blues” promo film does Syd look ungaged and a tad frazzled.”, one reads on page 207) while at the same time one learns that if things were not well with him it is true that ”in the main friends and onlookers were too damned cool to do anything about it.”(page 202).

He may have suffered from mental disorders, overused drugs, but his sacking from the band was certainly highly traumatic. Chapman compares the situation with what happened to Robert Wyatt (page 210).

It is hard, for instance, to accept the guy he felt closer to in the band had to find excuses ”to go off and play a gig.”(page 210). Some statements, in my opinion, can only be read as cynical comments (page 235, second paragraph from above).

And yet "they were unable to shake off the legacy of their former guiding spirit. Syd's spectral presence continued to cast a long shadow well into the 70s."

To be a great artist you do not have to be a great human being and, frankly, I am not that impressed by Pink Floyd members as people. I must say that my impression is deduced more from interpretation than from what is actually written.

I was never a great Pink Floyd fan. Their music always sounded too Jean Michel Jarre-like. That, however, can be a matter of taste.

There is a final comment to make. Too much , and too often, is said, especially at the time Syd died, that Pink Floyd always saw to it that he received his share of royalties. But could it be otherwise? Did he not write the songs? Did he not found the group?...

All in all, Mr Chapman's book deserves top marks and is not another brick in the wall.

## **“The Year of Magical thinking”**

by Joan Didion

*You sit down to dinner...*, September 19, 2010

I suppose the first time I heard about Joan Didion was when she published this book and I read an article in a portuguese newspaper about it. Later I understood that a play had been based on it, having Vanessa Redgrave as the, only, I think, performer.

I must say that I do not have great interest in books which are written as a help to cope with the unpleasent and dramatic situations we all have to face sooner or later in life. My idea is that each one of us has to find in himself the way forward. Friends and other people around us may help but, at the end of the day, we are the ones that have to face nights and have to get up every morning to make it through the day.

Also to have personal suffering and everything that goes with it displayed in a book is something most depressing and not very appealing in almost all cases I can think of. This August, entirely by accident, I found myself at a Barnes & Noble branch in N.Y. browsing through Ms Didion's book and ended up buying it, something that was very far from my mind when I had entered the bookshop.

Well, Ms Didion's book is certainly about her husband's death, while their daughter was fighting for her life in hospital. That is true but there are a variety of reasons why I liked it. First her writing is extremely good. The book is also written in a way that not only it deals with recent, at the time, facts but also it is a sort of biography of writer and husband. The amount of medical information for the common reader is incredible and you never get the feeling that it should not be there. We follow her daughter's progress in hospital (though we are not told if she fully recovered, probably not, since I have now read somewhere that she died not long after the book events). And everything with such a dignity!

Ms Didion was obviously in great suffering and yet the reader has to admire the way she is facing it. There were things to be done and she did them. I must say that I remember to have read the book quickly and what I deeply retain is a great inner peace feeling.

## **“Mockingbird: A Portrait of Harper Lee”**

by Charles J. Shields

*Answered prayers?*, May 12, 2010

I must have been 13 or 14 when I read "To kill a mockingbird". I am sure it was the title, in portuguese and literally "Do not kill the mockingbird", that led me to it. No one around me at the time could have recommended such a reading.

Apart from the usual newspaper or magazine reference, I did not know anything about the author. I even thought that Harper Lee was a man.

It was only when the movie "Capote" was released and I watched it that I became interested in Harper Lee again.

I suppose the main reason why I bought this biography was to know why she was a one book writer. I find myself much attracted to people who, apparently, give up their talent, the french poet Rimbaud being an extreme case.

From a certain point on in the book, it starts to become clear why that happened. She sums it up in a quotation on the final page of the biography: "I had every intention of writing many novels but I never could have imagined the success "To kill a mockingbird" would enjoy. I became overwhelmed.". This and some other events in her life, namely the death of a few people who had helped her through the writing of "To kill a mockingbird".

As someone wrote, this is an "affectionate biography", but it is also compulsive reading, extremely detailed and well supported by notes and a large bibliography.

When one finishes reading it, the reader may be faced with a natural question. Is it preferable to write just one great book, in this case "the 20th century's most widely read american novel", or never to be that successful but keep on writing and publishing? Obviously, there is no unique answer.

Shields's book is also very good in giving us a portrait of Harper Lee's life long friend Truman Capote. Especially for the period of their lives when they were concerned with the Kansas killings. The Clutter family murder would give rise to Capote's "In cold blood", a book often mentioned as being a "non-fiction novel", an expression that, in my opinion, is a contradiction in terms.

We cannot but sympathize with Ms Lee when Capote's book is published and she does not get the credit she fully deserved. Also that he never denied

in firm terms that he had not written parts of "To kill a mockingbird" was not fair. He was a genius, some people would say, and geniuses do not bother with such common things. Well, I certainly do not buy into that.

**“Le Desespoir Des Singes...et autres bagatelles”**  
by Françoise Hardy

*I was fourteen or fifteen long ago...*, January 15, 2010

I happened to come across this book while in Paris, at the end of the year. In my teens, I was a great fan of Françoise's, but stopped following her career long ago, the early 70s perhaps.

I regret my french is not particularly good anymore, but all the same I enjoyed this biography a lot. It brought back nice memories from an age when italian and french singers were THE singers.

We all know that things changed completely when The Beatles came on the scene and were never the same. “Those were the days”, as a song of the 60s was titled, and they were happy, carefree, though rather naive, ones.

Françoise aged as we all did and is now a sexagerian woman, looking beautiful and dignified. We tend to think that unpleasant things do not happen in the world she belongs to, but, like most of us, she had her share of suffering.

Reflecting on how Springs become shorter as we grow older may be rather melancholic, but I find it an appropriate way to end the book.

**“The Poetry of Solitude: A Tribute to Edward Hopper ”**

by Gail Levin

*All the lonely people / Where do they all belong?*, December 19, 2009

First let me say the title of this review is “stolen” from the lyrics of “Eleanor Rigby”, a song written by Paul McCartney & John Lennon.

We all have favourite writers, favourite sportpersons or favourite painters. For a long time, Edward Hopper has been a favourite of mine and what is certainly interesting is that I do not think Mr Hopper was very good technically. I am using technically in the sense that, for instance, Salvador Dali was very good. Some times I think his human figures look a bit awkward. However, in my opinion, no one portrays in a better way the loneliness that surrounds us all or the emptiness that pervades our lives most of the time.

The first time I came across this book by Ms Levin was when a very good friend of mine, for a reason I cannot think of at the moment, offered me her own copy. It was a very delicate gift indeed, a collection of poems related to some Hopper paintings, namely some very famous ones such as “Early Sunday Morning” or “Nighthawks”.

Though I am very interested in poetry I am not familiar with american poetry and, to be honest, the only author I had heard of before was Joyce Carol Oates. That did not prevent me from recognizing that most poems that are included are great poetry. Two in particular stand out, other people would perhaps choose different ones: “Inventing my parents” by Susan Ludvigson and “Early Sunday Morning” by John Stone. I quote a small fragment from each poem

“and she’s laughing, light  
as summer rain when it begins.”

“Somewhere in the next block  
someone may be practicing the flute  
but not here”

More than once I have offered copies of this book. The reaction has always been, “Where did you find such a beautiful book?” or some similar sentence. Ms Levin is the author of other books on Hopper. This ‘Poetry of solitude’ may be a nice introduction to Hopper’s thick biography or Hopper’s places.

## “Anthony Perkins: Split Image ”

by Charles Winecoff

*A shame you did it all at twenty-six*, August 18, 2009

If I remember it well the films where Mr Perkins appeared and I watched were “Psycho”, inevitably, and “La décade prodigieuse” by Claude Chabrol. On “Psycho” there is nothing new to be said and Chabrol’s movie was interesting.

Towards the end of the book under review, someone who had been very close to Mr Perkins is quoted as saying:

“That Tony never fulfilled himself is a tragedy. He never did anything optimum. And yet he was optimum.”

Well, the notion of “optimum” varies but, discarding that, frankly, that was not the impression I got from the book and if we go by the first sentence then most lives are certainly tragedies.

In my opinion, what was really sad in his professional life was the fact of having achieved a peak, never to be repeated, at an early age.

To use words by Tim Rice, for the musical “Evita” ,

What happens now, where do you go from here?

For someone on top of the world

The view is not exactly clear

A shame you did it all at twenty-six

...

Much worse, was that he would be linked to the Norman Bates’s character all his acting life. This surely must have affected his later career and the choices he made. Especially since, as opposed to photography or painting, cinema is an art where you depend on other people heavily.

As I suggested above, I do not think that Mr Perkins was outstandingly gifted. However, I would not say that most actors are and yet they go on to win Oscars or similar important prizes.

On the non-professional side, unfortunately Mr Perkins was a deeply troubled person. But, throughout his life, he met people who loved and cared about him.

I enjoyed, if such a verb is appropriate, knowing a lot more about actor and man. This is a well written, highly informative and well documented biography.

**“Raymond Depardon: Our Farm ”**  
by Benoit Rivero and Raymond Depardon

*The past is not a foreign country*, May 18, 2009

I am one of those persons who tend to become rather sentimental when talking about one's elders, especially if they did everything they could so their offspring might have a better life. That is certainly one of the reasons why I liked this book so much.

The book is a tale about a farm and a little boy who did not want to become a farmer. It is quite understandable, quite a heavy work, only half a day's rest a week. There is a particularly touching passage - "A doctor from Grange-Blanche had told my brother that my father's generation had been worn out by work. My father left school when he was twelve to replace his father who had been drafted in the First World War."

The boy went on to become a basically self-taught photographer, ending up as a MAGNUM member. I do not think one can get much higher.

On the other hand, we watch the farm declining. Progress led to its reduction in size and hard work made the present owner, the photographer's brother, to sell cattle and become a vegetable and fruit grower.

The little boy might not have wanted to become a farmer but he always felt and feels the need to go back and stay at length. Certainly out of love for his family but also for the place itself. He shows his concern on his brother's sadness that there is no one to take over after him.

The book consists of text portions and photographs, the latter being of past times and recent ones. The text is kept to a minimum and that is the way it should be. There are some misprints but, really, they are very minor ones.

**“Anne Sexton: A Biography”**

by Diane Wood Middlebrook

*Attended by devils*, January 6, 2009

Since references to Ms Sexton’s work in Portugal are almost non-existent, I cannot remember why I became interested in her. I have some idea that the british poet Neil Curry very favourably mentioned to me the book by the same author on the Plath/Hughes case and perhaps that led me to Sexton’s biography.

This work is certainly as accurate as any biography can be. The author was invited by one of Ms Sexton’s daughters to write it, so she must have had access to all the material available which gives a firm foundation. As an author, we can only be surprised how someone with such little formal education and in a relatively short time was able to produce work which earned praise, a Pulitzer prize included.

As opposed to that, Ms Sexton private life was tragic. “Attended by devils”, I’m borrowing from a Joan Plowright’s sentence on her husband, Laurence Olivier, she was so disturbed that she was unable to perform the simplest everyday life activities and most of her life she was under psychiatric care. She depended on other people even to cross a road, a strongest example cannot be given.

We can only imagine the nightmare that her husband, and later her daughters, had to endure during some 25 years. All the time a mother-in-law was there to provide some stability to household life and her husband was prepared to put up with a lot of suffering (he knew about Sexton’s multiple sexual affairs, for example) always hoping that she would get better and for a normal family life. Since people are not saints, it is only understandable that from time to time there were terrible anger outbursts.

This biography raises a few non-trivial questions.

First, in my opinion, nothing but medical care legitimates the access to the medical archives of a patient. I strongly disapprove of their being used in this work.

Second, at a differently level, it is utterly disgusting that a psychiatrist, or a medical doctor for that matter, allows himself to get sexually involved with a patient. I see no reason for him not to be banned from the profession right away.

Third, it is clear that with the remarkable exceptions of Dr Orne and his mother among probably others, some people treating Anne were incompetent, the last one not being even a psychiatrist but a psychiatric social worker... How is it possible that with her medical history, full of suicide attempts, alcoholism, hospital stays and so on, someone can say that ‘... Sexton had recently shown significant gains and that the decision to seek a divorce was reasonable’? (page 371, opinion of Dr Chase).

Sexton went ahead with the divorce, both daughters were angry at the way she treated their father, some friends tried to talk her out of that decision, provided care and, nothing that were not to be expected, got fed up.

The foreword, written by Dr Martin T. Orne, after all the man who suggested she try poetry, ends as follows:

Sadly, if in therapy Anne had been encouraged to hold on to the vital supports that had helped her build the innovative career that meant so much to her and others, it is my view that Anne Sexton would be alive today.

Well, it is a rather assertive statement BUT she might.

**The “The Guardian” Reader**  
by Neil Curry

*The ‘The Guardian’ Reader, May 28, 2008*

To read poetry requires effort and it becomes an even more demanding job when you are reading in a language which is not your mother tongue.

I am no poetry critic though I consider myself to be reasonably well informed on contemporary poetry. I am also a “The Guardian” reader, now an online one, as a result of having lived in England for long periods.

Two years ago or so I noticed that every saturday the paper would publish a poem, “The Saturday Poem”, usually by someone whose work I was not familiar with. Margaret Atwood was one of the authors published at the time. Not so long ago, one of those poems particularly caught my attention, “At le Caf de la Gare”, by Neil Curry.

The situation portrayed by the poem is rather “simple”. A couple is about to have some tea at a french caf, in or near a railway station.

Who are they? A man and a woman, two men, two women? They have time to spare before the train leaves. Are they both going home, will one be left behind? We know they are living a tense situation (... The silence bulged/ But failed to burst. ...) and it is not unreasonable to suppose that they are not on speaking terms anymore. Some unremediable thing must have happened to them (... It was as if all this// Had taken place a year or more ago/ And only through some glitch of memory/ Was of concern to them. ...).

This vagueness, this detachment, which I would find again in a poem like “Other rooms”, for instance, and the use of everyday situations and simple words to imply a lot attracted me. I was soon ordering a copy of the book under review and actually felt tempted to venture on the translation into portuguese of some of the poems.

Translation, I feel, helps me to understand better and there is much in this book worth better understanding. I will mention just a few poem titles: “The Metaphysics of Tulips”, “Four Times Four”, “At Samos: A Question”... I managed with the author’s great generosity in helping me to prepare a small booklet of portuguese translations which will come out until the end of 2008.

I always learn from reading "The Guardian", that is clear. This time however I do have a regret, that my english is not good enough to fully enjoy the richness of Neil Curry's poetry.

**“Swimming in a Sea of Death: A Son’s Memoir”**

by David Rieff

*There are no easy deaths*, May 22, 2008

I can understand very well that Mr Rieff felt the need to write about his mother’s death. That such a writing should take the form of a published book is a totally different matter.

With all due respect, and I have no doubt that David Rieff went through a terrible ordeal, his book adds nothing to what those who really care about their loved ones already know. Well, it is true that he elaborates more cleverly than most of us would be able to but all the clichés are there: the guilt, I wish it had been me, was there something else I could have done...

Here I am obviously talking about the psychological side of being close to someone who is dying. One is very lucky if the practical difficulties which arise can be dealt with smoothly and for that you basically need money.

When I say that Mr Rieff’s book is no contribution of great value I also want to say that it is not his fault (he could however have chosen not to publish). In my opinion there is nothing to minimize the suffering caused by death. Especially if it takes place after a long period of time, which is usually the case with cancer. The fact that Ms Sontag was a very intelligent and intellectually rich person must have made things even more difficult.

To sum it up, there are no easy deaths (the expression is borrowed from the reply given to Simone de Beauvoir by a french nurse: ‘But, madam, it was a very easy death.’ about the death of the former’s mother. It was sarcastically used by SB as the title of an account of her mother’s death.)

You never forget, that is my experience. You just go on trying to learn how to live with absence.

PS Mr Rieff comments disapprovingly on the publication of some pictures of his dead mother by Annie Leibovitz. I compliment him on that.

**“The Artist and the Mathematician: The Story of Nicolas Bourbaki, the Genius Mathematician Who Never Existed ”**  
by Amir D. Aczel

*If you want to waste your money....*, August 30, 2007

I am very sorry to say but this is a very bad book.

For people who are familiar with the Bourbaki group it adds nothing to what is easily available in journals, biographies, interviews and so on.

For those who are not, but may be interested, I would strongly recommend “Bourbaki: A Secret Society of Mathematicians ”, by Maurice Mashaal (Author), Anna Pierrehumbert (Translator).

Actually I should have known better. The book on Fermat’s last theorem by the same author is also of very poor quality.

For some years now I have been waiting by an announced book on Bourbaki by Liliane Beaulieu, someone whose work is of great quality. I wonder if the project was abandoned.

**“Silent Gesture: The Autobiography of Tommie Smith  
(Sporting)”**

by Tommie Smith and David Steele

*A Rather Noisy Gesture*, August 9, 2007

I cannot remember if I watched the medal presentation ceremony for the 200 meter race at the 1968 Olympics. I think I did, if I did not then I missed a historic occasion.

At that time racial problems in USA were not unfamiliar to me and I knew of people like Eldridge Cleaver, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael, Angela Davis... However I thought that those problems would not affect top class athletes and that they were fairly treated by the white society. So I regarded the medal ceremony as a strong and emotional protest by people who though not directly affected wanted to give a voice to the majority of afro-american citizens.

I could not be more wrong. For instance, it never crossed my mind that Carlos and Smith feared to be shot by someone from the crowd.

The book under review is a detailed account of Tommie Smith's life, focussing on the events that led to Mexico 68 and what happened afterwards.

It is hard to believe what the two athletes, Smith and John Carlos, gold and bronze medallists respectively, had to endure: insults, menacing junk mail (a friend of a Smith's sister later confessed she used to send similar messages just for fun), the collapse of a marriage, a wife's suicide, the lack of support from people who could have helped (the former footballer Jim Brown was one of those), other black athletes strongly complaining their careers had been destroyed (Jim Hines, for example), no jobs...

Also the families suffered. Smith's mother died at 57 and he strongly implies her death was caused by the stress that the situation generated. His brothers and sisters suffered all sorts of abuse and his youngest brother still seems to blame his life failures on him.

It is no wonder that Muhammad Ali threw his Roma gold medal into the Mississippi river when realized that he was treated as before in his home town.

The story appears to have a happy ending, the book closes with the unveiling of a statue portraying both athletes where everything started - the campus of San Jose State College -, but has it? Does anything in the world erase the strong suffering both athletes had to face?

On reading this book I was reminded of a TV movie I watched long ago. The character played by Bette Davis, an old teacher, bumps into a former and much, much younger pupil. They recall her motto - It's better to lose on one's terms than to win on someone else's. (I'm quoting from memory). I think that Tommie Smith might agree.

**“A Photographer’s Life: 1990-2005”**

by Annie Leibovitz

*More than a family document?*, January 14, 2007

It is perhaps fair to start by saying that the type of photography done by Ms Leibovitz has never been a favourite of mine. When I ordered this book I thought I might change my opinion. It was not to be.

The book is basically a document of a 15 -year period in the life of Ms Leibovitz or a love story document for that matter. Actually, several love stories unfold while we browse through it.

As to the pictures I have mixed feelings. There are some very good portraits. For instance, the strong portrait of iconic figure Patti Smith or Merce Cunningham’s. On the other hand we have the portrait of Scarlett Johansson, who looks awful posing in a rather awkward position.

No doubt Ms Leibovitz included the material she felt she had to. This notwithstanding, I think I will prefer to remember Ms Sontag as the rather physically attractive woman she was instead of thinking about her as a patient in a hospital bed or lying dead.

## “As I See It”

by John Loengard

*The man who stole Georgia O'keeffe's little black stone*, March 2, 2006

Some 20 years ago or so I went to a photography exhibition during “Encontros de Fotografia”, in Coimbra - Portugal, which impressed me a lot. The pictures concerned Georgia O'keeffe and her environment in New Mexico. At the time I was not so interested in Photography as I was to become later, the reasons in both cases not being relevant for what I want to write now.

At some point, I wanted to discover who had been the photographer and did some search which led me to John Loengard's ‘Georgia O'keeffe at Ghost Ranch’ (actually, the photographs I had seen were by Myron Wood).

The book on Georgia O. is wonderful and I emphasize this because the great merit of “As I see it” is to free Loengard from the O'keeffe images, at least from where I stand. O. K., O. K., there are two in the book, but they are masterpieces and I am aware that I am making a strong statement.

Mr Loengard says his work is a mixed bouquet. Nothing wrong with that. We have excellent portraits (Merce Cunningham's, for instance); unusual images (Cartier-Bresson flying his kite); events that got to newspaper front pages (Ted Kenny arriving for the funeral of Mary Jo Kopechne), landscapes (The Aghileen Pinnacles); some irony ( The supper intermission at Glyndebourne); “la joie de vivre” ( The Beatles in a swimming pool); and I will leave it there since I just want to exemplify.

Different people read (or, rather, see, in this case) the same book in different ways. I would like to point out two threads that I followed while browsing through “As I see it”.

-‘The image within the image’- This is, perhaps, the main one and there are lots of examples to illustrate it ( Avedon's portrait, the Turnley twins). Occasionally, the link, which is “supposed” to be the picture's subject, between the photograph itself and “the second degree image” - that is, the image within the image - almost disappears in a subtle way ( André Kertész and his distortion). Some other times, the second degree image is only suggested, as we have in the spectacular picture of Leibovitz, where she stands on a gargyle of the Chrysler Building in N. Y. to photograph dancer David Parsons, posing on another one . At first I thought it was a fake (do these

people not suffer from vertigo?). The irony here is that, in the end, Ms Leibovitz ended up preferring an image she took in her studio, a less riskier place we all agree.

-“The pairing way” when two two pictures face each other. The most brilliant example is Brassai’s eye and Georgia O.’s little black stone. But there are others: Bill Cosby and the negative; George Nakashima and Loengard’s son.

That every picture tells a story is commonplace. I am much more interested in what is behind, what happens before. Therefore I found the notes accompanying each photograph, at the end of the book, important material. They are interesting, informative and amazing in some cases. What happens afterwards is worth looking forward to if it leads to a book like this. If the end of the story happens at an auction then I would say it is an ‘unhappy end’.

**“Julian Lloyd Webber: Married to Music : The Authorised  
Biography ”**

by Margaret Campbell

*Younger brother makes good*, July 24, 2005

I suppose most people would find this an uneventful book, but then those people would not buy it in the first place.

The book gives a very detailed account of cello player Julian Lloyd Webber’s professional life both as a live and as a studio performer. It can some times be slightly boring for the not very knowledgeable reader, which is my case. I just enjoy the music and do not care much about other (relevant) details.

However ‘Married to Music’, by Margaret Campbell, has other merits. The reader is given what I believe to be an accurate portrait of Julian at several levels and, once again, I confirm that if talent is not to be wasted it has to go with hard, very hard indeed, work.

Julian is a multidimensional character. He is the researcher always trying to unearth long forgotten musical pieces. He spares no efforts to give his father’s music the right place it deserves. He stands for his friends, the controversy surrounding a book and a film on the late Jacqueline du Pré providing a good example. He speaks intelligently on his art and, like the ordinary man he is not, he keenly supports some football team.

I cannot hide my admiration for someone who achieved such a great success playing an instrument like the cello, especially when under the shadow of a talented elder brother, from which he escaped much earlier than some people are ready to admit.

At the end of the day, as in those questions “Which film star (athlete, writer, politician...) would like to meet (go out with...)?” that appear in some newspapers from time to time, I think Julian is the type of person I would really like to have lunch with.

The first time I heard of Julian Lloyd Webber was in late 1977 or in 1978, in an edition of “The South Bank Show”, by Melvyn Bragg, when ‘Variations’ had been or was about to be released. I was living in England at the time and having left soon after I sort of lost touch with him. Now the net has made it possible to resume contact and I am sure his playing will go on delighting me in the future.

**“Cindy Sherman: The Complete Untitled Film Stills”**  
by Peter Galassi

*The emperor’s new photographs*, June 27, 2005

Despite the fact that Art News, December 1999, included Cindy Sherman in a list of the ten top living artists, that’s irrelevant from my viewpoint. Such considerations can only be of interest to those who view art works as some sort of groceries at their disposal in the supermarket down the road.

The “untitled film stills” are just a collection of ‘portraits’ of Ms Sherman in disguise as a second rate stereotyped character removed from some movie.

The introduction itself, written by Ms Sherman herself, is nothing but a bunch of trivialities and a good example of the fact that most artists are unable to talk about their own work in an articulate and intelligent way.

Technically the pictures are poor and, naturally, one is led to wonder whether at the time Ms Sherman could dominate all the practical sides of Photography. Moreover some are not even taken by her but by people who apparently had no particular qualifications. It’s hardly surprising that some of the stills look very much like the pictures one finds in family albums.

Not wanting to be entirely negative, I would single out still #21 as interesting but I cannot bring myself to say more than that.

The principal interest I found in this book was the confirmation that the art world is full of ‘masterpieces’ of which the future is uncertain, to say the least.

**“Naked by the Window: The Fatal Marriage of Carl Andre and Ana Mendieta”**

by R. Katz

*Not a very easy death (after Simone de Beauvoir), 1 December 2004*

In August 2004, while in New York, I decided to go to the Whitney Museum. It was supposed to be a routine visit of sorts, particularly because I wanted to look at the Hoppers and Okeeffes again. It turned out not to be.

I was completely overwhelmed by an exhibition of an artist I had never heard of. Later I came to realize that I must have seen her name in print before for she is mentioned in a book on portuguese artist Graça Pereira Coutinho.

Such was the impression the work on display caused on me that I immediately wanted to know more about her life and work. By coincidence I happened to buy an american art magazine which included an article on her. It was then that I came to know why she died so young.

The book under review is a really important source for someone who may be interested in Ana Mendieta's life and work. It was a tragic life made even more tragic by its end. The author's work is written in a very clever way and is very informative and quite well documented. It starts with Mendieta's fall from a 34th floor in Greenwich Village and the story unfolds from there.

I would go as far as to say that of all people in the world but one Katz is the person who comes closer to know what happened the night Mendieta fell to her death. Apparently she committed suicide after a row with her husband, a minimalist artist whose name, despite his being so famous, escapes me.

Her husband was charged with murder but was later acquitted. Katz also gives us a non-trivial idea of how the art world functions, how reputations are created and so on. Without going into details, they belong to the book, I would like to reproduce artist Howardena Pindell's words:

‘I know if Ana had been an Anglo and if Carl had been black, the art world would have lynched him.’

Maybe I sound cynical but there are certainly less painful ways to commit suicide.

Ana's life was short and sad. On the other hand her work is so strong that I am sure she will be recognized as a major xxth century artist in the future.

I am grateful to Robert Katz's book. If I had not read it I would certainly a poorer human being.

**“Diane Arbus: A Biography ”**  
by Patricia Bosworth

*Arbus & Avedon*, 23 september 2004

Let's make it clear from the beginning. I strongly dislike Arbus's work though, technically, I am not competent to comment. She was a disciple of another very famous photographer, Lisette Model, someone whose work I'm not particularly keen on either, and I think it has all to do with a feeling of humiliation I cannot help. There may be exceptions, I agree. For instance, in Model's perhaps most publicized images, The Coney Island bather, the grotesque is annihilated by an intense physical happiness.

Diane's ways to obtain the pictures she wanted were not always clean. Here, she once found herself at the receiving end and got what she deserved. Having asked permission to photograph a meeting of "little" people, she was told they already had their "little" photographer to record the meeting. Another example in hand is the photographic session with Australian, England based, feminist writer Germain Greer.

No kind of moral judgements involved, I find her promiscuity very hard to deal with, to use very mild terms.

The parallelism between her life and Richard Avedon's, whether intentional or not, is extremely clever, though I tend to look at Avedon as rather "glossy magazine".

Having said all that is above, I must say that I could not stop once I started reading Patricia Bosworth's book. I cannot think of a higher form of praise.

## **“The Beauvoir Sisters”**

by Claudine Monteil

*A mathematician looks at the Beauvoir sisters, 12 september 2004*

I bought a copy of this book, “The Beauvoir sisters” by Claudine Monteil, in New York, this summer. I am reasonably familiar with the fiction work by Simone Beauvoir (S.B. and H. (for H el ene) B. from now on), having read it in the 70’s. However I never read ‘The second sex’ or any writings of a similar nature.

Literary, I always thought that she was an overrated writer. Her books always left me with the impression that she was someone who had forced herself to write rather than someone who was particularly gifted to do that. Actually, the books I prefer may be considered rather peripheral in her work: “Woman destroyed” (two short novels) and “A very easy death” (a moving account of her mother’s death). Today, in Portugal, she is relatively unknown as opposed, for instance, to Marguerite Duras. In particular, by the younger generations.

I knew vaguely she had a sister who happened to have lived in Portugal and that was one of the reasons which led me to buy the book.

I would like to compliment the author, Claudine Monteil, on the excellent job she did. She wrote a book which I found compulsive reading and which gives a good idea of S.B.’s (and, to a lesser extent, H. B.’s) importance in women’s struggle for their rights. This side of her life is unquestionable.

Also, I admired Monteil’s intellectual honesty when it would have been dead easy to skip some shadowy details in S. B.’s life or her opinions on H. B.’s painting for that matter.

For me, at least, is the younger sister, H.B., who emerges as the nicer person. I enjoyed knowing she had been happy in Portugal, kept good memories of the country and that Universidade de Aveiro did something to preserve part of her work.

At the end of the day, I strongly recommend this book and look forward to reading other books by Claudine Monteil.