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BOOKS

Literature in an Era of Social Ferment

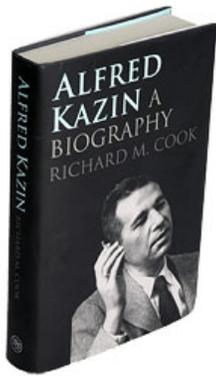
By Robert K. Landers

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Alfred Kazin

By Richard M. Cook

Yale, 452 pages, \$35



Alfred Kazin began writing book reviews for the *New Republic* in the summer of 1934, when he was 19 years old and not yet out of college. Eight years later his masterwork, "On Native Grounds," a passionate, 500-page history of the rise of literary realism in America, was published. "Conceived on a grand scale and as not only a history but a moral history," Lionel Trilling wrote, "it is quite the best and most complete treatment we have of an arduous and difficult subject." Other reviewers agreed. Young Kazin had arrived.

Kazin brought a rare intensity to literature, as one of his editors noted. But in a time when political passions ran high, he did not let his own so run away with him that they might impede his rise rather than serve it. He never joined the Communist Party or publicly expressed support for it; he signed no petitions for or

against the Moscow show trials. He played it safe, Malcolm Cowley, his editor at the *New Republic*, came to suspect. Yet radical politics was central to Kazin's thinking in those days, as Richard M. Cook observes in "Alfred Kazin," an excellent biography -- sympathetic yet critical, as good on the works as on the life of the eminent literary critic.

Born in Brooklyn's Brownsville neighborhood, Kazin (1915-98) was the son of poor Russian-born immigrants: an often unemployed house painter and a hard-working seamstress, who spoke little English and dominated the household. Sensitive and intelligent, something of a "mama's boy," Alfred worked hard at his schoolwork -- and developed a stutter. Outside of school, he was a "very lonely and unhappy kid," as he later recalled. Reading was the young Kazin's refuge, says Mr. Cook, who teaches American literature at the University of Missouri-St. Louis.

While Kazin's mother's Orthodox Judaism did not take -- he would never become an observant Jew -- his father's socialism did. The labor movement, Kazin later wrote, was "my great connection to the outside world." In 1931, at age 16, he entered tuition-free City College of New York -- and came to hate it. Though a socialist and "literary radical," he was repelled by the "fanatical" ambience at the school, particularly evident in the basement alcoves of the administrative building, where students in radical factions endlessly argued.

As Kazin made his way in New York's politicized literary world, he seemed to others there a "starry-eyed opportunist" (in Diana Trilling's much-repeated phrase). Sidney Hook long afterward recalled young Kazin lecturing him that the Stalinists "are too strong to be resisted" -- a remark that suggests there may have been an element of fear mixed in with his later-acknowledged admiration. Kazin's undeclared communist sympathies (which lasted longer than he later let on) certainly affected some of the reviews he was writing for the *New York Herald Tribune* and other publications. In a review of "The Adventures of a Young Man," John



Alfred Kazin in 1968

Dos Passos's 1939 novel expressing his profound disillusionment with American communists -- showing them ready to betray striking miners to score propaganda points for the party -- Kazin could not bring himself to describe plainly that particular communist perfidy that prompted the radical protagonist's disillusion. He pretended that Dos Passos was disaffected with "the whole radical movement in America."

When he began his masterwork in 1938, Kazin was filled with revolutionary hope, confident that history was moving in the right (that is, left) direction. His inspiration for "On Native Grounds" was Vernon Parrington's multivolume "Main Currents in American Thought," a politicized history of American literature that was quite influential during the 1930s. Though artists such as Henry James and Herman Melville got short shrift in Parrington's account, the struggle between "the people" and the plutocratic "interests" propelled the narrative forward. Parrington celebrated the growth of a "realism" in American literature that depicted the ordeals of ordinary lives.

Parrington died in 1929, before completing his final volume, but Kazin proposed to pick up the fallen standard and bring the story of the rise of literary realism up to date. After Lionel Trilling's devastating 1940 attack on "Main Currents," Kazin ended up sharply criticizing aspects of Parrington's work in "On Native Grounds" (and he rescued James and Melville). But Kazin could not avoid, as Mr. Cook notes, employing much the same "progressive" narrative strategy. By the time "On Native Grounds" was published, in 1942, history had shifted course -- the U.S. and the Soviet Union were now allies in the war against Hitler's Germany. "The left-wing writers" that Kazin "had been championing," Mr. Cook writes, seemed "less pertinent to (and possibly destructive of) the ideological needs of wartime America."

In fact, the final section of "On Native Grounds," in Mr. Cook's reading, may be best understood as "a record of personal crisis, a crisis of faith at a time" when, Kazin later said, "I was losing my faith in the only religion I ever had." Even so, he managed to end the book on an upbeat note, by turning to the documentary literature of the New Deal era and to new, affirmative histories of America's past. As for his "faith," it is clear from Kazin's later political responses -- his postwar unease with anticommunist liberalism and his disdain for ex-radicals who became neoconservatives -- that it was never entirely lost. His youthful radicalism had a profound, lifelong effect on his view of the world.

In the same year that Kazin started writing "On Native Grounds," he married a bacteriologist named Natasha Dohn, whose work in a hospital laboratory provided their only reliable source of income. Her "love, patience, and generosity had meant a great deal to him" at first, Mr. Cook notes, but the writer eventually took those gifts for granted. After "On Native Grounds" had elevated his status in the literary world, he began a brief affair with a married woman who habitually sought to further her own education by bedding brilliant intellectuals. His infidelity not only ended his marriage but sent him on a course of sexual wandering that would bring him, over the ensuing decades, three more wives, many mistresses, two children and much unhappiness.

"On Native Grounds," though somewhat dated, is still very much a book worth reading. It is written, as Mr. Cook says, in "a lively, often exuberant, prose with a novelist's feel for character and event." Confident that he could "read the mind behind each book," Kazin provides evocative portraits of William Dean Howells, Theodore Dreiser and many other literary figures, along with "impressionistic" evaluations of their books. Despite some errors of fact and interpretation (especially with regard to William Faulkner, whose "corn-fed, tobacco-drooling phantoms," Kazin wrote, "are . . . not protagonists in a great modern tragedy"), it remains an engaging introduction to a literary movement and its writers, many of whom still matter -- as does Kazin himself.

Mr. Landers is the author of "An Honest Writer: The Life and Times of James T. Farrell" (Encounter).

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