

A Colonel of Truth

The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick

Richard Norton Smith

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REVIEWED BY

Andrew Ferguson

"The last of the giants" is what the press critic A.J. Liebling called Robert R. McCormick six years after his death, and it should quickly be added, in fairness, that Liebling hated him, and lampooned him without pity. But he did know a giant when he saw one. Do the rest of us any longer? The Colonel, as McCormick liked to be called, was a newspaperman, a contemporary of Hearst and Pulitzer and Scripps. The only man in our own day to compare him to is Al Neuharth, the semi-literate lounge lizard who conceived *USA Today*. Both men were megalomaniacs and eccentrics, but there the comparison ends. McCormick's ambitions were as vast as his eccentricities: He wanted his newspaper, the *Chicago Tribune*, to mobilize armies, steer the economy, forge grand alliances, and more generally remake the country into something closer to his taste. Neuharth wants *USA Today* to tell his countrymen "How More of Us Are Eating Zucchini." Put the two men next to each other and you have a nice illustration—a suitable graphic for *USA Today*, in fact—of American journalism's steep decline.

Richard Norton Smith has now written the giant's biography, and he has done the job with such thoroughness and fair-mindedness that no future biographer

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need ever trouble himself to write another. In addition to being an accomplished historian, Smith is a former director of the Reagan library and a speechwriter for Bob Dole—a Republican, in other words. This shouldn't matter, but it does. McCormick's own politics were ferociously right-wing, which means they were roughly those of, say, Thomas Jefferson, transplanted intact to the twentieth century, and Smith doesn't take them as self-evidently absurd. His sympathy for McCormick survives. I don't think many other professional biographers nowadays, as consumed by politics as any academic, could leap this hurdle.

McCormick's life is inextricably bound up with the life of the *Tribune*, and so Smith begins his story with the story of the newspaper. It was founded in 1847 to be, as its original motto said, "neutral in nothing...independent in everything." McCormick held fast to the tradition. These were the days "when newspapers were read not for their objectivity but for their personality," Smith writes, and the Colonel upheld that tradition too. His maternal grandfather, Joseph Medill, bought the paper in 1855, turning it quickly into an organ allied with the newly born Republican Party. Medill became a confidant of Lincoln, and, for the rest of his life, an endless giver of advice (as opposed to adviser) to presidents, all the way up to McKinley. The paper's power grew as Chicago grew, and it grew rich along with its city.

McCormick was born there in 1880. For much of his childhood his parents lugged him around Europe, where the elder McCormick held a variety of diplomatic posts, secured through family connections. The experience simultaneously bred in the Colonel a lifelong love for the plainness of the American Midwest and an undying distaste for the Old World, particularly for England. His Anglophobia was world-class, though it never extended

to his wardrobe, which was pure Savile Row, or his preference in athletics, which was polo, or the baronial pretensions of life on his country estate outside Chicago, which he wandered in jodhpurs and ascot. (Scratch a -phobe and you'll find a -phile.) He was schooled back in America at Groton and at Yale. He detested both schools.

He returned to Chicago bent on a career not in journalism but in politics. He was a reformer then, taking the first Roosevelt as his hero. (His understanding of the Roosevelts was uncomplicated. He liked—to borrow from P.J. O'Rourke—the one who killed bears but not the one in the wheelchair.) As an alderman and later as president of the Chicago Sanitary Commission, he exposed corrupt politicians and bureaucrats, cleaned up the stockyards, and fought the rapacious utility mogul Samuel Insull to a standstill. "McCormick needed enemies," Smith writes, "the way most men need friends." In sprawling, wide-open Chicago, there was never a shortage of possibilities, and he carried them with him after he abandoned his career in politics and assumed control of the *Tribune*.

He took the editorship reluctantly, to keep the newspaper in the family and incidentally, Smith thinks, to win the favor of his shrewish mother. His craving for self-aggrandizement may have been more fully rewarded in politics, but his genius was for journalism—and he managed to squeeze plenty of self-aggrandizement out of that too. In business he was a pioneer of "vertical integration." When paper supplies seemed unreliable, he ventured deep into Canada and made himself a lumber baron: buying up timberland and building paper mills and power dams. To transport his newsprint to Chicago, he made himself a shipping magnate. When radio was launched, he turned WGN (for "World's Greatest Newspaper") into one of the most powerful stations in the world; he did the

tan" and most of them "decent people, just trying to make a living."

"Cabdrivers?" hazards Smith.

"Not as many as you'd think."

Most importantly, *Men in Black* does not make the mistake of taking itself or its space aliens seriously, and so it is a thousand times more serious, as well as more entertaining, than the ghastly *Contact* by Robert Zemeckis, which takes *everything*, especially itself, with ludicrous seriousness. If you liked the bogus uplift of Zemeckis's last film, *Forrest Gump*, you may find yourself attracted to *Contact*, but you should be warned that the bogusness has since multiplied exponentially. Here the Cartoon language really gets to stretch itself and show what it can do. Here Cartoon Science and Cartoon Religion and Cartoon Politics are all neatly packaged together with a New Age sensibility into the kind of commercial product that absolutely depends on the combination of innocence and imbecility for which American cinema audiences are becoming world-renowned.

Jodie Foster plays Ellie Arroway, a stunningly brilliant astrophysicist who has chosen to throw away (as her scientific colleagues see it) her awesome talent in a search for extraterrestrial intelligence. Guess what. She not only finds it (take that, scientific establishment!), coming via radio-telescope from the constellation of Vega, but finds with it a message of hope for the world. The message is almost lost on account of the media circus it gives rise to, and the machinations of nasty and selfish politicians and religious leaders, but it is essentially a message that the media could have scripted (in effect, *has* scripted), namely that the universe is a cosmic version of the Internet. Unimaginably distant civilizations have simultaneously adopted as their nearest approach to the transcendent an exchange of radio pleasantries across the light-years, with an occasional expensive meeting for the purpose of putting faces to the disembodied voices.

It is a little hard for me to understand the sort of mind for which a universe modeled on these lines would be inspirational, but it is apparently not rare. Especially among media folk. And it shares with the media a gut-level hostility

towards traditional conceptions of holiness or religion. These are represented in this film by Rob Lowe as a smarmy-looking Ralph Reed type, head of something called the "Conservative Coalition," by Jake Busey as a wacko fundamentalist preacher in a white kaftan and shoulder-length bleached hair who turns out to be a terrorist, and by the pseudo-profundities of a New Age guru called Palmer Joss (Matthew McConaughey), who is not so spiritual that he is prevented from inducing Ellie to drop her drawers within hours of meeting him. Their casual sexual liaison is obviously meant to stand for love in the same way that bodiless mathematicians 26 light years away are meant to stand for God.

I forbear to reveal how it is that Ellie comes to travel to the stars and back in a matter of hours with the help of an eccentric and dying billionaire (John Hurt), or to learn from her Vegan interlocutor (cleverly disguised as her own dead father) the profound revelation that hers is "an interesting species...capable of such beautiful dreams and such horrible nightmares." Suffice it to say that it involves a completely gratuitous government conspiracy, of a type familiar from at least a hundred recent movies, Ellie's remaining true to her atheistic principles but still being romanced by the dishy guru, and yet more profound truths imported from the stars—including "how insignificant we are" and, somewhat paradoxically, "that we belong to something greater than ourselves."

Well, as Hamlet's good friend Horatio might have put it, "there needs no alien, my lord, come from the constellation Vega to tell us this!" Yet the capacity of the largely teenage American cinema audience to believe that, when it hears such banalities, it is hearing something deeply meaningful is apparently limitless. Either Hollywood has abandoned any attempt to appeal to a mature audience or (a terrifying but increasingly inescapable thought) there is no longer a mature audience of any commercial significance in America. That must be why I am so often driven to dig up some obscure foreign film as the only movie in a given month which is watchable by grownups, or else to adopt the post-modern spirit and recommend some particularly clever piece of

trash from off the commercial shelf, with which it is at least possible to laugh along.

This month's Movies of the Month shall be one of each sort. *While the Cat's Away* by Cédric Klapisch offers up an old-fashioned romanticism about Paris and *la vie de Bohème* and, well, romance with touches of humor and pathos worthy, almost, of Truffaut. Chloe (Garance Clavel), a lowly makeup girl in the salons of the fashion industry, loses her cat, Gris-gris, and the rest of the film consists of her efforts to find it with the help of her gay roommate, Michel (Oliver Py), a mentally retarded Algerian immigrant, Djamel (Zinedine Soualem), and a whole platoon of cat-loving spinsters and widows in the neighborhood of La Bastille, organized by the redoubtable Madame Renée (Renée Le Calm). Along the way, the search for Chloe's cat becomes a metaphor for her search for love and companionship in the anonymous but strangely hospitable city—and both turn up in the end, unexpectedly, under her nose.

But for amusing trash I am drawn back to *Operation Condor*, in which Jackie Chan directing himself is much funnier than he is in his more calculated assaults on the American market, *Rumble in the Bronx*, *Supercop* and *Jackie Chan's First Strike*. I laughed myself silly over the combination of Chan's remarkable physical grace and the unselfishly comic purposes to which he puts it in this absurd but strangely familiar tale of a martial artist and three gorgeous girls braving the perils of the desert in a search for Nazi gold. Alas, I cannot offer a sample of Chan's wit without ponderous explanations, since virtually all the comedy depends on the visual context, as in a well-drawn comic strip. But he has thoughtfully provided an aged, crippled Nazi called (what else?) Adolf (Alfred Brel Sanchez) to ham it up and so to remind us that, even where the star does all his own stunts, there is nothing here that should be confused with reality. ❁

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