

ceptionally successful. She is also unmarried, though she doesn't want to be. A woman with boundless professional opportunities who is also a "good catch," in Banks's estimation, is facing a lifetime of loneliness, according to statistics. "This may not be the life that I had hoped for," Jones says, "but this is the life I have to live."

What to do about the black family is a dilemma that has preoccupied sociologists, psychologists, journalists, screenwriters, novelists, and ordinary people for decades. Few have unreservedly advocated the refreshing solution Banks offers: interracial marriage. While black men have long felt free to choose white mates, he notes, black women are "more segregated in the intimate marketplace than any group in American society." They view interracial relationships as too complicated and see partnering with black men as an expression of a larger commitment to the race itself; often, black women aren't as attracted to men of other races as they are to black men. But Banks urges them to overcome these reservations.

He ends his book with an uplifting story about Joe, who is white, and Teresa, who is black. They are complete opposites in personality and background, but have a joyful and mutually supportive relationship. Banks uses their story to illustrate the core of his argument, which is that unions between black women and white men actually benefit interracial relationships, because such relationships shift the "power, ever so slightly, in favor of black women" as the gender imbalance among single blacks becomes less severe. "If more black women married nonblack men," Banks muses, "more black men and women might marry each other." His controversial conclusion may rankle, amuse, or vindicate, but it provides a new chapter to an old story about the distressing state of black marriage.

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CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

A Singular Voice

Reviewed by Michael O'Donnell

FOR YEARS, IT HAS BEEN easy to take Christopher Hitchens for granted, and now we are losing him. The incomparable British polemicist, contrarian, essayist, bon vivant, and bullhorn of the anti-totalitarian left has advanced throat cancer, and may have won his last motion in the debating hall and blown his last smoke cloud into the face of tyranny. Fortunately for his readers, Hitchens's voice is not yet silenced. *Arguably* is a massive, engrossing collection of essays produced over the past 10 years. Like his brilliant memoir of 2010, *Hitch-22*, it reminds us of all we stand to lose.

Hitchens made himself somewhat tedious

ARGUABLY:

Essays by Christopher Hitchens.

Twelve. 788 pp. \$30

from about 2003 to 2007 with his relentless defense of the Iraq war and his apparently spiteful flirtation with conservatism. *Arguably* covers other ground. Those familiar with Hitchens only from his pugnacious television appearances and his Fighting Words column in *Slate* magazine will benefit from exposure to his literary side, especially his splendid review essays in *The Atlantic*. For those who like a little splatter, he can be just as brutal panning a book as attacking an apologist for fascism. He writes that, in composing the 2006 novel *Terrorist*, John Updike gives "the impression of someone who has been keeping up with the 'Inside Radical Islam' features in something like *Newsweek*," producing "one of the worst pieces of writing from any grownup source since the events" of 9/11.

The essays on literature and literary biography are erudite and often very funny. Here is a précis of the poet Philip Larkin's libido: "Lar-



For decades, writer Christopher Hitchens has delighted and provoked readers. Recently diagnosed with esophageal cancer, he posed earlier this year in his Washington, D.C., home.

kin may not have been highly sexed in the conventional sense, but he was a heroic consumer of pornography and amateur composer of sadomasochistic reveries, which he often shared with his worldly friends Robert Conquest and Kingsley Amis." Perhaps nothing recommends Hitchens more than his taste in literature. He returns again and again to W. H. Auden, Evelyn Waugh, Vladimir Nabokov, and Saul Bellow. If only more of our political writers read such fine stuff between columns.

A master of circumlocution, Hitchens writes with a spontaneous, understated, digressive style, orbiting a target with asides and allusions until it is all but lost from sight. Then, like Muhammad Ali, he suddenly stops dancing and punches with his whole arm. Two pieces in *Arguably* exemplify this pattern: one on Gore Vidal (of the far left) and one on Patrick Buchanan (of the far right). At times all the ironical, wordy sentences and name-dropping can feel like obfuscation, as when Hitchens smirkingly floats this judgment of Hungarian-born writer Arthur Koestler: "It has been plausibly alleged that in his compulsive seductions—of Simone de Beauvoir, for one—he did not always stop quite short of

physical coercion." Well, did he commit rape or not? But more often, Hitchens's luminous style and his development of an argument thrill. In an age of sound bites delivered to yawning members of mostly empty chambers, he actually persuades his listeners to change their minds.

This is particularly the case at the intersection of literature and politics, Hitchens's natural

home. Two themes preoccupy him: solidarity and totalitarianism. The former he prizes from his early years on the Trotskyite left; it manifests itself in an honor-bound and borderline-violent refusal to unlink arms with old comrades in places such as Kurdistan, Iran, and Cyprus. The loathing of totalitarianism in all forms comes from the right half of the Left—the territory of George Orwell, Hitchens's well-chosen hero. (Few could have predicted that a writer as verbose as Hitchens would champion the master of the 12-word, comma-less sentence.)

No one writing today beats Hitchens in crushing an argument of moral equivalency between Nazi Germany and Allied Britain, say, or between terrorists who kill as many innocents as possible and American troops who try to avoid civilian casualties. In this regard it must be said that even though his Saddam-loathing case for war in Iraq was not quite persuasive, it was by far the most persuasive case on offer. He waited a lifetime for his Iraq—a chance, as the Spanish Civil War was for Orwell, to stand firmly against the forces of totalitarianism, alone if necessary. Reading Hitchens today, one clearly sees that he would do it

the same way again.

At one point he quotes a novelist's description of a newspaper hack who "possessed that opportune facility for turning out several thousand words on any subject whatever at the shortest possible notice." Although Hitchens does not generally shy away from boasting, he is too polite to claim this mantle for himself. It is his. Reading him is like riding in a luxurious sedan upholstered in leather and cornering sharply: It does not really matter where we go because we will get there in style. And of course, we'll let down the window for our host's cigarette.

MICHAEL O'DONNELL'S essays and reviews have appeared in *The Nation*, *The Washington Monthly*, and *The Los Angeles Times*.

HISTORY

Water Over the Bridge

Reviewed by Edward Tenner

ALMOST 75 YEARS AGO, THE city fathers of Portsmouth, Ohio, ordered the sewers opened so that high water from the Ohio River would inundate the town gradually rather than violently. As a journalist of the time commented, "The people knew better than to argue with the river." Triggered by days of torrential rainstorms that astounded even many veterans of earlier floods, the waters in January 1937 would eventually crest 15 feet above flood stage and earn the engineering designation of "thousand-year flood," one statistically expected to occur once in a millennium.

Farming tracts and urban neighborhoods long classified as safe havens were inundated. Railroad and highway traffic was interrupted and power stations stopped working as waters spread where planners had never imagined they could. (In this respect, the Ohio-Mississippi Flood of 1937 resembles the tsunami in Japan earlier this year as much as it

does the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in 2005.) All told, financial losses were estimated at a billion dollars (roughly \$15 billion today). A million people fled their homes. Hundreds died, mostly from pneumonia and other flood-related illnesses.

Yet today few remember the 1937 flood, though it was more severe than the famous Mississippi River flood of a decade earlier, remarks David Welky, an associate professor of history at the University of Central Arkansas. National media, which were concentrated in the Northeast, Chicago, and California, gave the flood short shrift. But, as Welky suggests, the crisis has also been forgotten because the Flood Control Act of 1938 changed the perception of the Ohio (and other rivers) from "disaster waiting to happen" to "pleasant view."

The flood has three interwoven stories. One is geographic. Land hunger had encouraged the construction of homes and businesses in areas known to be flood prone. The relatively steep slopes of the Ohio River make it potentially more volatile than the Mississippi—which, for all its power, overflows gradually during heavy rains. The physical conformation of the Ohio valley inhibits control of the river by dams, but also increases its scenic allure, drawing people to settle on its treacherous banks. Even after railroads and highways reduced the need for commercial ports on rivers, river towns concentrated essential facilities in known danger zones.

The second narrative is technical. In the 19th century, two influential civil engineers offered rival visions for managing the Ohio. The self-taught Charles Ellet advocated building reservoirs that would intercept floodwaters from the rivers feeding the Ohio while providing drinking water and power for industry. Ellet's nemesis, the workaholic Andrew Atkinson Humphreys of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, published an exhaustive treatise in 1861 on the Mississippi and its management that attacked Ellet's views on reservoirs in favor of levees located on riverbanks. Through

THE THOUSAND-YEAR FLOOD:

The Ohio-Mississippi Disaster of 1937.

By David Welky, *Univ. of Chicago Press*. 355 pp. \$27.50