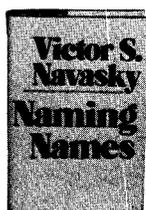


# BOOK REVIEW

## Silent Heroes

by Garry Wills



**Naming Names**  
by Victor S. Navasky  
The Viking Press  
482 pp., \$15.95

Oh no, not all the names again—the Hollywood Ten and all that; the enmities still poisoning cocktail parties on both coasts; the betrayal time. It has been told, for most of us, too often. As a son of Edward Bromberg, the blacklisted actor, remembers: “It was a time when everybody became an expert on everybody else’s life”—not an enviable accomplishment. Yet here it is again, the story of the House Committee on Un-American Activities and its 1950s investigation of Hollywood—the ritual whereby studio employees known to have attended a Communist Party or front meeting kept off their employers’ blacklist by naming anyone else they could remember from those parties. To tread that old ground author Victor Navasky must “pan back” and look at the larger darkness that was its setting.

Thus Navasky quotes Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., urging on the Commie-hunt of the early Fifties. For *New York Post* readers, Schlesinger described an odd threesome (Thomas Emerson, Carey McWilliams, and Stringfellow Barr) this way: “None of these gentlemen is a Communist, but none objects very much to Communism. The Typhoid Marys of the left, bearing the germs of infection even if not suffering obviously from the disease.” It is deftly McCarthyite in its innuendo—not obviously suffering the disease (so covertly?). “Bearing the germs” is the job of an “unwitting handmaiden,” as Senator Joe liked to put it. William Buckley

filched “Typhoid Marys” for his standard pitch of the mid-Fifties. Liberals at the time were always trying to steal the right’s thunder and just giving it more ammunition.

It was “the atmosphere of the times,” we are told a thousand times, which suggests that morality was an entirely different matter then, and no one who wasn’t there should go back and accuse. But some people *were* there, and did not yield? Well, they were just show-offs. Some dramatists will do anything for a good line, like Lillian Hellman’s “I cannot and will not cut my conscience to fit this year’s fashions.”

It is Navasky’s thesis that Hellman’s line was not an empty gesture but a definition of the moral issue. We can see that in her line’s antitype, the creed of the informers, as voiced by director Robert Rossen: “I don’t think, after two years of thinking, that any one individual can indulge himself in the luxury of individual morality....”

Navasky makes some key distinctions at the outset. Those who accused others of a crime like espionage may have felt an honest duty to speak out, no matter how unpopular that might make them. So Whittaker Chambers felt or feigned a pride in his act. If he spoke true, he spoke honorably—and here Navasky is granting, for the sake of his argument, that he did speak true (as I believe he did). But the majority of names named were from the world of entertainment, where the greatest “crime” alleged, even by the most rabid investigators, was that Russian people smiled in a movie or Ambassador Davies’s book *Mission to Moscow* was put on the screen (as President Roosevelt desired).

Navasky has sought out and interviewed the informers as well as their victims; and his disapproval of what they did does not interdict a sympathy

the informers clearly deserve. They were broken in the act of breaking others. Hear those who talked:

- Writer Richard Collins: “I was a son of a bitch, a miserable little bastard. It was unfortunate but true. I was a good boy, doing what you’re supposed to do.”

- Composer David Raksin: “The only thing a decent person could do was not talk—I still believe that.” Then Raksin wept as he told Navasky how he talked.

- Actor Marc Lawrence: “I had to because they caught me with my pants down. I lied to them. They gave me a list of people. It was sick.”

- Writer Isobel Lennart: “I cut myself off because I was so overcome with shame and guilt.... I couldn’t go to the commissary at M-G-M. I would get as far as the door and I’d get nausea. I just couldn’t do it. It was shame and guilt and nothing else.”

It is true that some informers defended their choice and have never retreated from that position. But Navasky notices an interesting thing about them: They prefer (like Elia Kazan) not to talk of their deeds, or (like James Wechsler) to discourage others from talking about them. Voluble before the committee, they are taciturn now—they “take, as it were, a retrospective Fifth.” For the victims and resisters, of course, the opposite is true. Silent before the Committee, they can speak with pride now.

And even those who spoke out then defend their act with strange arguments, such as Wechsler’s claim that he only named names the Committee already had, though he called a man a liar who told the Committee that, and challenged him to say it under oath. He defends informing, but says he did not inform—though he assured those to whom he was informing that he was informing: These are not the justifica-

tions of a man proud of what he did (though Arthur Schlesinger wrote at the time that he *should* be).

With considerable detective skills, the admirably thorough Navasky recreates the complex of pressures the Committee brought to bear on those who informed. It used a good-cop bad-cop routine alternating threats and reassurance. The “patriot” who spoke out would be decontaminated by bestowers of the Committee’s seal of approval—e.g., columnists Walter Winchell or George Sokolsky. There was a psychiatrist who helped ease the guilt of informing; there was a lawyer who talked defiance of the Committee while getting his client to perform; there was a Committee investigator who agreed with the informers that it was dirty business but said he would help them past the *real* bad guys at the hearing. Some were allowed to name names secretly. One, writer Leopold Atlas, even hid his shame from his wife and daughter for years. Only when the daughter was doing research in college to attack the informers did she learn, to her horror, that her father had been one.

Although the Committee was silly in the charges that it made, Navasky respects the skill with which it “played” the informer. The pressures were different for each person—some had family troubles, some were suspected of homosexuality, some were told that they would help prevent anti-Semitism by becoming a Jew who informed, some had actors depending on their ability to direct or write a specific movie.

If the pressures were so great, the informers’ role so marked out for them, isn’t it cruel to dig up their days of infamy? One sympathizes with Marc Lawrence, who shouted over the telephone at Navasky: “It’s a ghoulish exercise!... It’s like opening a grave! It’s like opening a cancer and asking, ‘How did you get it?’” Even Dalton Trumbo, after the years of his own blacklisting, was ready to forgive before he died, calling all those used and abused by the Committee its victims.

In a sense you could say that informers, as a group and with some exceptions, were worse off, finally, than those they named. The ones who fought

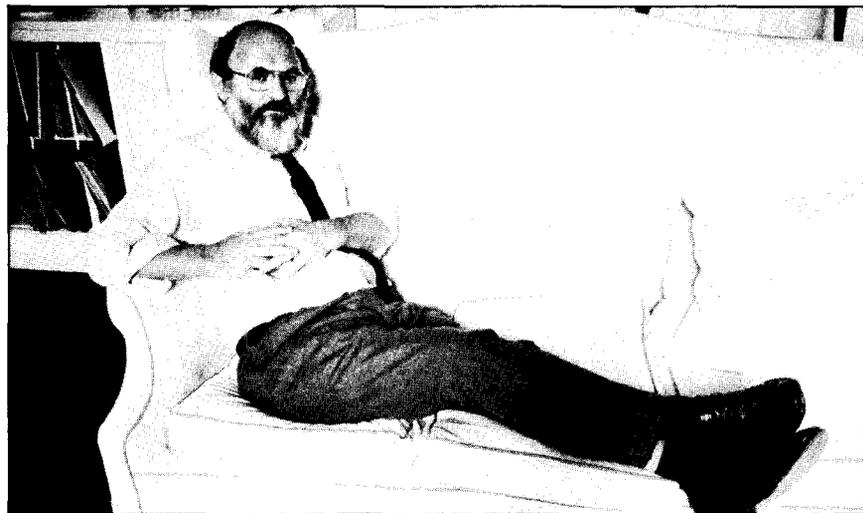
their way back—a Zero Mostel or Howard Da Silva—had not only survived but prevailed. Their pride was vindicated; they could speak without shame of that shameful period. Shortly after performing his Ben Franklin role from 1776 for President Nixon in the White House, Da Silva went to jail for peaceful protest against that President’s war in Vietnam.

Still, many did not make it back. Some committed suicide, some died before they had time to prevail, some lost the years they needed for their particular skill. The way back was long, and underpaid, and humiliating even for those who prevailed.

But the issue is not this or that individual’s suffering. If “the atmo-

lated. Murray Kempton grants that Lillian Hellman’s line was theatrical, but adds that it displayed as well “no small part of a shrewd instinct about the future, an awareness—and such senses have much to do with honor—of how things would look in due course.” How it looked in due course helped people resist better in the Sixties.

But there is another shift of mood now, a resentment at honoring people who acted honorably then. We hear now that informers were right to say they saw a young starlet at a “front” meeting, since Stalin was a monster. There was precious little of that justification voiced by informers at the time. Most did what they did to survive, or to uphold a caricature of patriotism,



With considerable skill, Navasky re-explores the moral dilemma of the blacklist era.

sphere” made people crawl, how do we prevent a similar atmosphere from paralyzing us in the future? In the 1960s and 1970s, a larger machinery of oppression was mobilized, but it failed to cow resisters. The FBI was no longer sacrosanct. The churches and universities did not uniformly cave in. People like Benjamin Spock and Philip Berigan were tried on wild charges, but there was wide and deep support for them in the intellectual community. What made the difference?

Partly the very history Navasky is recounting. McCarthy had finally given a bad name to the bad tricks Arthur Schlesinger was up to in 1947. The resisters did look good in retrospect. The informers had bad consciences. The examples had accumu-

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or to shift suspicion away from their family or religion or studio. That was the noblest motive most of them claimed, and few think much of it now. The most important lesson from that time is the possibility of resistance. The informers named names; but Navasky tells their story only to name the heroes. It is unlikely that those unwilling to recognize courage in others will learn to practice it themselves. It is important to humanity to remember that some people, offered every reason in the world to act less than honorably, just won’t. Such people may be difficult or disagreeable; but on them depends the honor of our kind. ■

Syndicated columnist Garry Wills is the author, among other books, of *Nixon Agonistes* and *Inventing America*.

# The Poems of Stanley Kunitz

by William Jay Smith

*The Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, given annually to the outstanding book of poems published in the United States, is sponsored by the New Hope Foundation and administered by Saturday Review. The \$5,000 prizewinner for 1979—The Poems of Stanley Kunitz 1928-1978—was selected by William Jay Smith, Cynthia Macdonald, and Quincy Thomas Troupe. Previous winners have been Hayden Carruth for Brothers, I Loved You All (1978), Allen Tate for Collected Poems 1919-1976 (1977), Philip Levine for The Names of the Lost (1976), Denise Levertov for The Freeing of the Dust (1975), and Cid Corman for  $\frac{0}{1}$  (1974).*



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Stanley Kunitz—Profound feeling and intellectual concern conveyed simply.

Judging by the number of books that fellow poets Cynthia Macdonald, Quincy Thomas Troupe, and I, as the jury of the 1979 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, have received in the past few months, the publication of poetry in this country is flourishing as never before. Commercial publishers are said to have cut back on poetry, and yet some of the most elegantly produced books by the best-known poets have come from large houses. But the publishers of these books seem strangely reluctant to promote them once they have appeared. While volumes from small presses and university presses rained down on us with great huzzahs, we received several books published by the largest companies, some of them final contenders for the prize, only after we telephoned and asked to see them.

"Any man in good health can go without food for two days," Baudelaire said, "but without poetry, never." After a daily diet of current books of verse, the most confirmed poetry reader may wish either to fast or to turn to well-written prose. Quality has not kept pace with quantity. Indeed, not within my

memory of poetry published since the end of World War II has there come work of such uneven quality. The young poets who grew to prominence in the Sixties praise one another's work to the skies. But there are apparently no elderly uncles like W.H. Auden on the scene to cast a cold eye, nor any fastidious aunts like Louise Bogan, reviewing poetry regularly, to tell them that much of what they have written does not, by any recognized standard, measure up.

While a few young poets echo Wallace Stevens, the far greater number follow William Carlos Williams, who has become something of a god. For them the quotidian is paramount, and every detail of their daily lives is presented in a flat and colorless fashion. They forget that Williams held that the tawdry has its place in poetry, but only when lightened by the imagination. In most of their pages the tawdry remains tawdry, one-dimensional and dull.

Although much of last year's work could be readily dismissed, there were still distinguished books to consider by such well-known poets as David Wa-

goner, Josephine Miles, John Ashbery, and James Dickey; by the prolific Philip Levine; and by poets like Isabella Gardner and James Whitehead, who, while not producing a great body of work, have written memorable poems. Three books by younger women poets held our attention. In *The Messenger* (Farrar, Strauss & Giroux) Jean Valentine details, in a kind of vibrant poetic shorthand, a moving inner vision. In her fourth book, *Many Moons* (Little, Brown), Mary Oliver explores both the natural world and human relationships with extraordinary freshness. *Killing Floor* (Houghton Mifflin), the Lamont Poetry Selection for 1978, by Ai, is a clear advance over her previous book; her passionate statements come through in language that is controlled but often powerful.

Artistic attics have for some time been filled with various Victorian artifacts, and one suspects that literary attics in the future will be filled with volumes of the current overwrought poetic monologues very much in the Victorian vein. One of the few poets who have mastered this form in any