



RENATA ADLER
AFTER THE TALL TIMBER **COLLECTED NONFICTION**

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What is really going on here? For decades Renata Adler has been asking and answering this question with unmatched urgency. In her essays and long-form journalism, she has captured the cultural zeitgeist, distrusted the accepted wisdom, and written stories that would otherwise go untold. As a staff writer at *The New Yorker* from 1963 to 2001, Adler reported on civil rights from Selma, Alabama; on the war in Biafra, the Six-Day War, and the Vietnam War; on the Nixon impeachment inquiry and Congress; on cultural life in Cuba. She has also written about cultural matters in the United States, films (as chief film critic for *The New York Times*), books, politics, television, and pop music. Like many journalists, she has put herself in harm's way in order to give us the news, not the "news" we have become accustomed to—celebrity journalism, conventional wisdom, received ideas—but the actual story, an account unfettered by ideology or consensus. She has been unafraid to speak up when too many other writers have joined the pack. In this sense, Adler is one of the few independent journalists writing in America today.

This collection of Adler's nonfiction draws on *Toward a Radical Middle* (a selection of her earliest *New Yorker* pieces), *A Year in the Dark* (her film reviews), and *Canaries in the Mineshaft* (a selection of essays on politics and media), and also includes uncollected work from the past two decades. The more recent pieces are concerned with, in her words, "misrepresentation, coercion, and abuse of public process, and, to a degree, the journalist's role in it." With a brilliant literary and legal mind, Adler parses power by analyzing language: the language of courts, of journalists, of political figures, of the man on the street. In doing so, she unravels the tangled narratives that pass for the resolution of scandal and finds the threads that others miss, the ones that explain what really is going on here—from the Watergate scandal, to the "preposterous" Kenneth Starr report submitted to the House during the Clinton impeachment inquiry, to the plagiarism and fabrication scandal of the former *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair. And she writes extensively about the Supreme Court and the power of its rulings, including its fateful decision in *Bush v. Gore*.

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From Reader Review After the Tall Timber: Collected Nonfiction for online ebook

Casey says

I really love Adler's fiction and here she's often correct in her analysis and critique but the parsing of words is...(and I hope I chose correctly Renata)...tedious.

Ian says

I'm not sure where this falls in the world of criticism (I haven't read much literature concerning the critiquing of critics aside from this), but this was a very eye-opening read for me personally. I love her writing, both its clarity and its fearlessness. Several times while reading this, I thought about skipping an essay because it was about something that didn't interest me (The Bork court, for one), but I was proven wrong every time. More than anything, this collection taught me (in very specific terms) how to be critical of the news I read, and how entities like the New York Times use retractions and press statements to shape how they are perceived.

Now I really want to read a book criticizing Renata Adler. I don't think she would mind, in fact she would probably welcome it.

Derrick Schneider says

It's easy to see why Renata Adler doesn't sit well with her fellow journalists: she simply has no qualms about calling b.s. on them, even in pieces, such as her Letter From Selma, that are more straightforward (though powerful and well-written) journalism.

But for those of us who think of journalism as something that requires as much critical thought as everything else we read, there's a lot of thought-provoking writing here. It is easy for a reader to consider the news as authoritative, because that's how it's portrayed, but Adler's essays remind you to keep your wits about you and find out the facts from diverse sources.

Richard Epstein says

While the rest of us were absorbing events, Adler was trying to understand, then record them in clear, perspicacious prose. She succeeded. You will never think about the people of Watergate the same way again. Oh, and you will never read the New York Times the same way either.*

*Or Pauline Kael, but that seems less important.

Steve Petherbridge says

This was my slowest read of 2015 due to constant need to Google research characters and events! No denying the quality of the reportage and other prose, but, it was a a slog! Really a text book for journalism and history students, it reaffirms one's doubts about the veracity and manipulation of the citizenry by U.S. media, even the NY Times, ruling conservatism and "old money" and divisions in U.S. Society!

Interesting to me especially, from page 340 (and confirming European media of the time), because, it is demonstrating how the powerful conservative cabal "went after" and "distracted" Clinton, as they have been doing with with Obama, both intelligent, somewhat naive and over-self-confident outsiders who thought that they could work "the system", by manipulating the statutes and governing bodies of the U.S. A democracy? Land of the free? I have my doubts.

A keystone cops chapter on the National Guard. The U.K. Territorial Army and Ireland's part-time armies are streets ahead in terms of discipline and training. Then again, our UN participating forces have tales of the U.S. Army's sad decline. It's the U.S. Marine Corps, Special Forces and the U.S.'s sheer weight of weaponry and manpower that usually forms their and our cavalry. When we desperately need a strong America, with minimal self-interest, this book, like those of other objective commentators, sews seeds of doubt. Note: this author is a proud and patriotic American, who just tells it how it is.

Renata Adler, now in her 70s, made it big when she was young and then vanished. Or "was vanished!"

What threw Adler's career off course was not being able to keep silent, and the shunning she endured as a result shows that "even serious writing is harshly proscribed, that the literary life has its hard rules, that politics must be carefully played, that renegades – and, no doubt, especially women renegades – who go past an undrawn line are cast out".

In her mid-20's she joined the staff of the famous New Yorker, where she spent the 1960s covering the civil-rights movement and reporting from the pivotal events of the day, including Six Day War, Vietnam and the now nearly forgotten, Biafra.

In 1968 she became the first woman film critic at the New York Times – a job so desirable that an ad for a department store read, "Some people think Renata Adler's job is like being paid to eat bonbons."

Her two novels, *Speedboat* (1976) and *Pitch Dark* (1983) were highly acclaimed and she was photographed by Richard Avedon. Dark clouds gathered - that inability to keep silent – or to keep silent about certain people. "I never attacked anyone weak," Adler said in a 2012 interview. "Only bullies, secure in their courts, bureaucracies, fiefdoms. Fear didn't come into it. Maybe it should have."

In 1980, while still writing for the New Yorker, Adler published a takedown of Pauline Kael, the magazine's powerful film critic, in the New York Review of Books. I had to research this episode to gain a perspective and relevance. With detailed meticulousness, she charted Kael's decline from a young freelance critic of unmatched "energy and good sense" to one of "protracted, obsessional invective" and wrote that Kael had altered criticism "astonishingly for the worse". In 1986 came *Reckless Disregard*, in which she tore strips off the establishment represented by CBS and Time magazine for irresponsible and dishonest work. Lazy journalism was her bug bear i.e. journalists relying on "informed sources" and not uprooting the truth and the story themselves.

In 1999. In *Gone: The Last Days of The New Yorker*, she chronicles the sad decline of the magazine. It famously began: 'As I write this, The New Yorker is dead.' The New York Times published several negative articles about this "irritable little book" and questioned Adler's ethics, but, the truth is the truth and often hurts.

With her principle professional relationships with peers and the so called 4th Estate unsurprisingly soured, Adler retreated to Newtown, Connecticut. Now, in 2014, it is "as though some statute of limitations on her offences has run out".

In 2013 the NYRB reissued *Speedboat* and *Pitch Dark*, and it has now published *After the Tall Timber*. Interviews, appearances and retrospectives of her works supposedly abound. Some pieces here may truthfully not stand the test of time, but, are worth reading whilst remembering the context of that time.

"A laudatory piece by Meghan O'Rourke appeared in the New Yorker titled "Welcome Back, Renata Adler".

Time heals I guess. Wounds heal. A new generation is reading her fiction, which is compressed, inspired, oblique and sharp. This compendium of work is a grouping of reflections of their time – the fragmentation of certainties, "the dismantling of sense that was the 1960s and '70s".

After the Tall Timber contains Adler's journalism from the mid- 1960s to 2003. There are pieces drawn from *Toward a Radical Middle* (her early New Yorker work), *A Year in the Dark* (film reviews) and *Canaries in the Mineshaft* (writings on misrepresentation, coercion and abuse of public processes, and the journalist's part in it). They definitely lent me a new perspective on how America politically functions and certainly has caused me to review the Presidency of Nixon and more so, that of Clinton. One's admiration, if it existed before reading this tough read, for America suffers somewhat.

These analytical pieces address some of the major American events of recent decades (when I was a teenager and blinded by what I read in the news media or heard on the radio and TV) such as Watergate, the abysmal Starr report on Bill Clinton, the dubious Supreme Court ruling in *Bush v Gore*, and the decline of serious journalism in favour of "lazy journalism", especially in the supposedly venerable New York Times, which was both surprising and disappointing to me.

Quotation from the Irish Times review; "One of the pleasures of reading Adler is that she is far less predictable than most journalists. She championed centrism and never embraced the orthodoxy of the Left (in the early 1960s she was a "liberal Republican"). She has written sympathetically of G Gordon Liddy and accused Watergate judge John Sirica of incompetence, corruption, and "clear ties to organized crime". She has written unflatteringly of Bob Woodward, who, with Carl Bernstein, broke the Watergate story: it was Woodward who produced "the nominal encounter" between the anonymous source and the young reporter, upon which "a religion was born, which has grown to affect not just journalism but the entire culture". (And by "affect", Adler doesn't mean improve.)

In 1969, she described American radicalism as one of "rhetoric, theatre, mannerism, psychodrama", which viewed "every human problem at a single level of atrocity".

And so on. But Adler appears to take no obvious satisfaction in flaying her subjects. It is simply what you do, you get the story straight. She marshals the evidence, and her attention to detail is obsessive.

Apart from an earnest indignation, this isn't emotional writing. "I particularly detested, and detest, the 'new journalism,'" she writes. And indeed, her work is largely free of personality. The personal is saved for the fiction.

The return to print of Adler's work is great news. Hers has been one of the odder instances of the writing life, and the determination with which she seemed to make inevitable her banishment from New York literary

circles is rather fascinating.

Wolff writes of her prose that it is some of the most brutal ever directed at journalism: "It exists in service to itself, as its own standard, as its own force, and not in support of political or commercial positions." One wonders if there was also something else at work, conscious or not, in Adler's trajectory.

In her Kael piece, which is also about the dangers of writing criticism under constant deadlines, Adler says: "A voice that may have seemed, sometimes, true and iconoclastic when it was outside can become, with institutional support, vain, overbearing, foolish, and hysterical." What one gets in place of quiet authority is "the somewhat violent spectacle of a minor celebrity in frenzy".

Renata Adler recused herself, rather dramatically, from institutional support, and thus perhaps from a similar fate."

A very interesting and a historical read, especially to those of us who grew up in the 1970's, or 1960's, but, were perhaps, a bit young to fully understand what was happening. Renata Adler's bravery and professionalism as a journalist shines through - she just told it how it how she saw it, trading on the toes of peers and the establishment in the process! Up there with Robert Fisk, John Pilger and other real reporters. Worth the slog!

Michael says

Renata Adler first spent years working at the New Yorker and the New York Times, and subsequently years relentlessly attacking her former employers in print for bad journalism, bad ethics, and bad writing. And it's hard, reading her "takedowns" of these publications (today's clickbait headlines might read something like "Renata Adler DESTROYS the New York Times in 50 pages"), to disagree with many of her conclusions. Adler's early journalistic pieces are tour-de-forces of astonishing reportage; she goes to the Sunset Strip to write about the lost children of the late '60s, she goes to Biafra to write about its doomed attempt to secure independence from Nigeria, she follows G. Gordon Liddy around America on a book tour (a piece many Goodreads denizens single out for its over-the-top, dry reporting, but who am I to deny the pleasures of excess in any of its forms?). She reports on the march from Selma, a melodramatic radical leftist convention in the late '60s (the absurdities of which will resonate with anyone my age who pays attention to radical discourse), and even the state of Cuban cinema. In her later years, her work takes a very different turn; this book includes her infamous takedown of Pauline Kael in which Adler argues that a recently published Kael collection is "utterly worthless," Adler's close reading of the Starr report, her analysis of the Watergate scandal (which hypothesizes that Nixon was being bribed to keep American troops in Vietnam), and a scathing critique of the New York Times for its approach to the Wen Ho Lee and Jayson Blair scandals. Occasionally, I got the sense that Adler was losing her train of thought (especially in her confusing and messy defense of centrism in "Towards a Radical Middle."), and at times she bogged her essays down with relentless parades of facts that may or may not have relevance to the subject at hand; this trend was much more noticeable in her later work.

Reading her work in an election cycle - especially this one - was especially illuminating, given that one of her biggest points of contention with journalists was that too often they colluded with instead of criticizing politicians and government employees.

Sarah says

This was a tough read. I would definitely recommend everyone read it, but maybe don't try to do it all in one day.

Abby says

Let's be honest: We're all here for "House Critic," aren't we? I will admit that I skipped around some; some essays certainly held my interest more than others. It is, nonetheless, an impressive body of work; Adler's career spans important decades in modern American life, and she views it all with keen-eyed suspicion.

Nyasha Junior says

Amazing writer, journalist, critic

Anthony Crupi says

The bravura performances arrive at the final third of the book, when Adler applies her prosecutorial acumen to the folly that was Nixon/Watergate, the Clinton impeachment debacle and Bush v. Gore. Still, getting past the hatchet job on Pauline Kael was no romp through the heather; Adler is just wholly and astonishingly wrong here, so much that every declarative sentence is either a byproduct of a misbegotten opinion or simple intellectual tinnitus. That I could get past that calumny without flinging the anthology aside is testament to how worthy the late-period work really is.

Calebgwright says

Get this book.

Laura says

excellent analyses and insights

Keight says

One of the downsides of my technique of requesting lots of popular books from the library and then reading them as I progress through long hold lists is that I sometimes get books when I'm not truly prepared to delve into them. Most likely I would have picked something lighter after just reading a long non-fiction book than

another long non-fiction book. But there was no dallying when my turn came... Read more on the booklog

Hank Stuever says

As a book, this might have been more enjoyable with three or four fewer pieces in it, especially since nearly all of them are quite long and don't necessarily stand the test of time. One piece is a far-too-detailed account of G. Gordon Liddy's 1980 book tour; it trudges into the 20,000-word range. The writing is sturdy but there's so much of it that a reader often gets lost in it and misses the good stuff. (If there's good stuff.)

I'm glad I read this, though. A review of "After the Tall Timber" in The Atlantic Monthly (link below) eloquently sums up the value in revisiting Renata Adler's nonfiction (the review makes a better case than Michael Wolff makes in the introduction, I think). For too long all I knew about Renata Adler came from little swipes at her in the old Spy magazine or outright vilification in the NYT and elsewhere whenever she seemed to piss off the wrong people.

Her early reportage is a strong example of the Mr. Shawn-era New Yorker. Today we'd probably call those pieces a "notebook dump," in which it seems the writer is just shoveling everything under the sun into a strict narrative order of observed details and quotes but without any point of view or indication of where the piece is headed or, more importantly, what the news is here.

Her piece for The New Yorker on Sunset Strip hippies in Los Angeles (which ran in February 1967 at a little more than 7,000 words) stands in sharp contrast to Joan Didion's "Slouching Toward Bethlehem" piece from San Francisco's Haight Ashbury scene (which ran in September 1967 in the Saturday Evening Post at a somewhat shorter length -- 4,000 words? -- but in a more segmented, staccato style that readers liked a whole lot more); Adler deplores, in that moment and later, this hyper-stylized work of the so-called "New Journalists" blazing around her. Adler's work was old-school reportage and analysis. Her later work comes slightly unhinged, I suppose, but it's not exactly in the wrong and never as sloppy or mean as her critics claimed it to be.

Although one of the marquee pieces here (and most sensational at the time) is Adler's 1980 takedown of The New Yorker's widely-revered movie critic, Pauline Kael, I found myself more taken with Adler's reflection of her own (very short) tenure as the chief movie critic for The New York Times in 1968, when she was just 29 years old. This passage in particular resonated with me; in fact, it's a chillingly spot-on description of how I feel in 2015, writing eleventy-seven pieces of TV criticism at once:

"Being film critic for The New York Times for a year (fourteen months, really) was for me a particular kind of adventure -- with time, with tones of voice, with movies, with editing, **with the peculiar experience it always is to write in one's own name something that is never exactly what one would have wanted to say.**" (Emphasis mine.) THIS. Yes. Hitting "send" on those almost-but-not-quite attempts to eloquently get at the thing you were trying to get at, and never feeling like you quite did.

Here's the link to "Renata Adler: Troll or Treasure?" by James Parker, Atlantic Monthly, May 2015:
<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/a...>

Meredith says

A collection of well-written essays from Ms Adler's long career with *The New Yorker*. Spanning a long period in contemporary American life, from the early 60s to just past the turn of the millennium, these works have appeared in other collections of her work, and are excerpted from those earlier collections. She is a fine writer, but the varied subject matter was not always to my taste. Nonetheless, well worth a peek between the covers.
