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## Review: The Star of Her Own Work

Oriana Fallaci was a complicated woman: a brave reporter with a strong style, a rage for fame and a thin skin. Michael Moynihan reviews 'Oriana Fallaci' by Cristina De Stefano.



A passport, notebooks, publicity portraits and personal papers that belonged to the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci. PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *Michael Moynihan*

Oct. 27, 2017 5:08 p.m. ET

In a rare moment of introspection, Henry Kissinger once confessed that a surrender to vanity led him into “the single most disastrous conversation I have ever had with any member of the press.” In 1972, he submitted to an interview by the Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci because, he later wrote, “fame was sufficiently novel for me to be flattered by the company I would be keeping in her journalistic pantheon.”

Fallaci had made a career of battering politicians, celebrities and dictators. Mr. Kissinger claimed to have seen only her resume, not understanding that it was a roll call of Fallaci’s victims. He would fare no better, later accusing Fallaci of “skillful editing,” while never exactly denying the cringe-inducing quotes that maximized his role in formulating American foreign policy. “The main point arises from the fact that I’ve always acted alone,” he boasted. “Americans like the cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone on his horse.” Enchanted by Fallaci’s angular beauty, Mr. Kissinger also simultaneously bragged about and minimized his reputation as a lothario. “For me women are only a diversion, a hobby,” he told Fallaci. “Nobody spends too much time with his hobbies.”

Outside her native Italy, Fallaci is now a largely forgotten figure. But she was

once one of the world's most recognizable journalists, famous for her ability to extract embarrassing quotes from powerful men. So great was her fame that she routinely complained about being stopped by admirers and bemoaned the heaps of unopened fan mail that cluttered her apartment. Despite claiming to have "never sought out success," La Fallaci—a nickname of her own coining—was never just a byline. She was the co-star of her own journalism, always a prominent character in her interviews, at times even pervasive to a fault.

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ORIANA FALLACI

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By Cristina De Stefano

*Other, 282 pages, \$25.95*

In her authorized biography, "Oriana Fallaci: The Journalist, the Agitator, the Legend," Cristina De Stefano reminds readers of Fallaci's journalistic legacy while clumsily attempting to

disappear her many flaws. But one must pity Ms. De Stefano, tasked with recounting the life of someone who once declared she "never authorized, nor will I ever authorize, a biography." To borrow a phrase from another trailblazing female journalist, Clare Boothe Luce, Fallaci had a rage for fame but bristled when written about critically.

Despite her hunch that Fallaci, who died in 2006, would have hated this book, Ms. De Stefano dutifully fulfills the implied requirement that any authorized Fallaci biography be hagiographic. In the 1990s, Fallaci did sanction a biography—which provided access to private papers and correspondence—but the author judged her to be "a celebrity determined to control absolutely my written words and her own official image."

Fallaci's toughness was forged from an early age. Born into a country consumed by fascism, at 14 she acted as a courier for the partisans. By 18, she was writing a column for a Florence newspaper. She would eventually distinguish herself by "the Fallaci style": the interview as blood sport. She was like a spider, disorienting her quarry before dismembering them—knocking them off balance with an insult, finishing them off with a question to which there was no good answer. To Yasser Arafat, leader of the Palestine Liberation Organization: "How many Israelis do you think you've killed up to this date?"

Her interviews were substantive but almost comically performative. If her subject refused to provide the appropriate drama, Fallaci would. With the activist and future president of Poland Lech Wałęsa, her opening gambit was to observe that the anticommunist hero bore a striking resemblance to Joseph Stalin. In the company of Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini, Fallaci was forced to wear a chador, providing her the opportunity to later dramatically remove the "stupid, medieval rag." When Libyan dictator Moammar Gadhafi indulged in anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, she replied, "Hitler would have been a very good friend for you."

Fallaci traded in moral outrage, but her moral compass was often in need of calibration. She judged Mr. Wałęsa "a vain, presumptuous man, a bigot" with a "certain air of protofascism about him." Unlike most dreary communist apparatchiks, Chinese dictator Deng Xiaoping proved a formidable debator—and became an object of her affection. She later claimed that such a clever man couldn't have ordered the Tiananmen Square massacre. None of this is mentioned by Ms. De Stefano. Nor does she confront accusations, from Mr. Kissinger and others, that Fallaci wasn't the most reliable narrator.

Reading Fallaci now, one senses that she needlessly inflated experiences that were already impressive. As a Washington Post writer pointed out in 1977, Fallaci "seems to spin a web of tales and fantasy when she talks." One new example unearthed by Ms. De Stefano is Fallaci's previously unpublished—and doubtful—claim to have once discharged a weapon in battle during the Vietnam War. Ms. De Stefano writes without skepticism that this was "not unusual," even though journalists rarely carried weapons in Vietnam and it would have been unthinkable for the military to distribute them to reporters in the field.

There is, though, much to say in Fallaci's defense. She was an uncommonly brave reporter, a muscular and meticulous writer and the rare interviewer who refused to ignore her subjects' little hypocrisies, obfuscatory verbs and weasel adjectives.

She was a self-declared woman of the left, variously identifying as an anarchist and social democrat, but her natural ideological comrades treated her with suspicion. She was a reflexive anticommunist in an era when opposition to U.S. policy frequently drove its critics into the embrace of its illiberal enemies. She vigorously opposed America's presence in Vietnam, but wasn't far off when she later argued that she "was the only journalist, the only one, who wrote the truth about Hanoi, back in 1969." She had a deep affection for the U.S., but was nevertheless infected with a lazy, *bien-pensant* anti-Americanism.

Having retreated from public view in the 1990s, her slight body ravaged by cancer, Fallaci spent her final years in repose on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. When, on September 11, Islamists committed mass murder in her adopted city, Fallaci found a subject to occupy her final years. The resulting obsessive hatred of Islam would do much to sully her legacy. In

angry and clotted prose, she produced a best-selling anti-Islam screed, “The Rage and the Pride,” and a slightly more restrained sequel, “The Force of Reason.” With an acknowledged crudity more “a scream rather than an essay,” Fallaci denounced the supposed Islamization of Europe, an irreversible demographic trend because the “sons of Allah breed like rats.” It was an ugly comparison with very dark lineage. Ms. De Stefano devotes only a handful of pages to Fallaci’s anti-Muslim turn and avoids quoting any of the controversial passages, instead offering perfunctory descriptions of her critics (“Some accuse her of inciting racial and religious hatred”) and breezing toward 2006, when Fallaci succumbed to cancer.

Oriana Fallaci’s career was varied and imperfect, but she is deserving of a serious treatment by a serious writer. Instead, Ms. De Stefano has produced a single-author Festschrift that, in examining the life of a journalist who reveled in controversy, studiously avoids it. Perhaps, then, Ms. De Stefano was right. Fallaci, enemy of stenographic journalism, probably would have hated this book.

—*Mr. Moynihan is a national correspondent for Vice News on HBO.*

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