

The Washington Post

Books Review

Oriana Fallaci: the journalist, the agitator, the legend

by John Domini March 23

These days, the news media feels blasted to smithereens. A cluster of tweets seems to outweigh any single reportorial voice, no matter how true it rings. But Oriana Fallaci, who died in 2006, built her career on such a voice: distinctive, direct and frank. The Italian journalist — and novelist and more — achieved a global reputation for efforts like her probing 1972 interview with Henry Kissinger. Nixon’s foreign policy adviser wouldn’t sit down with just anyone, but Fallaci had already set herself apart. She’d gone from no-nonsense local coverage around her home town, Florence, to incisive stories about Hollywood, where Orson Welles praised her “sharp, Tuscan eye,” and then to risky reporting on the Vietnam War. Kissinger had been impressed by her eye-opening interview with North Vietnamese Gen. Vo Nguyen Giap. But Kissinger apparently didn’t realize that Fallaci would bring the same formidable research and “impertinent questions” to bear on him. She got the usually careful national security adviser to admit that he felt like “the cowboy who rides all alone.”

Kissinger later termed the interview disastrous, and he was far from the only subject Fallaci left shaken. “Being a journalist,” she wrote, “means being disobedient,” and she went on breaking the rules for half of century. Her final uproar followed the Sept. 11 attacks, long after she’d become “La Fallaci” (a regular in The Washington Post) and settled in Manhattan. Though already in her 70s, her celebrity status didn’t keep her from heading for the smoking Towers (the police intervened). She whipped out a blistering screed, “[The Rage and the Pride](#)” (2002), which again upset expectations. The woman who had been so critical of the United States in Vietnam now all but called for war on Islam.

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[Washington Post obituary for Oriana Fallaci]

Fallaci's notoriety was matched by a private life full of broken crockery. Her best-known novel, "[Letter to a Child Never Born](#)," shared elements of her own turmoil: a child conceived out of wedlock, a mother who couldn't care less who was the father and a bloody spontaneous abortion. At least two such miscarriages scarred Fallaci's attempts at love. In the process, this small, pretty woman often drew blood herself. Her seductions took as many chances as her interviews, and she never crossed a bridge she couldn't burn.

Overall, Cristina De Stefano rises to the challenges of describing such a dramatic life. "[Oriana Fallaci: The Journalist, The Agitator, The Legend](#)" begins by following the chronology, delivering chills early, when the teenage girl was a runner for the Partisans, helping fight the Nazis. But as the biography reaches the 1960s and '70s, when Fallaci was at her most prolific and jet-setting, De Stefano changes the arrangement. She allows extra space for the Vietnam War — and for some remarkable photographs — while alternating between chapters on standout books and notable lovers. One of those men, interviewed decades later, provides delicious material; despite the mean trick Fallaci pulled with his old love letters, the man still carries a torch. Pillow talk like that is put alongside published material throughout, and the counterpoint usually proves effective. Once or twice, a quote floats up out of nowhere, but the more nagging problem for De Stefano is one of tone.

The intensity of Fallaci herself, the way she went to extremes, leaks into her biographer's style. Just as the book's subtitle, with that word "legend," flirts with overstatement, so late passages on combat reporting sometimes throw in generalities: e.g. "She is very superstitious." Really? "Very"? Then why not mention it earlier? The same impulse prompts De Stefano to read minds (unnamed war correspondents are "amused" by Fallaci) and to repeat herself. The translation, by Marina Harss, never lacks for clarity, which leaves the blame for these infelicities on the author. But if "Oriana Fallaci" gets operatic at times, that's not just because it's Italian. There's something personal at stake here. A younger woman writer is honoring her elder. Fallaci may be a pioneer, a kind of prophet, but she's without honor in her own country. The biography's closing pages rail against Italy's pernicious machismo, which reduces this "international star" to a "a madwoman, an eccentric."

If the book has a climax, it's the chapter on "[Interview with History](#)," an examination of Fallaci's methods that gets so close to her special magic that it ought to be required reading for all reporters. Indeed, anyone who takes time for

this compelling biography will experience the tingle of that magic, and with it the continuing power of honest, hands-on journalism.

John Domini's latest book is "MOVIEOLA!" In 2019, he'll publish his fourth novel, "The Color Inside a Melon."

ORIANA FALLACI

The Journalist, the Agitator, the Legend

By Cristina De Stefano

Translated from the Italian by

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