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Jerelle Kraus. *All the Art That's Fit to Print: Inside The New York Times Op-Ed Page.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2009. 280 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-13824-6.

Reviewed by Michael Socolow (University of Maine at Orono)

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The Art of the Op-Ed

Jerelle Kraus's *All the Art That's Fit to Print* is actually three different books. While primarily a memoir written by the veteran art director of the *New York Times*'s Op-Ed page, *All the Art* is also a book of illustrations, filled with numerous creative and provocative drawings and sketches. Finally, it is a history of the newspaper's Op-Ed page, broken down by decade, as told by an insider. "*All the Art*," Kraus notes, is "inevitably personal, as well as historical" (p.1).

As a memoir, Kraus's work provides colorful, intimate, and occasionally searing portraits of several high-ranking *Times* executives. An early scene depicts Kraus pleading–to little effect– with an icy Charlotte Curtis, the Op-Ed page editor in 1979, over a withering caricature of Henry Kissinger. This setback teaches Kraus "the caution that must be exercised when representing America's newspaper of record–especially when treating a figure like Kissinger, with his inevitable connections to the *Times* brass" (p. 6). In general, Kraus lavishes praise upon the supportive editors who protected her independence and scorns those–like Howell Raines–who challenged her.

All the Art recalls the numerous conversations (and arguments) between Kraus and the editors, artists, and *Times* contributors she worked with during her tenure as Op-Ed page art director. The book's chief value lies in its chronicling of the disputes resulting in the rejection of certain artworks. By placing the rejected illustrations next to descriptions of the debates surrounding them, Kraus forces the reader to ponder the issues arising from the juxtaposition of art and commentary. A basic conflict over both aesthetics and the purpose of art emerges throughout the book. For Kraus, the value of artwork on the Op-Ed page derives from its ability to incite, provoke, and engage. Her editors often preferred more simple explanatory or illustrative art. The best artwork in the book accomplishes both tasks, but many of the pieces (both published and rejected) can be classified as either too ambiguous or inflammatory.

Kraus's writing style is colorful, and the book is peppered with amusing anecdotes and memories. At times, however, her enthusiastic storytelling seems to undermine her attempt to deliver an accurate history of the formation of the *Times*'s Op-Ed page. For example, this paragraph introduces the reader to the feature's origins:

To find out how the Op-Ed phenomenon was born, we have to peek behind the closed door of editorial writer John Oakes's office on the *Times*'s ecclesiastical tenth floor. There, on a Monday morning in 1958, Oakes leaned back in his plush leather chair to read the "urgent" manuscript he'd received in that morning's mail, a text so compelling that the black coffee in his cafeteria paper cup grew cold. The essay's discussion of the Suez Canal was incisive. Oakes ached to publish it, yet returned it with this note: "I regret that your excellent piece is too long for a Letter to the editor and too short for a magazine article." That Friday, Oakes opened the *New York Herald Tribune*, which ran occasional outside contributions, and saw the very Suez text he'd been offered on Monday. He concluded that the *Times* should dedicate a full page to nonstaff essays! (p.11)

This excerpt offers a vivid illustration of Kraus's style, as well as her historical sensibility. No direct citation

is offered for this scene, but in the following paragraph Kraus explains how the story was related "in his Manhattan home by the late John Oakes." The Oakes interview, she continues, was "taped for Columbia University's Oral History Project" (p.11).

Columbia University has posted the entirety of the John B. Oakes Oral History on-line, in its notable New Yorkers Series.[1] Using the available search function, I was unable to confirm such assertions as the original essay arriving on a Monday, that it was labeled "urgent," that Oakes allowed his coffee to grow cold, or even that the *Herald Tribune* published the same essay "that Friday." That Kraus places the Suez Canal Crisis in 1958, rather than 1956 when it occurred, further undermines confidence in her accuracy.

In her zeal to tell a good story, Kraus might be forgiven for eliding standards of accuracy in historical scholarship. She does not claim to be a professional historian. But more serious breaches of professional standards occur as well. For example, here Kraus directly quotes Oakes about the page: "'I especially wanted writers who disagreed with our editorials,' said Oakes. 'I felt that was a function of a free press. I ran a piece by Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge and another by someone I hated–Nixon's vice president, the dreadful Spiro Agnew. We also got pieces from Arthur Miller, E. B. White, Arthur Schlesinger, and Philip Roth. It was a way of getting the germ of my idea into the paper"' (p. 11).

By all accounts, Oakes was a somewhat formal and circumspect man. The strong judgments expressed in this quote–that Oakes "hated" the "dreadful" Spiro Agnew–appear somewhat out of character. Direct quotes voicing such sentiments appear nowhere in other works examining Oakes and the origins of the Op-Ed page.[2] When one enters "Spiro Agnew" into the oral history's search function, the following is returned: "'So, there were various experimentations going on during these years with a Topics column, but the part of it that really has some relevance to the Op-Ed page was the fact that I did get some well-known outsiders. Spiro T. Agnew was one of them, and Henry Cabot Lodge, and people of some note were contributing columns to the *Times*, in a format that really was a predecessor to an Op-Ed page, but these were only run as columns, often expressing views (viz: Agnew) opposed to the *New York Times*."' A search for the word "dreadful" turns up no hits in the Oakes Oral History, nor does a search for "E. B. White."

Ultimately, though, *All the Art* effectively reveals the enormous difficultly involved in selecting artwork for such a prestigious spot in a prominent publication.

Notes

[1]. `http://www.columbia.edu/cu/lweb/digital/collections/nny/oakesjb/introduction.html`.

[2]. See, for instance, Chris Argyris, *Behind the Front Page: Organizational Self-Renewal in a Metropolitan Newspaper* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1974), 153-160; Edwin Diamond, *Behind the* Times*: Inside the* New York Times (New York: Random House, 1993), 124-127, 277-295; Joseph C. Goulden, *Fit to Print: A.M. Rosenthal and His Times* (Secaucus, NJ: Lyle Stuart, 1988), 202-203; James Reston, *Deadline: A Memoir* (New York: Times Books, 1992), 363-364; and Susan E. Tifft and Alex S. Jones, *The Trust: The Private and Powerful Family Behind the New York Times* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), 462-465.

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