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Bill Minutaglio, W. Michael Smith. *Molly Ivins: A Rebel Life.* New York: PublicAffairs, 2009. Illustrations. xv + 335 pp. $26.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-58648-717-1.

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The Life and Times of Molly Ivins

Molly Ivins: A Rebel's Life might better have been entitled *Becoming Molly Ivins.* The book primarily recounts the inner life of the Texas journalist (August 30, 1944 to January 31, 2007). We get a 230-page build-up describing Ivins's professional and private life from 1944 to 1993, when syndication and her first book made her financially independent. But we get only 77 pages to carom through her most successful and productive literary period between 1993 and her death from cancer in 2007. "Inner life" here means the quotidian (as we say in North Zulch):[1] personal relationships, struggles with supervisors at work, and personal issues, highlighted by her chronic alcoholism and her fourteen-year battle with cancer. We get very little about her intellectual struggles or the satisfactions involved in writing columns, speeches, and books.

Authors Bill Minutaglio and W. Michael Smith note quite clearly that they combed through the 150 boxes of personal effects that Ivins left to the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas and not her voluminous writings. Not that Ivins did not have a fascinating life, and not that the book does not cover the majority of that life quite well. The book falters, though, when Ivins becomes financially independent in the last decades of her life. Minutaglio admits as much on a segment of *Book TV* on C-SPAN, saying that some future author will have to take up that subject.[2] This approach seems a little strange since Smith, Minutaglio's coauthor, was Ivins's research assistant for six years during this prolific time and since people who worked closely with Ivins after 1992 had already given extensive interviews that could have been used as source material.

Perhaps more important, it is the writings that make Ivins's life merit a biography. No complete bibliography exists of her considerable number of published writings. One of the favors Minutaglio and Smith do perform is to describe the subject matter of some of her newspaper articles at the *Minneapolis Tribune* (1967-70), the *New York Times* (1976-80), the *Dallas Times Herald* (1980-91), and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* (1992-2001). Still, there are no articles or critiques from her years with the *Texas Observer* (1970-76). Online databases typically do not begin coverage until the early 1980s, by which time "Molly Inc." is in full bloom. Indeed, allowing for human error, online databases credit Ivins with 346 articles in periodicals (1979-2009), 305 newspaper articles (1986-2009), and the forewords to 4 books; Ivins also was the compiler of 4 books of her own columns and coauthor of 4 monographs with Lou Dubose, her mentor at the *Texas Observer.*[3]

"Texas journalist"–the term most often applied to Ivins–requires some explanation. Although born in California, Ivins spent most of her life in Texas. She spent the period from her early childhood until college in Houston; did an eight-year stint at the *Texas Observer* in Austin; worked with the *Dallas Times Herald* and the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*; and then, from 1993 to 2007, enjoyed her most financially independent period that the authors rightly dub "Molly Inc." (p. 215). The authors, by the way, are extremely lax about providing specific dates in the text, making the reader research the timing of events.

Despite her Ivy League education at Smith College and her junior year abroad in France, she became quintessentially Texan, and she spent a great deal of her life explaining the ways of Texas to others. Her later Texas journalism combined hard expose with sarcastic humor. During her *Texas Observer* days, she was often the only woman in the aisles of the state legislature, the capitol corridors, the back offices, and the after-hours bars. She frequently used her gender to wheedle information out of slightly inebriated solons who woke up the next morning to see their names linked to a dubious political opinion in print.

Yet Ivins left the drunken rough-and-tumble world of

the Texas legislature for New York City in 1976 to work for the *New York Times*. A deep-down sentiment exists among intellectually inclined Texans that they cannot truly succeed in their beloved state, and they must abide elsewhere, particularly New York City, to reach the heights of intellectual success they feel is due them. (Newsman-turned-folklorist John Henry Faulk and entertainer Kinky Friedmann are also members of the so-called Texas-New York axis.) Ivins found the state legislators in Albany just as crooked as those in Texas but not nearly as interesting. Her exile to the *New York Times*'s Rocky Mountain bureau bored her even as a fellow Denver reporter, this time for the *Los Angeles Times*, won a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting about unsafe dams in the American West (p. 184). Ivins was interested in people and what they did, not in structures or institutions.

In terms of her personal life, Ivins's combative relationship with her father constitutes an idée fixe (as we say in Flatonia). James E. ("Jim" aka "the General") Ivins has the most index listings, even though his coverage is more in fleeting references than hard analysis. After divorcing his first wife, the General, a major officer of Tenneco Oil, roamed the East Coast of the United States looking for better places to sail his beloved boats. He doted on his one son and generally ignored his two daughters his entire life. The authors attribute Ivins's rebellion against authority and her abhorrence at "playing the role" in an office environment to her war with her father. What a great irony it is that Ivins was sorting out a mature reflection of her father for publication when she got word of his death (p. 273). None of the rest of the important people in Ivins's life gets anywhere near as thorough coverage.

Bob Bullock, who mentored Ivins during her *Texas Observer* years, probably should have. Bullock served as an assistant to the Texas governor, secretary of state, and state comptroller while Ivins was at the *Texas Observer*. Inconsequential in and of themselves, these offices gave Bullock access to the ad hoc legislative/lobbyist coteries where liquor and opinions flowed and where Ivins, the only woman in the room, learned so much of the ways of power and its exercise. Ivins and Bullock remained close upon her return to Texas in 1980, but he apparently ceased being the legislature coach he had been in the 1970s.

Ace storyteller Faulk showed Ivins a successful example of the Texas-New York axis. Faulk faced a virulent faction of McCarthyites, who got Faulk fired, but who six years later, lost a huge libel suit that Faulk brought against them. His mentoring of Ivins as a storyteller with a political message was especially important for her own career. Minutaglio and Smith manage to communicate the relationship adequately, but they scatter it in pieces throughout the text.

Neither do Minutaglio and Smith tell us when and where Ivins met Ann Richards. A safe bet places them together when spouse Dave Richards gave a two-office complex to the *Texas Observer* and to the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) while Ivins was at the *Texas Observer* and becoming an acolyte of Faulk's work at the ACLU. The two women appear to have become instant best friends. Ann Richards apparently introduced Ivins to the pleasures of Texas river float trips and hamlet junkets for sausage, beer, and good times. Minutaglio and Smith spend three pages describing the effects these frequent float trips had on Ivins's political thinking and her writing style.

The one philosophical point running through the book–mostly hidden–is the "problem of objectivity." (The quotation marks are mine.) How does a political commentator savagely satirize the shortcomings of various political figures while also producing an open-minded analysis of their political positions? Early in her career, while working at the *Minneapolis Tribune*, Ivins lived with a local political activist named Jack Cann while writing a series of sympathetic articles on "Young Radicals." Before they shipped Ivins off to their Austin bureau in 1985, the management at the *Dallas Times-Herald* endured her tirades about the countless points of view a writer could use on a story. Ivins forcefully and pungently told them that "ultimate objectivity was bullshit" (p. 215). As she moved more toward economic independence as "Molly Inc." she worked hard to render her outré coverage of the Texas legislature into a format for analyzing national issues. Ivins diligently labored at polishing and recycling many of her earlier invectives, and good fortune gave her still additional juicy Texan politicians to skewer with the Bush family's rise to national prominence.

But people do not only live in their own world; they live in the world with others. Minutaglio and Smith write well about Ivins's own world and almost well enough about the ways she navigated the worlds of others. They bring out the openhearted Ivins who gave away money, possessions, and time without hesitation, and they chronicle the amazon who cold-cocked any man who made untoward advances. But readers do not know where Ivins fits in their worlds. Despite the public speeches and TV appearances, the public never got to

know Ivins beyond the carefully crafted "Texas journalist" image.

Neither do we know the other oeuvre of her newspaper articles, editorials, book forewords, and books as enumerated above. Pigeon-holing Ivins as a progressive liberal Democrat is far too simple, and, anyway, what do those terms mean and how do they apply to her writings? Does her writing adhere to the carefully crafted Texas journalist, or did she move beyond her Austin-centric playground to a national podium? Just how far did she set the stage for other women, such as Maureen Dowd and Ann Coulter? For answers to those questions, we need another book on Ivins.

Notes

[1]. Ivins's humor often involved using a French word or a word used only in high-level literary discourse and coupling it with the name of a Texas town where, chances were, nobody knew the word or its meaning.

[2]. Bill Minutaglio, *Book TV*, C-SPAN, January 4, 2010, http://www.booktv.org/search.aspx?-For=molly%20ivins.

[3]. The reviewer of this work searched Gale Group Cengage for periodical articles, Proquest for newspaper articles, and OCLC WorldCat for books by Ivins.

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