

## Book Reviews

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*Sinatra: The Chairman.*

By James Kaplan.

New York: Doubleday, 2015.

979 pages.

Writing a biography of Frank Sinatra would seem a challenging task at this stage. The spectacular highs and lows of Sinatra's career, massive critical acclaim, and an epic life—one could hardly term it "private"—long ago propelled him to iconic status and provide an extraordinary biographical narrative. The vast number of biographies that have been written about Sinatra attest to the potency of his story and simultaneously pose the problem of how to distinguish any new book from its predecessors. Kitty Kelley's 1986 *His Way: The Unauthorized Biography* casts a long shadow. Despite Kelley's singularly unflattering assessment of her subject, her extensive research makes it still the most revelatory of all biographies of Sinatra, as she gave substance to a number of aspects of the star's life that had largely been hidden behind vague rumor and unsubstantiated FBI files until her book's publication.

James Kaplan takes on this dilemma again in *Sinatra: The Chairman*, the second volume of his biographical journey. The first, *Frank: The Voice*, covers Sinatra's youth and early career until his mythical rise from career ashes with his Best Supporting Actor Academy Award in 1954 for his performance as Private Angelo Maggio in *From Here to Eternity* (1953). Kaplan picks up the thread of Sinatra's story in *The Chairman*, moving chronologically through to his subject's death in 1998, concluding with an ending literally at the star's gravestone.

This vast book takes a two-handed approach, narrating the developments in Sinatra's career and life against a cultural landscape of the second half of America's twentieth century. The reactions of both young people and the recording companies to Elvis Presley and the Beatles, the corporatization of Las Vegas, and the interconnected worlds of politics, entertainment, and organized crime form a backdrop to Sinatra's declining popular success as a recording artist, his shift from Vegas emperor to being a nuisance who could not get credit at the clubs and whom someone actually knocked to the floor at The Sands, and the singer's ill-fated relationships with both the Kennedy clan and the Italian American underworld.

The opportunity for commentary and analysis afforded by such an approach might position the book as what has in recent years been termed the "scholarly biography," but Kaplan delves only minimally into this arena. Since 1947 when E. J. Kahn, Jr., in his perceptive book *The Voice: The Story of an American Phenomenon, Frank Sinatra*, linked Sinatra's popularity with America's female youth to their identification with his working-class Italian American background and with a wartime desire for an aspirational figure, biography and shifting cultural contexts have played a role both in Sinatra's art and in responses to the person and his work. Here, contextualizing Sinatra offers a limited historical framework, as Kaplan focuses more on shifts in the media industry while refraining from exploration of Sinatra's more extensive and representative cultural reach. Instead, Kaplan remains rooted in his subject, demonstrating how changes in

American popular culture affect the individual Sinatra experience. The author's intent to delimit his discussion in this way is reflected in his analysis of Sinatra's work, which largely steers clear of a rich field of academic writing. Kaplan's commentary on Sinatra's recordings draws heavily on Will Friedwald's (1997) excellent *Sinatra! The Song Is You: A Singer's Art* where he considers the ways in which Sinatra's meticulous attention to music he regarded as an American art form shaped his recordings. Kaplan is attentive in particular to the singer's close relationships with his musical arrangers—notably, Axel Stordahl, Nelson Riddle, Billy May, Gordon Jenkins, and Quincy Jones—and the acknowledged role Sinatra played as artistic director of his work.

Kaplan takes a more perfunctory approach to Sinatra's films, perhaps influenced by Sinatra's own attitude to a career the star always held as secondary and that, as Kaplan outlines, he increasingly came to view as a distraction from his recording work and business and political interests. At his height in the postwar twentieth century, however, Sinatra became a provocative presence on Hollywood's big screen, presenting an unusually challenging image of the American male that was sexually objectified and emotionally vulnerable and yet laden with machismo and that consistently positioned him as an outsider, defined by class and ethnicity in a WASP-obsessed United States. Sinatra's cinematic importance lies in this image, elements of which are present not only in critically acclaimed films such as *The Man with the Golden Arm* (1955) and *The Manchurian Candidate* (1962), to which Kaplan gives additional attention, but in films that were significant for the era's racial politics such as *Kings Go Forth* (1958), which rates barely a passing mention. Kaplan's admiration for Sinatra's artistry as a singer is so great that his writing tends to undervalue Sinatra's screen work, resulting in analysis that becomes largely a subjective, and unbalanced, critique. A jarring example comes in the author's surprisingly lengthy discussion of Sinatra's 1960 television special *Welcome Home Elvis*, which Sinatra had been persuaded to do as a means of seeing out his contract with ABC and bolstering the ratings of the network's failing *The Frank Sinatra Show*. Kaplan concludes that "both [Presley and Sinatra] seemed to be having the time of their lives" (317), despite Sinatra's obvious discomfort in a show that positioned him as a middle-aged swinger against a new youth idol whose music he had publicly derided.

Kaplan's book is nonetheless a measured biography that resists the temptation to define Sinatra as saint or sinner. The events he chronicles are all well-trodden ground: the compulsive on-off relationship with Ava Gardner, the broken engagements to Lauren Bacall and others, the dalliances with John F. Kennedy and Sam Giancana, the Rat Pack's adventures in Vegas, and Sinatra's shift to a form of political and cultural conservatism, all while he maintained a desire to combine musical quality with his business instinct for selling records. The picture Kaplan paints of Sinatra is ultimately one of a supremely talented and driven man whose musical artistry was the sole space in which his exceptionally guarded nature relented. Kaplan avoids a simplistic biographical reading of Sinatra's music, but his acknowledgment that the man and his art are inextricably linked brings with it an impartial acceptance of Sinatra's essential capriciousness. This means that he often leaves it to the witnesses to events to provide any judgments or to psychoanalyze his subject.

Kaplan uncovers no hidden aspects of Sinatra's life. He does, however, make some major omissions, such as the debacle that surrounded Sinatra's 1974 tour of Australia during which some disrespectful comments he made about Australia's female journalists

resulted in Sinatra being stranded for three days as airport staff refused to refuel his private jet (immortalized in Paul Goldman's 2003 film *The Night We Called It a Day*). Since Kaplan explores this period as one in which Sinatra's power seems to be both simultaneously exercised and challenged, this seems an odd exclusion. At the same time, Kaplan's use of a number of key sources, Kelley's included, to compile an otherwise extensive overview of Sinatra's life and career and interrogate their often contrasting versions of events makes this an interesting and useful introductory resource for Sinatra scholars.

—KAREN MCNALLY  
*London Metropolitan University*

### Works Cited

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*Daughters, Dads, and the Path through Grief: Tales from Italian America.*

By Donna H. DiCello and Lorraine Mangione.

Atascadero, CA: Impact Publishers, 2014.

253 pages.

There is no shortage of books that purport to offer solace and advice for the bereaved. What is distinctive about *Daughters, Dads, and the Path through Grief: Tales from Italian America* is that Donna DiCello and Lorraine Mangione aim to shed light on the multi-faceted relationship between fathers and daughters in Italian American families and how this bond undergoes changes throughout life and the experience of loss—in this particular case, the deaths of the fathers. Psychologists themselves, this book's authors intend to convey messages of hope and acceptance through their own stories and those of several other women who have lost their fathers. The book offers readers a window into the experiences of a diverse group of women rather than a prescription for dealing with grief and bereavement.

Through the lens of psychology and an understanding of Italian American culture, the authors weave together their own journeys and those of fifty-one others, women from all walks of life, representing a diversity of ages, religious beliefs, education, sexual orientations, careers, and family structures. Some of the women grew up in Italian American communities while others did not. One common thread they all experienced is the death of their fathers. The women in the study were self-selected, willing to be interviewed, and had largely "sound" relationships with their fathers, that is, no experience of abandonment or abuse.