

CHRISTOPHER BRAY

FAST LANE

NOBODY'S PERFECT: WRITINGS
FROM THE NEW YORKER

★

By Anthony Lane
(Picador 750pp £15.99)

CELLULOID SKYLINE:
NEW YORK AND THE MOVIES

★

By James Sanders
(Bloomsbury 498pp £30)

KEN TYNAN WAS a drama critic on Fleet Street for more than a decade, but he quit the *Observer* film column in 1966 after just a couple of years. As a theatre critic he had been used to having some sway over the success or failure of a new production; when he wrote about films, his opinions seemed to count for nothing. It didn't matter that he had panned, say, *The Sound of Music*: audiences (which, given their size, must have been composed at least in part of *Observer* readers) handed over their money to see Julie Andrews twitter at the Nazis anyway.

What would Tynan have made of matters today, when genuine critics have less power than ever, and the average movie review is little more than a rewrite of a semi-literate press release? The fact that potential viewers today learn about upcoming movies not from reviewers but from gossip columnists would have worried him, and he would have been shocked by the proportion of space even the best critics devote to the latest trash-fest. When Pauline Kael reviewed the first *Star Wars* movie for the *New Yorker* she gave herself just two paragraphs to junk it. Her successor, Anthony Lane, dumped 2,500 words on *The Phantom Menace*.

Even giving a crock like that the bum's rush must be a

bit like cleaning out the Augean stables, but there are worse ways to earn a living — cleaning out real stables, for instance. And there is nowhere better to be a film critic than the *New Yorker*. This is not merely because of space (Lane gets a two-page spread to talk about one or, occasionally, two movies) but also because of time. *New Yorker* movie reviews last, if only because they are invariably collected and reissued between hard covers. Kael published ten books of her pieces from the magazine, Penelope Gilliatt got a couple of volumes out of her years there and Terrence Rafferty brought out a lacklustre collection of his reviews a few years back. Now we have *Nobody's Perfect*, Lane's 750-page 'hunk of old journalism', half of whose pages are given over to movie reviews.

Beautifully written movie reviews. Lane is as fine an essayist as the English-speaking world presently has and his old notices are worth reading even if you have never seen the movies under discussion. Unlike Tynan, he has no illusions about any influence he might have at the box office. His only hope for this book is that it might cause a reader to 'suddenly jump up and down in unprecedented fury, enraged by my appraisal of *Speed* or *The Bridges of Madison County*'. Well, maybe. The fact is that final judgements are in very short supply. Lane pulls no punches on *The Phantom Menace* — 'What is this? Crap. Say it out loud: crap' — but in the main he is content gently to weigh up the pros and cons of whatever confronts him. As he says in his introduction, the job of the critic is to file 'a sensory report on the kind of experience [into which moviegoers] will be wading, or plunging, should they decide to risk a ticket'.

As sensory reports go, Lane's aren't quite up there with those of Kael or David Thomson (the best writer on the movies there has ever been), but there is no denying that he has a habit of spotting things other critics miss: the way Harrison Ford seems to build every performance around a different haircut, for instance, or how Anthony Hopkins's smile never lasts quite long enough to convince. Lane also demonstrates an awareness (unusual among contemporary critics) that movies are team efforts. Like Tynan before him, he knows that a composer can do a lot to boost or blur a film's strengths, and that the cameraman has more than a little to do with the way a movie looks. The question is, does Lane actually like looking at movies or are they mere grist to his comic mill? Critics who make us laugh are always worth a read, and Lane makes you laugh more than most, but often you can't help thinking that what he likes best about the movies is the opportunities they afford him for wisecracks.

The same cannot be said of the literary essays that make up the second half of this book. Here, in pieces on (among others) Waugh, Connolly, Ruskin and Housman, Lane demonstrates his real strength: old-fashioned close reading. With what delicacy he unpacks meaning: 'If you had to pick a single Waugh word — the syllable that registers his

demeanour as reliably as the "Sir" of Dr Johnson — it would be "so". Designed to establish a causal connection, it may equally gesture toward a run of events so fluid that cause and effect can be found giggling under the table.' If you had to pick a single Lane word it would be 'equally'. Weighing up a sentence can take him as many words as most critics spend on a whole book. No writer is better suited to the discursive freedom the *New Yorker* grants. Lane had previously done good work in this country (as the *Independent on Sunday's* first film critic), but the move across the pond has taken him up a gear. Here's to the fast Lane.

But then New York, the song tells us, is 'a wonderful town'. I'm afraid I'm still taking Sinatra's word for it. Awful to admit, but I have never been to the Big Apple. I sometimes wonder whether I ever will: the place is so alive to me in a fantasy fuelled by a flurry of movies (*While the City Sleeps*, *Manhattan*, *Taxi Driver*, *The Apartment* — the list goes on) that I am scared reality might short-change me. What makes James Sanders's *Celluloid Skyline* more than just an NYC movie résumé is his awareness that my experience is not unique — that for a majority of viewers Gotham is still mythic and dreamy. Sanders is an architect by training, and his book, whose readings of the cinema's numerous New York stories would put many a professional critic to shame, is built to last. Page for page, this is the best new film book of the year.

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