

## Book Reviews

Alice Jardine. *At the Risk of Thinking: An Intellectual Biography of Julia Kristeva*. Mari Ruti, ed. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020. Pp. xiv + 385. \$26.95.

An authoritative voice narrates Kristeva's life: Alice Jardine knows her subject extremely well, perhaps better than anyone writing in English. She was Kristeva's research assistant as a graduate student at Columbia in 1976 when Kristeva first went to teach there; she has conducted many interviews over a period of years and even visited Bulgaria with her. She calls her subject "an important personal friend." And I call this an important book.

Jardine's close access to Kristeva is both a signal strength of this book and a possible caution: one might be inclined to task the work with a loss of objectivity. But from the start, it is perfectly clear that this is not *that* sort of biography. It is personal, and at times intimate—and this is appropriate for Kristeva, for whom the intimate ranks high among her subjects of inquiry. Where there has been controversy about Kristeva, Jardine is resolutely supportive of the positions she has taken. Examples include the criticisms coming from feminists who think Kristeva is a traitor to the cause and the recent claim she served as a spy named Sabina for the Bulgarian secret police.

We read here an intellectual account: always factual and drawing on every available source, Jardine's opinions are formed by her research into her subject.

The title is modeled on Kristeva's *Au risque de la pensée* (2001), and it is a good one because of the co-presence of the two key words: risk and thinking. Kristeva is a thinker—that is the foremost characteristic this biography extolls—but she is a thinker at risk: she takes chances, she pushes ahead and innovates at every turn, tries out the novel idea, studies it, and writes the book about it, at the risk of being badly understood and losing followers. As Jardine writes, "she theorized the problem she found herself living by writing a book about it." *At the Risk of Thinking* rests on the multifaceted elaboration of this reality about its subject, the "constatutory intellectual."

Well organized, the biography is largely chronological, with stages of the life marked by Kristeva's books. There is a continuity in Kristeva's writing rooted in letters, syllables, words, and the sonorities of language, from childhood to the present, with "an increasingly precise and insistent vocabulary and an ever-increasing sense of urgency" (183). Part III, "Becoming Julia Kristeva (1980–Today)," details the Kristeva most known to current readers from the plethora of studies about her work. Skillful, succinct coverage of each of Kristeva's books portrays the fully-developed thinker, in 130 pages grouped by decades. Jardine's key point here is how Kristeva has "shifted slowly from analysis to [...] advocating for a strategy based in a renewed secular humanism" (187). The end of Part III outlines the Sabina saga, confirming Kristeva's claims that she was never a spy: that was just not her life.

Part I provides an affective account of Kristeva's early life in more detail than available elsewhere, the distinct influence of each parent on the smart little girl Kristeva was, her education in a French school, and the culmination of her childhood career in the French fellowship that allowed her to move to Paris in December 1965. Part II, "The Crazy Truth of It (1965–1979)," brilliantly demonstrates how the Kristeva of today was already present in the work of the seventies and the latter half of the sixties. The account of her activity during the heyday of structuralism and *Tel Quel* completes and corrects the picture drawn by many others of this period of intense intellectual activity. This part also provides insight into Kristeva's relationship with her husband, Philippe Sollers, and their disabled son David Joyaux.

Throughout, what I admire most about *At the Risk of Thinking* is the author's finely nuanced, perfectly clear analyses of Kristeva's theories, concepts, and positions.

## BOOK REVIEWS

Jardine supplies a chronological list of Kristeva's forty-five books in French, while full data on the English translations, quoted throughout, are available in the notes (which occupy fifty-two pages).

To correct a small error, pileface.com is not "Sollers's website," as Jardine writes in several places. That site, rich and hugely useful, was established by Viktor Kirtov, "créateur et animateur du site" since 2005. Kirtov wrote to me in December 2005, "Je n'ai pas encore osé en informer Philippe Sollers."

Many black and white photographs contribute to the pleasure of reading about this remarkable person's life. Mari Ruti, co-editor of the Bloomsbury series *Psychoanalytic Horizons*, is credited as editor of this book, with her name on the cover and title page.

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