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Pomp & Circumstance

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The Third Man

NADER
Crusader, Spoiler, Icon
 By Justin Martin
 Perseus. 320 pp. \$26

Reviewed by CHRIS LEHMANN

Did he or didn't he? For many Americans—particularly those of a Democratic persuasion—that has become the only question to raise about Ralph Nader. Had he done the gentlemanly thing and left off his doomed third-party candidacy roundabout Labor Day of 2000, would we now find ourselves midway through an Al Gore presidential term?

Justin Martin's sympathetic and briskly narrated account of Nader's life makes little space for such second-guessing, and perhaps rightly so. In some ways, after all, the foreshortened 2000-centric assessment of Nader's character and career underscores many of the criticisms of the major-party "duopoly" that he himself raised on the hustings: obsessive attention to horse-race calculations, airy media speculations in place of searching discussion of issues, and a certain zero-sum alarmism characteristic of an electoral process long on sloganeering and pushing but short on meaningful public participation. And as a strict proposition of math, as Martin argues, Gore's declared 538-vote margin of defeat in Florida was so slim that one could

just as plausibly blame it on Libertarian Party nominee Harry Browne, the Constitution Party's Howard Phillips or the Natural Law Party's John Hagelin.

The larger causes behind Nader's 2000 crusade reside, in any event, in the distinctive cast of his personality, and Martin does a fine job of bringing Nader's impassioned, eccentric and notoriously private life into full, three-dimensional view. Born to Lebanese immigrant parents, Nader grew up in Winsted, Conn., a small manufacturing town nestled in the Berkshire hills. His father, Nathra, ran a restaurant on the edge of town and took Winsted's local democratic institutions—and the byplay of lively public disputation that they needed to thrive—very much to heart.

Young Ralph didn't waste much time following his father's example. After his father had taken him to view lawyers arguing before the local bench, Nader knew he wanted to be an attorney, championing the rights of the underdog before the bar of justice. After getting a Princeton degree in Far Eastern studies and economics, he was off to Harvard Law School—and his first major bout of disillusionment with a venerated institution. Always a feverishly driven student—to the exclusion of anything resembling a dating life or a standard collegiate social circle—Nader was at best a halfhearted presence at law school. The curriculum, he complained, was far too nar-

row, and the faculty preoccupied chiefly with directing the practice of the law into a rigid fealty to the interests of the highest-bidding client pool.

Nader's initial years out of law school were spent first in a perfunctory volunteer tour of Army duty and then in a nondescript general-practice Hartford law office. In reality, though, Nader was training his unquenched longing for righteous legal work on a series of targets—he spent a self-financed summer in D.C., lobbying for Alaska and Hawaii statehood, conducted a tour of Scandinavia to investigate the ombudsman system and developed a growing, obsessive interest in the then all-but unknown issue of automobile safety.

It was this last preoccupation that catapulted Nader to worldwide renown. His 1965 exposé, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, transformed him virtually overnight from an obscure issue entrepreneur to a star congressional witness, a bestselling author and, as would soon become apparent, the target of a not-so-subtle surveillance-and-sneer campaign bankrolled by General Motors, whose 1960-63 line of Corvairs came in for special, scathing treatment in Nader's book.

This dizzying experience might well have been the summit of any good Washington wonk's career, and almost any other sort of reformer would have happily leveraged it into a

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on to get his earlier crusades minted into reform legislation. But Nader was not about to see things that way. If anything, he grew more rigid and imperious—to the point, for example, of savagely attacking the fledgling administration of Jimmy Carter, which was the most consumer-conscious White House in Nader's long career, and which had named several Nader protégés to key positions of influence. Many Gore supporters will doubtless see a dangerous pattern emerging here, of purist repudiation of powerful friends in a do-

sition to do some estimable favors.

Nor would they necessarily be wrong. Reading Martin's nuanced account of Nader's later career—his long years in the Reagan and George H.W. Bush wilderness—it's hard to avoid thinking that Nader thrives on his own sense of utmost exclusion, and that when the prospect of exercising real power in the world draws too close, as it did in the Carter years, it seems he almost has to will it away.

But Martin wisely shies away from too much single-bullet theorizing about Nader's mercurial life. He does profitably press one il-

luminating analogy, though, by likening Nader's career to that of Progressive Era reformer and "people's attorney" Louis Brandeis. Martin writes that Nader's crusades are united by his campaign against what Brandeis called "the curse of bigness." Like Brandeis, too, Nader has a near-religious faith in the province of expert knowledge, the law first and foremost.

And finally, Martin's Brandeis analogy loosens the grip of the tired Nader-as-Gore-betrayer debate. Brandeis, after all, found his calling as a U.S. Supreme Court justice and

comfortable life as a single-issue goo-goo lobbyist or lawyer. But Nader was just getting started. From auto safety, he moved on to meat packing—an industry that hadn't come in for significant federal regulation since 1906. Taking on a team of idealistic Ivy League-educated young reformers—soon to be dubbed "Nader's Raiders"—he moved on to other inviting targets, such as the corrupt, crony-ridden and ineffectual Federal Trade Commission, and a wide array of other causes, from remedying abuses in nursing homes to campaign finance reform.

Nader was also that great rarity among reformers, an institution builder. He launched spinoff projects on nearly an annual basis, most notably the nationwide, college-based network of consumer advocacy "PIRGs," or public interest research groups. By the time he set his sights on Congress itself, with his wildly ambitious 1972 Congress Project, virtually every elected member was too afraid of Nader's influence to turn down his interview requests.

But his 1972 shot across Congress's bow was also his first significant failure—producing first a quickie, scarcely edited paperback study, *Who Runs Congress?*, and then an almost entirely indigestible 13,000-plus page digest of the member profiles. The Congress Project was a double debacle in that it needlessly alienated many of the aides and political leaders Nader had relied

made a very comfortable peace with the world of power. Nader clearly lacks the temperament for achieving such a peace—but then, too, both major parties have less and less patience for anything like a crusader in their midst. Indeed, at the end of Martin's appreciative yet justly critical account of Nader's life, one is less moved to ask whether Nader lost the election for Gore than to ask where all the Brandeises have gone. ■

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