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An Absolutist in Full

The remarkable life of a passionate writer

By *Saul Rosenberg*

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Michael Scammell's "Koestler" is a rescue operation. Today's well-informed reader may rightly remember Arthur Koestler as the author of the best-selling anti-Stalinist novel "Darkness at Noon" (1940) but also as a deeply flawed if not mentally unstable man who devoted his late-life energies to loopy researches into parapsychology, conducted a predatory sex life whose most distinctive feature was the rape of a good friend's wife and, when terminally ill, persuaded his healthy middle-aged wife, Cynthia, to join him in suicide. Such, at least, was the impression left in 1998 by David Cesarani, Koestler's previous biographer. All these and many other aspects of Koestler's life Mr. Scammell examines carefully, enriching them with context and often pulling back from Mr. Cesarani's harshest verdicts—for the most part, smartly and successfully.



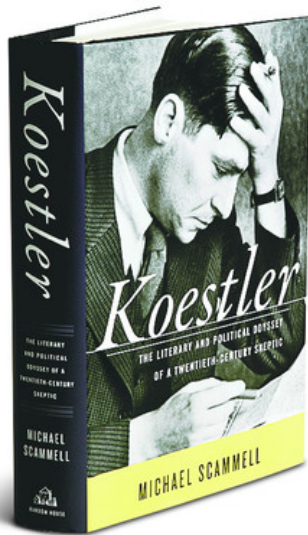
Arthur Koestler in a 1950 photograph. TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES

Any Koestler portrait, including Mr. Scammell's, will remind us that Koestler was a journalist of genius who produced several works that helped win the Cold War. Mr. Scammell readily concedes that Koestler was an adulterous and sometimes callous misogynist, but he prefers to emphasize the better angels of his nature—his intellectual integrity, generosity and courage. Koestler, after all, was a man of action as well as reflection. Unlike most

intellectuals, he risked death for his ideas and fought assiduously for them rather than accommodate political injustice in exchange for a quiet life. The first half of "Koestler" practically traces the allegory of a tortured century as if through the adventures of Indiana Jones by way of George Orwell.

Koestler was at school in Budapest when the Austro-Hungarian Empire imploded at the end of World War I, and he lived under a republic and two brutal dictatorships within 12 months. He arrived in Berlin in 1930 the day Hitler scored his first genuinely significant electoral result. For his anti-fascist activities in Spain, he was imprisoned by Franco in Malaga in 1936. He found himself listening to executions nightly, expecting to be next, when the intervention of the British government brought his release. Interned in France in 1939, he was stuck there after his release when Hitler marched in the following year. Re-arrested by a street patrol after joining the Foreign Legion (in a bid to make it to French North Africa on the strength of a movie he remembered), he bribed a local official to provide false discharge papers for four British prisoners in the same barracks. The five of them set off by tramp steamer and train to Casablanca, disguised as Yugoslavs. Eventually Koestler made it, by a combination of luck and nerve, to Britain—where he was promptly jailed once again as an enemy alien.

Over the same 20 years, Koestler wrote for several Zionist publications in Palestine, where he established himself as a prodigious Middle East correspondent for a European news syndicate that he was later to serve as a brilliant science editor. He became a communist and traveled in the Soviet Union with the American poet Langston Hughes. He produced four longer works of permanent political value. "Spanish Testament" (1937) alerted an ignorant world to Franco's atrocities. "The Gladiators" (1939) examined the Communist revolution by way of Spartacus's slave revolt. "Darkness at Noon" (1940) vividly captured a truth bitter to many on the left at the time—that the Soviets and their ideology promised only a Nazi-like totalitarian terror. "Scum of



the Earth" (1941) drove a stake through the myth of a noble France crushed by the Nazi machine.

A man might retire on that. But Koestler was only 36. In the 40-odd years left him, he devoted his efforts to stiffening the West's spine in the face of Soviet expansionism. He spearheaded a campaign to end capital punishment in England. And he produced novels, several volumes of autobiography, a play, books of essays, scientific works, general nonfiction, parapsychological studies—and a volume claiming today's Jews are descended from the Khazars, a medieval kingdom that converted to Judaism en masse.

KOESTLER

By Michael Scammell
Random House, 689 pages, \$35

• • Read an excerpt:

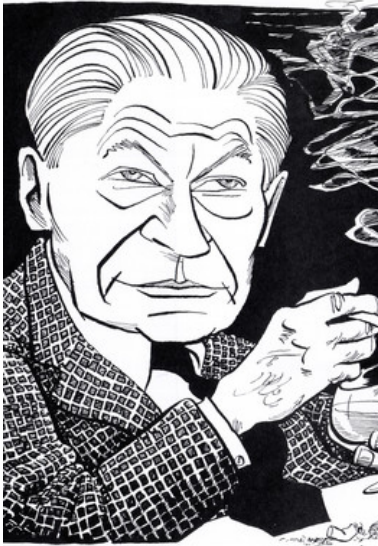
Nearly everything he wrote got him into trouble. He was scorned by communists for his attacks on Soviet Russia, attacked by scientists for his "unscientific" methods and excoriated by Jews for his denial of any relationship between ancient Hebrews and modern Israelis. His essays into parapsychology won him few fans.

Yet Koestler was often simply ahead of his time. He exposed the tyranny of the Soviet system years before Solzhenitsyn. Some of his scientific intuitions were ultimately borne out—most remarkably, his defense of the French evolutionary theorist Lamarck, who in the 1800s proposed that characteristics acquired by an organism during its life could be inherited by its progeny. Lamarckism, derided for more than a century, has now found new life through epigenetics, which suggests that environmentally induced alterations in gene expression may be passed on.

Even the kookiest of Koestler's ideas, such as his belief that ESP and telepathy might represent a superior plane of reality, are of a piece with his earlier obsessions. Koestler yearned for an absolute beyond the provisionality of life as we experience it. Indeed, he dubbed his condition "absolutitis." As Mr. Scammell notes: "Koestler was a romantic," given to "quixotic hopes that some variant of the utopian dream might lead to happiness on earth." Considering how intensely Koestler yearned, part of his greatness lies in his ultimate rejection of virtually everything he embraced—even if each rejection led to the next ideological romance.

And what, finally, of the routine misogyny, the rape of Jill Craigie in 1952 and the double suicide in 1983? The misogyny cannot be denied: He insisted that his (three) wives keep house, play hostess and act as secretaries, forgoing all other activities to do so—and accept that he would sleep around as energetically as he wished. In his determination never to have children, he bullied more than one woman into an abortion. (Nor would he meet the child he fathered with a lover who would not terminate her pregnancy.) But this is only part of his personal story: There was, among Koestler's many dozens of partners, no shortage of women who remained fond of him. Some loved him all his life.

Regarding Jill Craigie: Mr. Scammell's extraordinarily patient researches raise the possibility that what is now generally regarded as rape—Koestler seems to have pressed his advances repeatedly with real physical force—may be a matter of modern mores projected into the past.



Mr. Koestler in caricature. LEBRECHT/CORBIS

"The likeliest explanation is that behavior that wasn't at the time seen as rape has since come to be regarded as such," Mr. Scammell writes. As for the double suicide— Koestler and Cynthia were found dead in their sitting room of sleeping tablets and alcohol—Mr. Scammell notes that even Cynthia's sister did not hold Koestler accountable for Cynthia's death.

Mr. Scammell's work is not without fault. He does not have a theory of Koestler's life beyond Koestler's own self-diagnosis of "absolutitis." This is perhaps understandable, given that Koestler published a half-dozen penetrating autobiographical works. And the obvious determination to be utterly comprehensive exacts a price in style. Mr. Scammell's prose is sound and workmanlike, but it neither glows with brilliance nor flashes with wit. By contrast, when Mr. Scammell quotes from Koestler, the words jump off the page, as when Koestler described the West's alliance with Russia against Hitler as "fighting against a total lie in the name of a half-truth."

Nevertheless, Mr. Scammell's "Koestler" is unlikely to be surpassed. This is Koestler in full—sins and virtues measured fairly and thoughtfully. Can a man with such flaws be a great man? As a friend noted: "Koestler was the embodiment of an uncompromised, unafraid, international idealism." There can be no greater compliment.

—Mr. Rosenberg is a writer and editor living in New York.

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