



# Going into the City: Portrait of a Critic as a Young Man

*Robert Christgau*

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One of our great essayists and journalists—the Dean of American Rock Critics, Robert Christgau—takes us on a heady tour through his life and times in this vividly atmospheric and visceral memoir that is both a love letter to a New York long past and a tribute to the transformative power of art.

Lifelong New Yorker Robert Christgau has been writing about pop culture since he was twelve and getting paid for it since he was twenty-two, covering rock for *Esquire* in its heyday and personifying the music beat at the *Village Voice* for over three decades. Christgau listened to Alan Freed howl about rock ‘n’ roll before Elvis, settled east of Manhattan’s Avenue B forty years before it was cool, witnessed Monterey and Woodstock and Chicago ’68, and the first abortion speak-out. He’s caught Coltrane in the East Village, Muddy Waters in Chicago, Otis Redding at the Apollo, the Dead in the Haight, Janis Joplin at the Fillmore, the Rolling Stones at the Garden, the Clash in Leeds, Grandmaster Flash in Times Square, and every punk band you can think of at CBGB.

Christgau chronicled many of the key cultural shifts of the last half century and revolutionized the cultural status of the music critic in the process. *Going Into the City* is a look back at the upbringing that grounded him, the history that transformed him, and the music, books, and films that showed him the way. Like Alfred Kazin’s *A Walker in the City*, E. B. White’s *Here Is New York*, Joseph Mitchell’s *Up in the Old Hotel*, and Patti Smith’s *Just Kids*, it is a loving portrait of a lost New York. It’s an homage to the city of Christgau’s youth from Queens to the Lower East Side—a city that exists mostly in memory today. And it’s a love story about the Greenwich Village girl who roamed this realm of possibility with him.

## Going into the City: Portrait of a Critic as a Young Man Details

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# From Reader Review Going into the City: Portrait of a Critic as a Young Man for online ebook

## Jeff says

A few declarative sentences on *Going Into the City: Portrait of a Critic as a Young Man*. Nothing fancy, perhaps along the line of Nelson George, whom Christgau summarizes to the effect of wishing never to "write anything that couldn't be understood by a reader of New York's signature tabloid." Christgau continues: "Although Nelson's copy required considerable cleanup, he was always clear, and since he was an indefatigable learner who'd been on the beat since college, his insights were on point whether you agreed with his judgments or not." Finally: "He's been the kind of pop force my theory of pop once imagined all too vaguely. . . Nelson George and Greg Tate exemplified how foolish it is to pretend there's a single African-American culture."

Sound fairly diffident? Like Christgau will take for his "theory of pop" any rose-tinted reflection he can get? Even if the literacy ("considerable cleanup") suffers a bit? That notion of there being "a single African-American culture" is a funny one. This goes back, way back, though further on you may hear it in James Agee's "Psuedo-Folk" when he calls negroes "our best group en bloc," or in this flat dismissal of Donny Hathaway, from Christgau's Seventies Consumer Guide collection (written probably in the early eighties): "Perhaps the idealistic credulousness of a project that incorporated pop, jazz, a little blues, lots of gospel, and the conservatory into an all-over black style is linked to the floridity that mars much of his work." Whether this is a dismissal of Hathaway, that "black style" central to Agee's assumption, or Jerry Wexler (who signed Hathaway) is hard to say. Hathaway's work, meantime, continues to find its devoted listeners, and not just among those committed to the stalking horse of a discredibly "all-over black style."\*

Christgau is a complex figure in the minor genre of literary history that is rock criticism. Christgau's book contributes a lot to that history, particularly in the long central chapter on Christgau's passage through the two storied years 1967-1968, as the boyfriend of the cultural journalist Ellen Willis, and as among the first in his generation to imagine a vocation that would "cover" the burgeoning manufacture of recorded music in the postwar period. Christgau certainly has a flair for self-drama -- one of the eddies the long chapter on Willis's shaping of his political imagination flows into emerges again several chapters later when he tells the story of the *Village Voice's* commitment to arts and cultural reporting in the late Seventies and early Eighties.

Here's what I think: much of the book is hard-going but it's leavened by that account of his relationship with Willis, about whom Christgau must sense that this is the story that needs to be told, as Willis was with him at the moment of his movement into the pages of *Esquire*, her being hired at *The New Yorker*, and together with their friend Larry Dietz, the founding of the venture counter-culture magazine, *Cheetah*, where both of them worked diligently as the country fell apart. This chapter gave me the feeling, similar to one from Michael Rossman's *The Wedding Within the War*, of being lost in amazing tumult, as when Christgau comes home one day in spring '68 (annus mirabilis) to find that his roommate and his lover has been raped, and Christgau reflects that he put his own needs first, which put me in mind of Patti Smith's book, when her roommate and lover (Robert Mapplethorpe) declares himself homosexual and Smith admits she tried to shame him . . . I much admire, and am very moved by, this sense of a stranded, or even inessential behavior against a backdrop of on-going action in the mid-distance.

Christgau gives us an image here. Yet the first paragraph of the last chapter reads wrong against the inessentiality of that image:

**"As originally mapped out, this book would have ended in 1978, primarily because I didn't want people to think it was about the *Voice*. That's a book worth writing, but I don't know by who -- untangling the paper's interactions is not for outsiders, and judging its achievement is not for the news hounds who generally shoulder such projects. Me, I was there a long time. But I reported for duty to get my work done, not to gossip or scheme -- I wanted autonomy, not power, and I didn't follow office politics except to recommend the occasional hire, although I did once collaborate with [Geoffrey] Stokes in a union dispute. Even nailing facts for the glimpses I've provided was a chore. There presumably will be a *Voice* book sometime -- by an academic, perhaps. I bet I won't like it."**

This paragraph should have been trimmed. It's wrong about five different ways. First of all, if he didn't think his readers wanted a book about the *Voice*, then he was probably surprised to hear someone who wrote for him there, Dwight Garner, in the *Times*, say: "This myopic book may be a memoir in part about the early years of rock and rock criticism, but none of the major figures Mr. Christgau knew and often befriended (Greil Marcus, Lester Bangs, Jon Landau, Lisa Robinson, Dave Marsh and James Wolcott among them) are sketched in intimate detail. Nor does he spend much time situating his work among theirs." I gather Christgau thought he was doing this, and did do it, just not in a way Garner expected. Of course the *Voice* is the work Christgau did that paid off on the promises and failure of those two passionate years he spent with Willis. He had to finish that story, the story that begins with their vision of a rock criticism the *Voice* became the most reliably serious venue for. If Christgau doesn't know who would be appropriate to write it then perhaps it's because he doesn't understand the account his chapter *vide* Willis offers, or its chronicler. The whole paragraph is telling for the bumpy road readers find if the story they hope emerges is of rock criticism as Christgau and Willis think it up. The sentence about who is right to be the *Voice* book's author is snide (about news hounds), patronizing (toward outsiders), and bullying all at once. Then it takes a dump on academics -- one of whom (Devon Powers) has, guess what? written a book about the *Voice*. <https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/1...> In fact, many rock critics who got their start under Christgau's tutelage at the alt-weekly are now academics. Hmm.

The problem, then, is that Christgau only partially understands who he is on the page, and sometimes can't get out of his own way. Lots of blustery stuff on poetry (the pastoral!) and the novel, about IQ scores and SAT scores (I promised myself years ago I'd never listen to another fool tell me their IQ, but here I was, reading, as Christgau offered his -- twice), loads and loads of narrative detail from what Freud calls the superego (about how great marriage is, how excellent his own matrimonial dinners are, what the increases to African American staffing at the *Voice* were like numerically); the Law rides high in Christgau's saddle. But in the sections on Willis, and on the "Riffs" column at the *Voice*, we do have Christgau situating his work in relation to rock criticism, if Garner would only have a look. Indeed, and duh, the book is all about Christgau's positioning, vis a vis rock criticism, daily papers, weekly papers, the academy, and who will have the opportunity to cover the art form. A last word, and a scrappy one.

\*fn: Isn't this what Amiri Baraka called the "changing same of R & B music"?

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## Jeffrey Thiessen says

Completely unreadable and even worse, totally uninteresting. One of the worst books I've ever read. What a gruelling book to get through.

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## Carol Storm says

I was really disappointed by this memoir. As a teenager I loved reading Robert Christgau's record reviews. I thought he was more sensible and down to earth than Greil Marcus and Dave Marsh, though I enjoyed them too. But nothing in this memoir ever seemed to make sense. It's a strange thing to say about a first-person account, but it all felt weirdly artificial and inauthentic.

None of the biographical stuff rings true. There's so much over the top sentimentality, about the author's parents, his siblings, his high school classmates, his college classmates, his fellow writers, his girlfriends and his wife . . . yet none of them ever come to life. Christgau writes in a way that's indescribably glib and fake. He wants to offend none of the old gang yet again and again whatever story he tells comes back to his awesome abilities in the classroom, on the editing desk, in the sack. His writing has a rhythm to it, but it's grating and mechanical.

"Back then I was fortunate enough to FUNKY VERB with NAME CHECK NAME CHECK NAME CHECK. Of course I was very HUMBLE BRAG and HUMBLE BRAG, but in the end I HUMBLE BRAG and got NAME CHECK to hire me/sleep with me/give me a lead story!"

Then there are the glaring and often grotesque contradictions between what he pretends to believe as a critic and author and what he actually practices as a human being. Christgau calls himself a bohemian and socialist but makes it clear that he's spent his whole life cultivating the right kind of people, people with connections, people who come from money. He brags about how easily he ingratiated himself with Jews in high school, calling a whole chapter "The Wonderful World of Jews." He also writes about his early churchgoing and worrying about whether Jews were damned. But he doesn't ever ask whether the Nazis were damned. Nor does he confront the church's long history of anti-Semitism . . . or the existence of anti-Semitism in his own neighborhood, let alone his own home. He brags about his German roots, admits there was a large Nazi/Bund element in Queens. and then promptly cops out. "I Never got that vibe from the Christgau clan." As Linus would say, off the old hookeroo!

His sexual politics are equally hypocritical and stupid. Christgau never shuts up about his commitment to "monogamy," like he's discovered the wheel or something. And he describes all his female friends in the most saccharine, ass-kissing way imaginable. And he takes all the safest and dumbest cheap shots imaginable at rock stars like Mick Jagger for writing songs like "Under My Thumb." (Though quite interestingly, there's no mention of any transgressions by rock's elder statesmen, like Big Joe Turner. Come on in this house, Robert Christgau, and stop all that yakety yak. Well, fix my supper don't want no talking back!)

Anyway, after shoveling his insufferable born-again feminist manure for about two hundred pages, our Jew-loving German/woman-loving pig lets slip that he once threw a piece of pie in Ellen Willis' face after she broke up with him. What, smashing a grapefruit in her face wasn't classy enough? Jimmy Cagney sez: I wish you was a wishing well, Robert Christgau, so I could tie you to a rope and sink you!

I think you can see the pattern here. This guy has learned nothing and forgotten nothing. Even at the end of a long life he is still in denial about just about everything. He's a fake with a guilty conscience, and his real enemy in life is not sexism or racism but self-knowledge. There's a direct link between his sentimentality, what James Baldwin calls "the ostentatious parading of excessive and inappropriate emotion" and the secret inhumanity within. Only a guy weak enough to throw pie at a woman (and dumb enough to brag about it years later) would find it necessary to make prissy little moral judgments about Mick Jagger. Only a guy deeply insecure about his sexual potency would have to tell the reader how much he likes sex, and sex with rock music, and sex with his wife, over and over again. Poor Christgau reminds me of Tommy, the psycho gangster in GOODFELLAS. Not because he's tough, or a killer. But because he's got too much to prove.

Speaking of killers, it's interesting that Christgau (like his old buddy Dave Marsh) never actually served in the military, but is very interested in portraying himself as a guy who "never went along" with the hippy hatred of GI's in Vietnam. He distances himself in all the usual timid, weak-willed ways, talking about the soldiers like they were "dumb guys with few options" and graciously withholding any judgments about what they actually did over there. But what is striking is that he never mentions a single guy from Dartmouth who served in Vietnam. Or a single buddy from Queens. Or a single homeless vet he met on the street. This is a telling detail, especially given the fact that most of this book is name-dropping and ass-kissing.

I could go on for another ten pages about things that rubbed me the wrong way in this book. but I guess I better try to wrap things up before I end up chewing the carpet!

Things I hated most about this book but didn't yet mention. 1.) The easy, un-thinking cheap shots at bigger, better men. Everyone from William Styron to Norman Mailer to Jimi Hendrix. 2.) The nauseating sentimentality Christgau applies to classic novels like *SISTER CARRIE* and *CRIME AND PUNISHMENT*. It's part of his creepy, phony, transparently insincere woman-on-a-pedestal thing. But he misreads both novels because of it. 3.) The smug and utterly unconscious hypocrisy of castigating other people as racists who don't dig black people, when he smugly identifies his phony white-bread crew (at Dartmouth, in Queens, on the Village Voice) as "his homies." 4.) Referring to the "grunts" working starter jobs in journalism for low pay. Christgau knows perfectly well that real grunts were infantrymen in Vietnam. But he wants to keep them nameless, voiceless, and faceless. 5.) Taking mean cheap shots at his rivals for having money or status, and then copping out thousands of times about his own ass-kissing and social-climbing, and then wrapping up all the assorted cop outs by whining, "class is a complicated thing." Yeah, it is. But there's no evidence in this book of Christgau ever acknowledging his own privilege, or his own toadying. Not even once!

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## **Todd says**

I expected a lot of things from a memoir by Robert Christgau. I expected it to contain some opinionated takes on various musicians and writers. I expected it to feel very downtown New York-y. I expected it to feature a number of big words and some hit-or-miss humor. I expected to like it.

I didn't expect it to be infuriating and dull, and -- at its worst -- like wading through sludge.

For a guy who was Present At The Creation of rock criticism and has produced a lot of marvelously pithy, aphoristic reviews for his Consumer Guide, Christgau is strangely detached. I once read a review (not Christgau's, I think -- probably Dave Marsh, but I could be wrong) of Bob Dylan's "Live at Budokan" that described him as in his "and then I wrote" mode. That's Christgau's book: "And then this happened, and then I disagreed with this, and then I met my lifelong friend ..." There's a surprising lack of heart here; a lot of

names are dropped in a way that suggests either you know them or you don't, and Christgau doesn't seem to care either way. He seems reluctant to really engage with his own life, even when he's obviously going through some wrenching events -- including his wife's affair with a friend.

The early chapters are best, though they go on too long. Christgau grew up working-class in Queens, the son of a fireman, and one of his best toss-offs is when he noted that neither he nor onetime lover Ellen Willis could hate cops because they both grew up as offspring of what we now call first responders.

But then he gets to Dartmouth and his head is full of theory, and then he gets back to New York and ends up at *Esquire* for a time, and then ...

Well, he never comes out and says it, but it sounds like he never really got over Ellen Willis. And he does come out and say it, but his sex life really isn't interesting in the way that, for example, a Hollywood braggart's is.

I still love my Consumer Guides. And I could probably whine about some of Christgau's cohorts, including Marsh (with whom he apparently had a falling-out) and Greil Marcus (one of his best friends, a guy who's at HIS best when he's bluntest). But for a guy who's known to jab with a sarcastic joke once in awhile, all I could think of was how unnecessarily tedious this was.

So here's my Consumer Guide: Skim this book, and then skip this book. C minus. (On a curve.)

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### **Neil Mach says**

Filled with fact, divulgence, declaration and utterance, these illustrative & expressive expositions from one of the finest - yet tersest - rock critics of all time is required reading for anyone who wants to involve themselves in the business of writing for rock...

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### **Bob Reutenauer says**

His self-appointed title of ironic prominence, goes against character, the “Dean of American Rock Critics” Robert Christgau very generously shares credit with the small fraternity— Ellen Willis, Greil Marcus, Dave Marsh, Jon Landau— who authored the very first rock-crit manifestos and reviews of a new thing called “albums.” In the immediate wake of this group’s original work sprang hundreds of underground and alternative small zines and others of mass circulation and Album Oriented Rock format FM stations and helped make “rock” the critical/intellectual, cultural/political, and commercial/corporate behemoth unmatched in artistic enterprise since the Medici’s promoted a deep bench of Florentine talent . Of Jan Wenner, on whom he layers none of the praise reserved for actual writers, he says distantly but admirably that “by 2000 *Rolling Stone* was the largest left leaning mass circulation magazine in the United States, financing no holds barred investigative journalism with hide-bound music coverage.” Music coverage, lots and lots of it, over four decades of listening to albums 10-12 hours per day and writing at least a little about each of them—the web archive is monstrous— and the *Village Voice* paid him a decent living until the 1990s when Rupert Murdoch bought the *Voice*.

Beautifully drawn portraits of his friendships with Ellen Willis and Greil Marcus are a feature of the book.

To them he cedes the big vision thing, the longer term, longer form anguish and rewards of writing the rock scene aesthetic as “pop” yes, but in a world historic fashion. Shakespeare was low brow once too—remember Huck and friends by the riverside playing for bits?

Christgau the memoirist’s New York City, like Patti Smith’s in *\_Just Kids\_* and Pete Hamill’s in *\_A Drinking Life\_* comes to life as a dynamic, but anchored, timeless character of it’s own. Great read. *\_The Ellen Willis Reader\_* a recent collection edited by the late cultural critics daughter Nona, Christgau’s god daughter, is moved up on my list! Ellen's 8,000 word "Dylan" was an effort that she and RC lived together with, they shared a few late 60s "summers of love" together before the essay found a home in the underground sheet "Cheetah" (1967).

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## **Elliot Chalom says**

I've said this again and again - often one's rating of a book - in fact one's entire experience with a book - can be tainted by expectations. I don't necessarily mean high or low expectations, though I mean that too. I mean expecting a book to be one thing and then having it be something totally different. In my mind I have a certain expectation for what a memoir by Robert Christgau, the "Dean of American Rock Critics," a man who spent his prime living in the '60s and '70s NYC, who was an integral part of the "scene", who worked at the Village Voice for decades, who apologizes in advance for his recounting of his many sexual experiences, should read like. I'm imaging a cross between Hunter S. Thompson and Iggy Pop. This book is NOT that. Christgau isn't gonzo and he isn't wild, even if everything around him was. Somehow, his story (and perhaps his real life) manages to miss all the excitement and capture only the little bit of that era that was dull and without heart or soul.

My issues with the book probably begin with the portion of his life that Christgau decided to devote time to. He is most known for his "Consumer Guide" albums reviews, which he began in 1969, his annual Village Voice Pazz & Jop music polls, began in the early 1970's, and for being a senior editor and chief music critic at the Voice, a position he attained in 1974, and staying at the Voice through 2006. Yet the dense 365 page book doesn't even reach the decade of the 1960's until page 150. That's 3/7 of the book slogging through by far the most uninteresting period in Christgau's life. I don't mean to say that this section could have been cut in half; I mean to say that it could have been cut down by 80%. From that point it picks up marginally, in fits and starts, but still suffers from a failure to get to the point - the point being his time at the Voice and beyond. In Chapter 10 (of 11) - literally page 284 - Christgau finally gets to the Voice/CBGB era. Although even here he meanders a bit at first. And at second, and at third ... CBGB's gets its first mention at around page 300! When you consider that the final chapter is generally about his wife's marital infidelity, hopefully you can understand my frustration.

And that is before we get to the writing. Christgau discusses the passing of fellow critic Lester Bangs, offering that the two weren't close because "he thought I was flaunting my Ivy League diploma when I argued ideas with him, as I did with almost everyone." Mr. Bangs - I couldn't agree with you more. I consider myself an intelligent person who has read hundreds of books, countless memoirs, and many books far more highbrow than the memoir of a rock critic. So why is "Going into the City" one of the most challenging books I've read in a long time? Sometimes (say when I read Kierkegaard) I know that a failure to understand the author's work is on me. I need to become smarter before I can properly understand what is on the page. Other times it's the author that's failed. If I can't follow your narrative, or keep track of the characters in your life, or know how things tie together or why they're relevant - maybe that's on you. This time it's on Christgau. For a linear memoir this story is damn hard to follow.



When all is said and done, it's not terrible. Two stars means "OK". There is some material here that entertained me briefly and a sentence or two that made me stop and think. But if I had to do it again ... I'd read the Consumer Guides instead.

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## Simon says

*Going Into The City* is Robert Christgau's memoir of a post-World War II New York childhood and decades as a rock critic. The book is full of a hungry, scattershot energy that anyone who has spent even a short time in New York can't help but recognize. It is also a book that could have been written for me, and if I'd read it at 22 instead of 42 I wonder if it might have changed the direction of my life. Born in 1942, Christgau was - and is - a voracious reader. He describes a fast journey from *Dick and Jane* to reading Book-of-the-Month Club fare (*Kon-Tiki*) by age nine. As a young reader I shared Christgau's velocity but mostly lacked his ambition, though I do remember putting away *1984* in fifth grade (the year of the title, it was in the air) and also an infatuation with *The Making of the President* books a little later. I was notorious for rushing through assignments so that I could read, a habit that was greeted with mostly good-natured chagrin by my teachers. In the same 5th grade year the only thing that could interrupt my extra reading was a trip to the school library, where a primitive "computer lab" allowed to me to play state capital games and write programs in BASIC.

Christgau went to college at Dartmouth and began to discover a few things about himself that would define the rest of his life. Again, I relate. There's a reoccurring attraction to smart women that would continue right up through his (still extant) marriage. The joys and trials of both Christgau's marriage and his previous long relationship with the critic Ellen Willis are described in great detail, with evaluations of sexual taste and ability (including his own) made as perhaps only someone who came of age in the 1960's could pull off. More germane to Christgau's writing career is the idea of "contingency", an idea he discusses at length that seems to have come from the waning of his Christianity and a liberal arts-fed dislike for "-isms" of any kind. Christgau's contingency becomes clearer as he arrives in New York and finds work as a journalist: a distaste of elitism and theory, a healthy populism, and a lack of interest in labels are all a part of the superstructure that Christgau outlines. I wrote too serious movie reviews in college before I'd read much or any Sarris, but the auteur theory never made much sense to me. Kael all the way, though for a time in my 20s I did sit through too many bad action movies in the hope that something profound about the director would reveal itself to me.

The purpose of these few words isn't to draw parallels between my life and that of Robert Christgau, nor is it to suggest that my nonprofessional writing in any way approaches the skill or insight of the "Dean of American Rock Critics". (Christgau has been published in many outlets but is most closely identified with *The Village Voice*.) Rather, it's to express my pleasure at finding connection in a book that evokes what it was like to have a press pass in New York City of the 1960's and '70s. Christgau saw and listened to music constantly of course; the book is full of thoughts on pop, rock, jazz, disco, rap, and the "alternative" rock of the '80s and beyond. But there was also film and theatre, and outsized personalities like Patti Smith and David Johansen. Christgau's enthusiasm for art bubbles over these pages; he stops the narrative of his life for mini-essays on personally meaningful works from *Crime and Punishment* to *Jules and Jim* to *Sister Carrie*. I'll spare you what my list would include, but the exhilaration on display in Christgau's writing about these favorites is irresistible to anyone of a similar mind.

Christgau's central metaphor is, of course, "The City". Christgau grew up in Queens, and his Manhattan is both the center of the world and the home of frontiers both personal and creative. I don't have the same

connection to New York, but in my desire to describe art on paper I am part of a great tradition.

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## **Barry Hammond says**

Called by many "The Dean of American Rock Critics," Robert Christgau covered popular music for Esquire, Newsday, Creem, Playboy, Rolling Stone, Blender, MSN Music and The Village Voice, where he was a senior editor and chief music critic for thirty-two years. "Going Into The City" is his memoir about how an awkward outsider from Queens with a German Protestant religious upbringing became the ultimate fan, champion of pop and rock music, social theorist and astute writer of a generation. Not only does he talk about the music and times that shaped him but he speaks fluently about love, monogamy, feminism and politics, fondly remembers a range of other writers, critics and journalists and how the music scene changed and changed him over the years. It's worth reading for his take on Television's classic "Marquee Moon" disc alone and his coverage of the CBGB New Wave scene. A compelling, informative and moving read. - BH.

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## **Herzog says**

If you are really are interested in learning about the life of Robert Christgau up to 1980, this book might be for you. Along the way you'll learn his IQ, his SAT scores and which of his girlfriends had "a moist and succulent c\_\_t." Music is an afterthought. I'd really hoped to learn more of what music influenced his life. Perhaps, I read the wrong book?

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## **Danimal says**

Robert Christgau means a lot to me. When I came across his Consumer Guide collections for the 70s and 80s, they rocked my world. Here was a music critic tackling ALL the essential albums of the past two decades, weighing in with language that was equal parts smart and funny (if occasionally incomprehensible, but that was part of what made it interesting). Those books were an endless resource for a guy who was devouring music by the bucketload, not to mention trying to figure out how to write about it.

So.

I went into his memoir figuring it would be all those things (smart, funny, confounding) and more. And it is ... but it's the more that's the problem. Because I would add these terms: creepy, over-sharing, braggy, gross, and -- the most damning -- dull. I should've been forewarned, since he admits in the introduction that there are four kinds of memoirs (famous person, hanger on, unsung hero, triumphant dysfunctionist) and he doesn't fit any of them. What does that leave us with?

A lot of sex talk, apparently.

He fucks to the Stones' "Going Home." He fucks the multi-orgasmic, sex-loving Ellen Willis and her "zaftig, creamy body." He gets dumped by the lady with the "moist and succulent cunt." He ends up marrying "the woman who turned sex into a polymorphous game of button-button with sweetmeats at the end." He tells us way, way too much, and not in a fun or even interesting way. There are plenty of people who write about sex and don't make you go "ick" but Bob isn't one of them.

In the end, this is a minor book, more for fellow music critics or music obsessives who want to know what the 60s were like from every single angle (the book grinds to a halt in the early 80s and doesn't do much with the NYC punk scene that Bob was such a party to, oddly enough) than the average reader (who would be bored shitless). Bob has something to say about loving music and loving his wife. Not sure what it means that one of the most compelling sections was about his wife's affair. Maybe that tension and emotion carry a narrative the way big words don't.

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### **Steve says**

I've been reading and arguing in my head with Christgau since I first noticed back in 1979 that his was the name on those short record reviews with letter grades that were in the front of Creem magazine and sometimes disagreed with the longer ones in the back. Heck, I even foolishly argued with him from a position of ignorance when he tried so hard to get me to dig deeper into the nugget of insight I had about Radiohead's "OK Computer" that he wanted to publish in the comments section of the Pazz and Jop Poll that one year. Yeah, Christgau is so fanatical about precision in writing that he edits two sentence blurbs, and for him, editing means trying to get the writer to try harder. And then there was the time I interviewed him and we talked about the meaning of "pretty" in regards to DeBarge, which we both loved but which I again didn't think as deeply about until after we'd had that discussion. So, what I'm saying is that the only target audience more carefully selected than me for a Christgau memoir is probably the very large number of family, friends, ex-lovers, influences, and writers name-checked in the book itself. Naturally enough, I enjoyed the thing immensely, especially when he gets into the way he developed his critical insights along the way, but also when he's just plain describing his place in the zeitgeist. He's way more informative about his views of life in the 50s and 60s than he is in the 70s and 80s, though part of that is because I already know more about that stuff, and part of it is that it's hard for me, who never for one second wanted a child, to relate to the long-term problems he and his wife had over their lack of conception. That and the fact that his discussion of punk rock aside, he spends more of that time editing others, and giving credit for their discoveries, than he does on his own striving to figure things out. Also, the latter part of the book just has fewer drop-dead hilarious lines in it. So, I don't know if you should read this, and I definitely think it's got a couple sexual descriptions that don't need to be there, but as he's done so many times before, Christgau has me all jazzed up about this critical thing I like to do.

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### **Jonathan says**

This book just wasn't for me. I remember purchasing it and feeling sure I would like it since I frequently read rock journalism, and I lived for a few years in New York. But I found the style of writing to be dense and challenging. Unfamiliar names of fellow writers and editors from the 1970s listed in rapid succession, few direct quotes, little imagery-driven or narrative writing. It honestly felt at times like you'd have to be from the writer's own inner circle to get the rapid-fire references. Christgau's writing is clearly well-respected by many, so maybe I'm not a sophisticated enough reader.

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## **Karen says**

Robert Christgau's *Going Into The City* is an exhilarating ride through the Mr. Christgau's childhood and early years as the most influential rock critic for the *Village Voice*. The self-professed "Dean of American Rock Critics" Christgau invented the genre of rock and pop criticism and he brings an intellectualism and muscularity to his essays and reviews as well as to this memoir. My appreciation for Christgau's work is partially due to his keen understanding of the impact of race, gender, and class and for his challenging me to become a better reader (with dictionary by my side). I learn a lot from Christgau's capsule reviews and not just about music.

My favorite part of the book is his portrayal of his three-year relationship with Ellis Willis. It was pretty sexy and this is meant in the broadest sense; their mutual love of theory, words, music, politics bring heat and richness to his depictions and his sadness at their ending is real and palpable. And at the center of this book, in the midst of the words and theories about art, his passion for music and love for New York City and that particular place and time, is his commitment to marriage, to his wife Carola Dibbell, to monogamy and his pride in that.

I love how Christgau uses language. He is insightful, bighearted, shrewd, complex. Sometimes, however, his sideways trips through theory, his digressions about literature are showy and tiring. Despite this, I have reveled in the joy and exquisite beauty of Christgau's story and I thank Edelweiss for allowing me to review it.

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## **Tom Andes says**

This book seems sociologically significant partly because it documents the fact Christgau's then-partner Ellen Willis was paid \$1500 for a landmark 7000-word essay about Bob Dylan the same year she paid \$900 annually in rent. Christgau's smart enough to acknowledge the extent to which what he calls "the affluent society" -- which is to say, the twenty-somethings who benefitted from the post-WW2 economic expansion in the United States -- fueled not just the emergence of his chosen profession, but an explosion of culture in various media. I've always loved Christgau's reviews, as much for the quality of the writing as because I sometimes share his opinions, and because I find myself sympathetic with how he positions himself: a leftist with no patience for leftist cant, a music writer whose notion of art gives as much credence to Taylor Swift as it does to whatever band I haven't heard of Pitchfork is dotting on this week. Ultimately -- because monogamy seems to be part of Christgau's intellectual stance -- the book develops into a meditation on the virtues and challenges of his marriage to writer Carola Dibbell. Perhaps because a few reviews griped about the lurid details, I was prepared for much worse. "She had an exceptionally moist and succulent cunt," about an early girlfriend, and which is a bit Hannibal Lechter-ish, aside, this is the prose of a man who likes sex, who loves women, and who particularly loves intelligent women. That's part of his intellectual stance, too. If you're interested in the ways in which Christgau's personal life informs his critical ideas, or if you simply want a window into this period of American (and New York City's) history, this is well worth the read: the moving account of a firefighter's son from Queens who skipped out on academia to become one of the last "public intellectuals" worth the name.

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