"Empire of Self," by Jay Parini: Attempt to keep Gore Vidal in view

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Empire of
Self
A Life of Gore Vidal

By Jay Parini

Doubleday. 480 pp. $35.

Reviewed by Glenn C. Altschuler

Gore Vidal, who died in 2012, was a prolific American writer and public intellectual. Across a wide variety of genres - novels, screen- and teleplays, stage plays, essays, and memoirs - he examined the history and politics of the United States and corruption in public and private life. He welcomed combat and controversy, trading insults (in print and in person) with the likes of Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, and William F. Buckley Jr.

In Empire of Self, Jay Parini, a professor of English at Middlebury College who has written poetry and novels, and biographies of Robert Frost, John Steinbeck, William Faulkner, and Jesus, draws on his long-standing friendship with Vidal, access to his papers, and interviews with friends and "frenemies." Empire is an authorized yet frank biography "of a gifted, difficult, influential man who remained in the foreground of his times."

Parini describes Vidal's sexual promiscuity, his complicated view of homosexuality, and his relationship with Howard Auster, his companion for decades. Parini includes first-person vignettes, culled from his own journals, of interesting moments in his friendship with Vidal. And Parini documents
the comings and goings of celebrities in literature, entertainment, and politics at Vidal's residences in Ravello, Italy; Barrytown, N.Y., overlooking the Hudson River; and the Hollywood Hills.

Parini is less successful in refuting the notion, advanced by many critics, that Vidal's work is not all that important and will not endure. He does not elaborate on his assertion that Burr and Lincoln "redefined the biographical novel, shaping its texture and direction." He does not make a compelling case for his contention that Vidal's essays are unrivaled in the postwar era for their "variety, humor, elegant prose and critical energy," and for "assimilating information and setting forth arguments."

And Parini may protest too much in suggesting that Vidal, in his often-shrill and mean-spirited political pronouncements, deserves credit for asking useful questions, and, in at least two important instances, for being right. He wasn't when he contended that Franklin D. Roosevelt knew the Japanese were about to attack Pearl Harbor and when he once characterized Timothy McVeigh as "a Kipling hero, a boy with an overdeveloped sense of justice," who may not have bombed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. But, like Noam Chomsky, Vidal seems to have been right "at least on Vietnam and Iraq."

More than anything, Parini reveals, Vidal feared "becoming a rumor in his own time" - and forgotten when he was dead. "One feels the Great Eraser always at work," he said again and again in conversations and letters. Empire of Self may stay the hand of the Great Eraser. But probably not for long.

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