

# Who Was Kevin Killian?

By Bruce Bawer

In 1981-82, my third year as a graduate student in English at Stony Brook University on Long Island, I shared a house in the neighboring town of East Setauket with two of my fellow students in the English department. While living there, I became acquainted with a friend of theirs. Kevin Killian was a year or two ahead of me in the graduate program, and four years older than I was; I never really got to know him well and never saw or communicated with him again after our time together at Stony Brook. Leaving with an M.A., he moved to San Francisco and stayed there the rest of his life, becoming, in the fullness of time, part of a circle of avant-garde West Coast writers that – small world – included a couple of friends of mine. But back to graduate school: one fine morning, to my astonishment, he showed up at the East Setauket house with a painting he'd done. It was a gift. For me. I knew he wrote, but I didn't know he painted (and I couldn't fathom why he'd decided to give me one of his creations). Now, thanks to a new book, I've discovered that he not only wrote and painted but also had an intense interest in a wide variety of artistic genres – an interest that, over the course of his life (he died of cancer in 2019) developed into real expertise.



Kevin Killian by Daniel Nicoletta (Wikimedia Commons)

That book, edited by Hedi El Kholti and Robert Dewhurst (and equipped with a reliably pretentious introduction by the supremely effete poet and critic Wayne Koestenbaum), is [entitled](#), and I kid you not, *Selected Amazon Reviews*. You see, it turns out that Kevin was, of all things, an extraordinarily prolific writer of Amazon reviews. (This book, whose contents were written between 2004 and 2019, clocks in at just under 700 pages, and was cut down after his death from an original word count of over one million.) Kevin was also, as his presentation to me of that painting demonstrated – what ever happened to it, I wonder? – a generous soul. Nine-tenths of the reviews in this book, most of them no more than a page long, are full of praise: four or five stars out of five. And they cover a remarkable gamut of merchandise – novels, poetry, movies, pop albums, a Creole cookbook by Maya Angelou, a movie quiz book, a dog-care book, a [biography](#) entitled *Center Square: The Paul Lynde Story*, a men’s cologne (“The scent itself,” Kevin pronounces, “is sort of woodsy”), a Black & Decker tool (“Did you ever get in a jam when hanging a picture...?”), khaki shorts, and a [book](#) called *Airport Planning & Management* (“Like many young men, and I daresay women, I was drawn to airport management after exposure to Burt Lancaster’s sterling portrayal of a harried airport manager in the Ross Hunter classic [Airport](#)”).

From the first time I laid eyes on him, I thought of Kevin and myself as being very different types. Living in New York after grad school, I became the literary critic for the just-launched *New Criterion*, where I specialized in long-form takedowns of grungy, overhyped dirtbags like the loathsome Allen Ginsberg. By contrast, Kevin was the kind of guy who adored Allen Ginsberg – the kind who, well, moves to San Francisco, hangs around with performance artists, churns out nakedly autobiographical [novels](#) and experimental plays, and edits a “poetry zine” (all of which Kevin actually did). And indeed some of the reviews here reflect a taste for offbeat writers of the sort to whom I’ve always tended to give a wide

berth, not to mention a political perspective that deviates considerably from my own. Reviewing the 1945 British classic *Brief Encounter* – a tender love story, mind you – Kevin says that it brings to mind the “British empire and the way in which the entire social structure in which Laura and Alec [the lovers in the film] are conducting their ‘private affair’ is already compromised by its dependence on Black slave labor, etc.” No, it doesn’t.

Then again, there are other occasions when one expects Kevin to serve up a reflexively PC reaction, and he doesn’t. And hey, at least he loves *Brief Encounter*, as I do. Indeed, his taste in old movies turns out to have overlapped with mine to a far greater extent than I ever would have imagined. Among his – and my – faves: *Shadow of a Doubt*, *The Yearling*, *The Heiress*, *The Lost Weekend*, *Ninotchka*, and even the extremely obscure *Until They Sail*. Like me, Kevin was fond of sweet, corny old pictures. He watched *White Christmas* every Yule. He cried when he saw Judy Garland’s *A Star Is Born* for the thousandth time. He even appreciated the merits of *Cavalcade*, the Frank Lloyd movie, based on Noel Coward’s sentimental, patriotic stage extravaganza, which won the Oscar for Best Picture of 1933 but whose reputation has been on the decline ever since.

Nor was he too much of a cinema snob to appreciate the virtues of a crackerjack thriller like *The Hand that Rocks the Cradle* or to declare *Scream 4* the best of that series of slasher films. He enjoyed mediocre pictures that could be appreciated in a campy way – awarding five stars apiece to *Love Story* and *Valley of the Dolls* – but drew the line at schlock like *Meet the Fockers* (three stars: “nothing happens and nobody really cares”). And he could be very funny: “[A]s Walter Pater told us, all art aspires to the condition of *Basic Instinct 2*.” Get a load of the way he begins his review of the 1938 Katharine Hepburn comedy *Holiday*:

*I never really liked this movie much until my wife and I*

*invested in one of those newfangled "Hepburninators" on TiVo, which allows you to watch a full-length Katharine Hepburn movie in half the time by eliminating all scenes in which she appears. Now, as I watch Holiday in relative comfort, freed from the worry that at any moment she may show up and spoil all the fun, I can relax, for like the old saying goes, an hour without Katharine Hepburn is like a month in the country.*

I don't get the Hepburn-hate, but it made me laugh. His longest review, by the way, is of *Vertigo* ("the greatest movie of all time, at least I think so in certain moods"), about which he serves up a provocative theory or two – making me wish he'd left behind a collection of fewer but longer and more probing critical essays.

As I guess I've made clear, the range of his taste was unusual – although he plainly had a special place in his heart for the French *nouvelle vague* and for avant-garde California writers such as himself. One minute he's naming Marcel Duchamp, along with Andy Warhol, as "the central art figure of the last century," the next minute he's penning a touching posthumous tribute to Rodney Dangerfield ("You always saw things the way the common man did") or Christopher Reeve ("You won America's heart playing the part with all the conviction and vulnerability in the world, and so when your riding accident happened we were there for you too as we cheered on your fight against immobility and pain").

He describes himself as Truman Capote's "greatest fan of all time." He gives John Updike's lame 2006 [novel](#) *Terrorist* the thumbs-down it deserves. He says that he managed to get through *Finnegans Wake* (inconceivable) and once considered it "the greatest novel of all time" (even more inconceivable), but tells us, in 2008, that his favorite writer is now his friend and fellow small-press West Coast [novelist](#) Dennis Cooper. To his credit, he doesn't let his politics keep him

from appreciating the likes of John Wayne, “one of the greatest Hollywood stars.” And not infrequently, his high-culture bent peeps to the surface, to humorous effect, when he’s addressing middlebrow material, as in his review of Leslie Caron’s memoirs: “Every page has some La Rochefoucauldian pensée on love, on death.”

Here and there, Kevin provides glimpses of autobiography: several of his reviews begin with some variation on the words “As an American boy growing up in rural France.” Turns out he had his “own subscription to the *International Herald Tribune* from ages six to ten” and read *Gigi* in French at eleven. (Who knew? By the time I met him, he was one more guy from Long Island.) As a boy he “had an inappropriate relationship with a priest.” (Somehow I’m not surprised.) Later, he was a Deadhead who followed the Grateful Dead “from stadium to stadium.” (Oh well. *Chacun à son goût.*) In late middle age, he made an “annual jaunt to Iberia” to revisit the museums in Madrid. Which raises this question: what did he *do* for a living? Yes, he wrote prodigiously, but never the kind of stuff that makes any money. How could he spare the time it took to bang out all these Amazon notices for free? How could he swing those trips to Spain? Surely nobody ever put more work or wit or skill or style into reviews for Amazon. Jeff Bezos should have put him on the payroll.

Why am I writing about a collection of Amazon reviews? Because they add up to a fascinating portrait of one man’s unique mind – complex, quirky, deeply engaged, and engaging. Because writing online can feel terribly ephemeral (especially to someone old enough to have been raised in a print culture), and it’s nice to see worthwhile material written for the Web preserved between covers for posterity, however much of a pipe dream that may ultimately be. And because reading these reviews is not unlike having a long, rambling, congenial, and bibulous conversation, by turns serious and silly, with someone whom I knew very briefly long ago and whom I now

dearly wish now that I'd looked in on during one of my many visits, over the decades, to the City by the Bay. *Selected Amazon Reviews* – which is beautifully produced and edited, the dust jacket amusingly designed to make it look like a volume from the Library of America – isn't the kind of book, of course, that you read through, from start to finish, all at once. But I did glance at every page and I'll definitely be keeping it close at hand, dipping into it delightedly from time to time to explore its contents more thoroughly.

*First published in [The American Spectator](#)*