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The Life of Oriana Fallaci, Guerrilla Journalist

By Dwight Garner

Oct. 16, 2017



The Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci (1929-2006) wrote all sorts of things during her long career: novels, polemics, war dispatches, truth-dealing celebrity profiles.

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ON ORIANA FALLACI, GUERRILLA WRITER

A biography explains how the Italian journalist wrote her way to provocateur status, from her profiles to war reporting **By Dwight Garner**



PHOTO: GIANANGELO PISTOIA/AP

PROVOCATIVE: Oriana Fallaci

The Italian journalist Oriana Fallaci (1929-2006) wrote all sorts of things during her long career: novels, polemics, war dispatches, truth-dealing celebrity profiles. But her Christiane Amanpour meets Joan Didion reputation rests on her confrontational interviews, mostly with political figures, which were repackaged in best-selling books in the 1970s and 80s. Fallaci's questions could resemble rectal probes.

She began an interview with the actress Gina Lollobrigida by stating, "I don't think you're as stupid as people say." With Muammar el-Qaddafi in Libya, she asked: "Do you know you are so unloved and unliked?"

Her interviews were guerrilla achievements and global events. She was witty, well-prepared, antagonistic; she got people to say things they ordinarily would not.

Secretary of State Henry Kissinger regretted his 1972 interview with Fallaci after he referred to himself in it as a "cowboy who leads the wagon train by riding ahead alone on his horse." This displeased President Richard Nixon and prompted what passed at the time for a sizable scandal.

Interviewing Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran in 1979, Fallaci wore a chador. When she criticized the condition of women in Iran, Khomeini said, "If you do not like Islamic dress you are not obliged to follow it. The chador is only for young and respectable women." Fallaci tore it from her head, saying, "That's very kind of you, Imam. And since you said so, I'm going to take off this stupid, medieval rag right now."

Fallaci was sometimes criticized for being a poseur and a narcissist. But there was no one like her and there still isn't.

Fallaci is the subject of a short new biography, "Oriana Fallaci: The Journalist, the Agitator, the Legend," by the journalist Cristina De Stefano. Written in Italian, it has been translated into English by Marina Harss.

It's the first authorized biography we have of Fallaci, with access to new personal records, and welcome for that reason. It is not particularly well-written or thoughtful but it gets her story onto the page and, thanks to its subject, is never dull.

Fallaci was tiny but had an explosive personality. She was called La Fallaci. She did not take well to editing. She did not suffer fools.

She was born in Florence, where her father was a cabinetmaker and part of the anti-fascist resistance during World War II. As a young girl she became a courier for the resistance, smuggling hand grenades inside heads of lettuce.

Her mother was intelligent but stunted; she was forced to cook and clean for her husband's extended family. Fallaci said she became a journalist, then largely a man's profession, in part to vindicate her mother.

"ORIANA FALLACI The Journalist, the Agitator, the Legend"; By Cristina De Stefano, 289 pages, Other Press, \$60

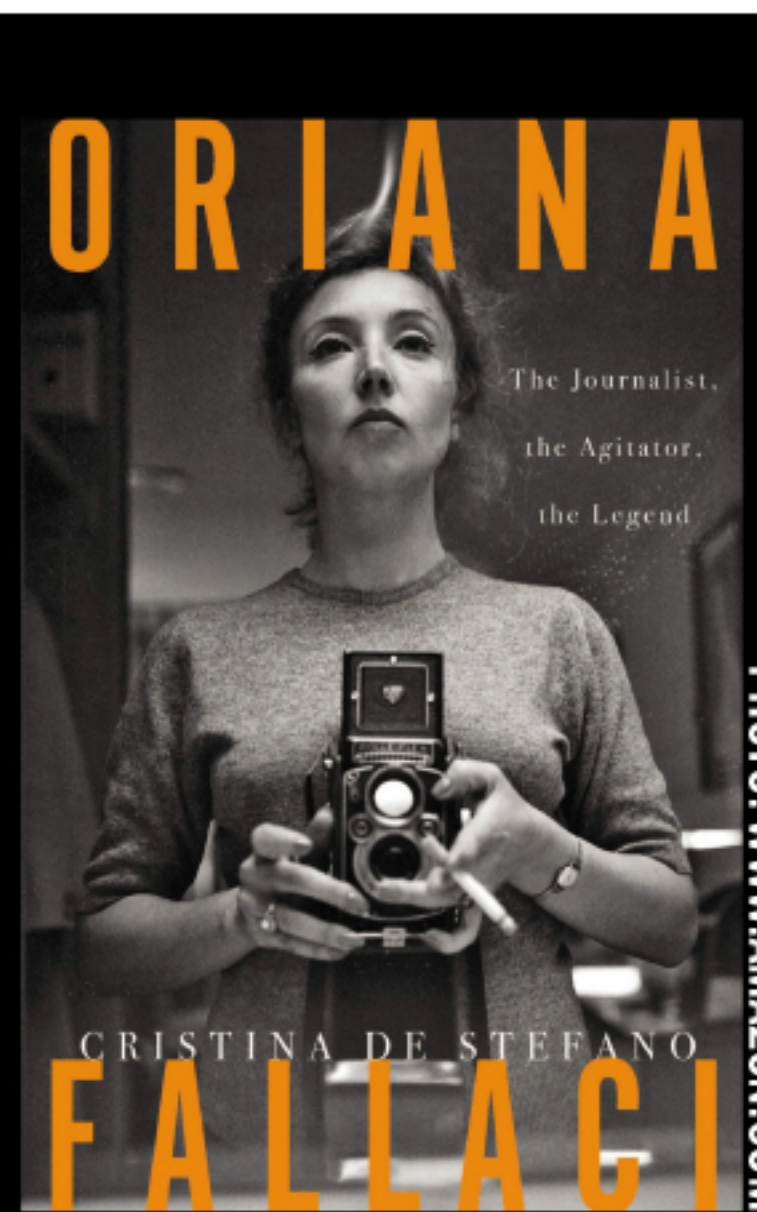


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She was messy. She loved airplanes but was afraid of elevators. She smoked nearly three packs of cigarettes a day and had bad teeth. She opened her mail months late if at all. She was a hypochondriac. She put sticky notes on her apartment doorbell that said "Go Away."

She never married but had several long love affairs. When she fell in love, it was as if from a cliff. She was given to composing yards of bad poetry ("I miss you like I miss the rain") which De Stefano quotes at cruel and numbing length.

Fallaci liked to say that she had a degree in solitude from the Sorbonne. She needed to be alone to get her work done.

"I have trouble writing when someone is hanging around," she wrote. "Men know how to isolate themselves to write because their wives don't dare disturb them. But it's different for women because men are always interrupting them, asking for a kiss or a cup of coffee."

Fallaci split the final decades of her life between Tuscany and New York City. She knew her career was coming to an end when, in the 1990s, it became increasingly difficult to get her Olivetti typewriter repaired.

In 1991 she learned she had a tumor in her breast. After it was removed she asked to see it. "You goddamned bastard, don't even think about coming back," she told the tumor. "Did you leave offspring inside of me? I'll kill you! You won't defeat me!"

She was in Manhattan on September 11, 2001. She had long been a critic of Islam and the attacks reignited her loathing. She published three late, controversial books about Islam and the West, beginning with "The Rage and the Pride" (2002).

She wrote in one of them that the "sons of Allah breed like rats." The night increasingly embraced her; the left criticized her for inciting hatred.

Fallaci's books of interviews still pop off the page. They have the drama of prize fights; they are entrancing. She unhorsed her subjects.

For our scrutiny, she brought them down to eye level. ■

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