

Register

Obituaries

Jason Epstein

Publisher who came up with the idea for The New York Review of Books

When Jason Epstein joined Random House as an editor in 1958, the publisher's New York offices were something of a second home for authors. "Mrs Debanzie, our Scottish receptionist, usually sent them upstairs to see us unannounced," he said, recalling "WH Auden in torn overcoat and carpet slippers delivering the manuscript of *The Dyer's Hand*; Ted Geisel, known as Dr Seuss, arriving with his storyboards to recite *Green Eggs and Ham* to us; Cardinal Spellman submitting his poetry, which we published as a neighbourly act".

Others were associated with particular parts of the building: "Terry Southern sitting on a wooden table in the basement mailroom next to the postage machine, cackling in his exaggerated Texas drawl over scenes he was writing for *Dr Strangelove*; Andy Warhol outside my office, bowing slightly and addressing me in a deferential whisper; John O'Hara in a three-piece suit showing off his Rolls-Royce in the courtyard on a sunny day; Ralph Ellison in my office, smoking a cigar and explaining with his hands how Thelonious Monk developed his chords."

Epstein was a man of publishing ideas, many of which he recalled in *Book Business: Publishing Past, Present and Future* (2001). In 1953 he had started Anchor Books, developing the concept of high-quality, low-cost paperbacks for impecunious students. His next brainwave came to him at a dinner party during the New York newspaper strike of 1962-63. In the absence of published book reviews, he revived a long-held idea for the *New York Review of Books* (NYRB), modelled on *The Times Literary Supplement* in Britain. "There's only one person in the country who could do it, and I'm busy," he had previously said.

Fifty years later he described how the newspaper strike presented the opportunity, "indeed the obligation", to create a journal dedicated to serious reviewing.

"We wanted a book review worthy of its subject, in which the writers we admired — and who agreed with us that books were the ongoing critique, the sine qua non of civilisation — would have a place to write at adequate length."

Epstein's position at Random House meant keeping his distance editorially, but Robert Silvers, from *Harper's* magazine, agreed to be the editor and asked Epstein's wife, Barbara, to be co-editor. Robert Lowell, one of the dinner guests, came up with \$4,000 from his trust fund. Publishers, starved of opportunities to promote their books, bought advertising. *Village Voice* recommended a printer and Epstein revived his distribution contacts from Anchor Books.

Reviewers were lined up, including Auden, Isaiah Berlin, Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag and Gore Vidal. "Bob and Barbara worked night and day, assigning the authors, finding a designer, hoping for the copy to arrive before the strike ended; 45 reviewers agreed to, and met, a three-week deadline with no pay," Epstein wrote. The first issue of NYRB appeared on February 1, 1963. "Each page ... consisted of three unbroken columns of solid type, except where Barbara placed a few woodcuts," he recorded. It sold out and "2,000 letters arrived urging us to continue".

In 1982 he devised the Library of America, an elegantly-bound series of great American literature intended as a New World version of the French *Éditions de la Pléiade*, and four years later came up with *Reader's Catalog*, promotional books directly to readers in a 40,000-title catalogue. The idea, described as a forerunner of Amazon, had a beautiful simplicity, although bookstores refused to stock the catalogue out of the fear that it would harm their own trade.

Speaking on PBS Television in 2000, Epstein explained that he regarded publishing as a craft rather than just a job. "It is a vocation. You feel you're doing something extremely important, and it's worth sacrificing for, because without books we wouldn't know who we were."

Jason Wolkow Epstein was born in 1928 in Milton, Massachusetts, the son of Robert Epstein, a partner in the family textile business, and his wife Gladys (née Shapiro). His earliest memory was helping a cousin to carry eight volumes of Macaulay's *History of England* up a hill on a hot day, recalling



Epstein at home in New York in 1984

that it "must have impressed me with how seriously books could be taken".

He left school at 15 and was a contemporary of Allen Ginsberg and Norman Podhoretz at Columbia University, New York. He and Podhoretz later fell out over Epstein's opposition to the war in Vietnam and a lukewarm review in NYRB of Podhoretz's *Making It* (1968). Some saw the suit-clad Epstein as a snob, with one acquaintance recalling that he hung out with a group who "gave the impression that if you hadn't read Proust in French, you might as well go home". When asked if he only liked important people, Epstein replied: "No. It's only that I don't like strangers."

He continued his education at the old Eighth Street Bookshop in Greenwich Village, describing it as a cathedral of knowledge, while his first publishing job was at Doubleday. A boss gave him the opportunity to start Anchor Books and its first title was a translation of Stendhal's *The Charterhouse of Parma*.

At Doubleday he met Barbara Zimmerman, who had persuaded the company to translate and publish *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* (1952). "Her father and my father were friends," he said. They were married in 1953 and sailed to France for their honeymoon. At dinner they were seated with the actor

Buster Keaton, who began juggling with the table decorations, and Edmund Wilson, whose 1940 history of revolutionary thought, *To the Finland Station*, Epstein had republished at Anchor. In Europe they continued to meet literary figures including Stephen Spender, VS Pritchett and Cyril Connolly.

Epstein enjoyed the finer things in life, including expensive cigars and handmade shoes. His apartment in New York was furnished with carved plasterwork and elaborate curtains, while a black cockapoo called Hamlet ran around. His 18th-century house in Sag Harbor, Long Island, was filled with antique quilts. At dinner parties he was the chef, explaining that "cooking and editing are much the same thing; they're both a way of organising experience". In 2009 he published *Eating*, a blend of recipes and recollections.

His marriage was dissolved and in 1993 he married Judith Miller, a journalist for *The New York Times* who once spent 85 days in prison for refusing to betray a confidential source. Her reporting on Iraqi weapons of mass destruction drew criticism and she was later forced to resign. She survives him along with the two children of his first marriage, Jacob, a television producer, and Helen, a contributor to NYRB.

Meanwhile, Epstein had left Doubleday in 1958, frustrated at the company's refusal to publish Vladimir Nabokov's controversial novel *Lolita*,

His cockapoo, Hamlet, would run around his elaborate apartment

and later joined Random House. After witnessing the riots at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago he returned two years later to observe the trial of the Chicago Seven and published *The Great Conspiracy Trial*.

At Random House, where he was appointed editorial director in 1976, he acquired a reputation for ridiculing other editors' suggestions and being rude to underlings. "I was surely a very disagreeable presence," he admitted. "I wasn't cut out to manage something of that kind. I had no patience with other people." He was relieved of those responsibilities in 1984 and gradually morphed into the company's self-styled Grand Old Man of Letters, continuing to edit its most valuable authors including Mailer and Vidal. That same year the NYRB was sold, making a small fortune for its founders.

Although Epstein was latterly a champion of the electronic book, he retained a soft spot for his paper cousin. "My rooms are piled from floor to ceiling with books so that I have to think twice about where to put another one," he wrote in 2010. "If by some unimaginable accident all these books were to melt into air leaving my shelves bare, with only a memorial list of digital files left behind, I would want to melt as well, for books are my life."

Jason Epstein, publisher, was born on August 25, 1928. He died of congestive heart failure on February 4, 2022, aged 93



Robinson, right, playing for England against Scotland in 1982 and, below, in 1972, the year she was captain. She won 170 caps overall for England and Great Britain

Val Robinson

Beer-drinking, cigarette-smoking hockey star, hailed as the best British player of her generation

Val Robinson came to be viewed as Britain's most successful female hockey player, yet had she been born in another era her sporting career may have turned out differently given that she drew the attention of Sir Matt Busby, who recognised her talents on the football pitch.

As a teenager Robinson had played football with a group of local lads in Accrington, using the railway line as the pitch and dustbins for goalposts, before turning out for Accrington Ladies and then, when that team folded, Preston Ladies. The Manchester United manager watched one of their games at Blackpool and I went on record as saying she was the best female player he had ever seen and, if she had been a man, he would have signed her up for Manchester United there and then.

Instead she earned her stripes as a brilliant forward on the hockey pitch. In an international career spanning 21 years, she made her England debut against Wales in 1963. However, the hosts lost the fixture 1-0, their first defeat at Wembley in 13 years, and she was promptly dropped. Undeterred, she

forced her way back, going on to play in a record 19 Wembley internationals and five world championships, including England's solitary World Championship triumph in Edinburgh in 1975, when they beat Wales 2-0 in the final.

According to Anita White, England's captain in Edinburgh, what set Robinson apart was her ability to take on opponents. "The game was essentially a passing one, but Val developed this distinctive style and once she received the ball it was head down with that trademark body swerve and go for goal," White said. "She nearly always managed to get a shot in and if she didn't score, others would finish it off. I remember before the tournament one national newspaper had written off our chances, which incensed Val who said she'd ram the paper down the correspondent's throat if we won."

As Robinson emerged as British hockey's first superstar, spectators at Wembley would erupt whenever she received the ball, using her pace and dribbling skills to carve open defences. Banners in the crowd declared: "Val Robinson eats Scots for breakfast."

The first Englishwoman to win 100

caps, Robinson played her last international in 1984. By then she had made 149 England appearances, 21 for Great Britain, and scored 46 goals in total.

Her solo runs created many scoring chances even though they sometimes frustrated her fellow forwards who felt she missed opportunities to pass the ball when they were in better positions.

Despite always being closely marked and taking many knocks, Robinson invariably bounced back, never missing an international through injury. She described her frequent bruising encounters with the Dutch left half José Poelmans as "dirty battles" but nevertheless had respect for her opponent.

She captained the England team for one season in 1972. "I was voted in by the players and because there were five players from my territory I begged them not to vote for me as I thought it wouldn't look good, but they did anyway. I thought it was the kiss of death as I had seen the three previous captains dropped immediately afterwards," she said. She was right.



them every week and had actually played fewer games on grass in my life," she said.

Naturally shy, she never sought publicity, rarely speaking about her life off the pitch. She was genial company in the bar with her half-pint of bitter late at night before a match and usually the evening after. Team-mates recalled her superb levels of fitness despite her habit of lighting up a cigarette in the changing rooms before matches.

In an era when players were expected to hire their England skirts, buy their own socks and shirts and stay in basic accommodation, Robinson was amazed at one tournament to learn that players had to provide their own food. "I took a pot of Irish stew, which we enjoyed that evening, and the following day I scored four goals. Perhaps I should have stuck to it as a pre-match meal," she remarked.

Valerie Walsh was born in Accrington in 1941, the elder of two daughters of Bill, a polisher, and Doris (née Kay), a weaver in the local cotton mill. She attended Spring Hill Primary School and then Accrington High School, where she played netball for three years before taking up hockey aged 14. "I

She won Superstars so easily that she was not invited the next year

loved games and I was told to get the ball and run up the field," she said.

In 1961 she went to Chelsea College of Physical Education, returning to teach in Ellesmere Port once she qualified. It was there that she met Gwyn Robinson, a rugby-mad Welshman from Ebbw Vale, and they were married in 1965.

Moving to the southeast, she took up a post as head of PE at Stratton Upper School, Biggleswade, while her husband taught history in Letchworth.

Daunted at the prospect of teaching into middle age, the couple returned north and set up a business running sports courses at Foxhill Bank House in Accrington. Money was tight and they worked hard to make it succeed. Gwyn predeceased her in 2020. There were no children.

Robinson displayed her athletic prowess in 1979 and 1981 on the BBC show *Superstars*, a programme where elite athletes competed in a variety of events. Her appearances elevated her profile and that of the sport, but she continued to shy away from the limelight. When a pupil asked her if it was true she had been on the television one night she replied it was just a rumour going round the school. "I thought so," said the pupil. "They only have famous people on *Superstars*."

Crushing the opposition, she won five of the six events in 1979 and was allegedly not invited back the following year for "spoiling the show".

Realising its mistake, the BBC extended an invitation in 1981 where once again she triumphed, seeing off younger rivals including the Olympians Sharron Davies, Donna Hartley and Suzanne Dando.

Exhausted after finishing the gruelling 400m final race, Robinson celebrated in her usual style, relaxing on the grass with a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other.

Val Robinson OBE, England and Great Britain hockey player, was born on December 18, 1941. She died of cancer on February 13, 2022, aged 80

Edmund Reid

Gifted violinist who was one of the first black musicians to play at the Royal Opera House

Looking down into the orchestra pit from the giddy heights of the upper slips at the Royal Opera House, even from such a distance it was easy to pick out Edmund Reid. Sitting among the first violins, he was for many years the only black musician in the orchestra.

His role as a pioneer in the predominantly white world of Britain's professional orchestras was hard-won. When he auditioned in 1964 for Sir Georg Solti, Covent Garden's musical director, his playing passed with flying colours. Yet his appointment was delayed for two months while a committee discussed "whether it was OK to employ a black man".

After they concluded that it was permissible Reid spent ten years as a mainstay of the orchestra, while the greatest voices of the age, including Maria Callas, Joan Sutherland, Tito Gobbi, Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo, sang on stage. He was also in the orchestra pit when the peerless black American soprano Jessye Norman made her Covent Garden debut in 1972 in Berlioz's *Les Troyens*.

Obtaining the approval of the Royal Opera House's vetting committee was not the only racial barrier that Reid had to overcome. On tour with various other orchestras, he often struggled to find accommodation while his fellow musicians were put up in guesthouses displaying signs which read "No blacks".

In 1985, he became acting co-leader of the English National Opera's orchestra at the London Coliseum. He spent two years in the role and when he was denied the permanent title, he took the company to an industrial tribunal and won his case.

"I've had a pretty rocky time," he told *The Observer*, although he treated the obstacles that were placed in his path with fortitude. "When I started I told myself I wouldn't get in an orchestra if I played as well as the next person, so I decided I had to be 300 per cent better," he said.

He went on to become one of the most respected orchestral leaders in Britain and his violin playing had an exceptional sensitivity and tone. Reid also thought profoundly about the music he was required to perform, as well as how it should sound, and he was not afraid to lock horns with the conductors under whose baton he played. "He had strong opinions about orchestral string playing, but was always ready to try the alternative," said Levon Parikian, artistic director of the Rehearsal Orchestra, which Reid led for 20 years. "If he disagreed with a conductor's ideas he would argue the toss with good humour. And he usually won."

Genial, highly supportive of younger colleagues and known to all as Eddie, the rubric on his Facebook page read: "ADORE parties. Bit of a maverick. Love a good but good-natured argument." He was also a considerate and kindly teacher, who advised his pupils that quality rather than quantity of practice was vital: "Not so much the length of time, but regular concentrated work, ideally daily."

He is survived by his wife Gretta Barrow, a pianist with whom he recorded



Reid took one orchestra to a tribunal

and gave recitals at the Wigmore Hall and the Queen Elizabeth Hall. He is also survived by their son Robin, a computer software developer, daughter Sandra, and two other adult children.

Edmund Carlton Patrick Reid was born in 1936 in Kingston, Jamaica, the youngest of four children. He was raised by his aunt Doris, who sent him for violin lessons. A child prodigy, he gave his first recital at eight and earned a place at Kingston College on the island. At 16 he won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music and moved to London, studying under the Russian Sascha Lasserson, who had in turn been a pupil of Leopold Auer.

On graduating, Reid's first professional appointment was with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, under the baton of Charles Groves. He moved on to join Sadler's Wells before his groundbreaking admission to the orchestra at Covent Garden. He also played freelance for many years with the London Symphony Orchestra and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and went on to become co-leader of the Welsh National Opera and ultimately the ENO.

In later years he led and coached the London-based Rehearsal Orchestra and led the festival orchestra at France's Opéra de Baugé near Angers. An all-rounder who appreciated all kinds of music as long as it was "well-performed", he also made guest appearances playing orchestrated versions of Bob Marley hits with the Reggae Philharmonic Orchestra, a multi-ethnic collection of pop, jazz and classically-trained musicians formed by members of the reggae band Steel Pulse.

Reid's experience, both the obstacles he faced and his success in overcoming them, helped to change attitudes. Many orchestral auditions are now undertaken "blind", with musicians performing behind a screen, and all UK orchestras operate equal opportunities policies.

Yet the singularity of Reid's achievement in rising to the top of his profession was evidenced in the 2017 study *Gender, Subjectivity, and Cultural Work: The Classical Music Profession*. More than half a century after he became the first black musician at Covent Garden, out of 629 players in 17 UK orchestras, there were still only 11 from a black, Asian and minority ethnic background.

Edmund Reid, violinist, was born on December 4, 1936. He died of undisclosed causes on December 13, 2021, aged 85

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