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Famous for 35 years

In America by Susan Sontag (Jonathan Cape, £16.99, 387pp)

Published: 27 May 2000

As a literary brand the name, Sontag is a synonym for serious. So the phrase "Susan Sontag's new book" is a promise of significance. The writer has long grown accustomed to a state of "perma-profile" involving, on the one hand, recent battles with her good conscience in Sarejevo and against traumatic injury, as well as a second brush with the cancer she famously defeated in the 1970s. On the other is the dubious realm of critical sanctification and the *Vanity Fair* puff.

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Sontag, born in 1933, earned a reputation in her thirties with the essay collections *Against Interpretation* and *Styles of Radical Will*. Her writing influenced what we think about camp, photography and illness, and helped make icons of European men such as Barthes, Canetti, Artaud, and the saturnine Walter Benjamin. She has long been "the most intelligent woman in America", and countless column inches have been spent on the miles of book-shelves that line her Manhattan apartment.

She returned to fiction in 1992 with a well-received historical romance, *The Volcano Lover*: a novel invested with the matured intellectual vigour that fuelled her reputation. It was a gamble, and it revealed a problem: not the predictable cynicism of the intellectual, but the way that Sontag's profile precedes, envelopes and smothers her work. It does so in the sense not just that *In America* is "Susan Sontag's new book", but also by her presence, which is felt on almost every page - sometimes deliberately, but rarely appropriately.

In America is the story of an actress and her successes in her native Poland and adopted America. In between, Maryna Zalewska, with an entourage that includes her husband the Count and another close admirer, gives up acting to found a utopian community in California - a brief experience of failure. The novel is set during the 1870s and is "inspired by" a historical figure. The actual actress's exhaustingly researched biography has spurred on Sontag's fascination with artistic celebrity, which she treats as an American story.

Marina's stage genius is unrivalled in America, and Sontag writes at devoted length about her Shakespearean cameos, her fizzing fame and its endorsements - from fans and of products. At the end of her previous novel, the volcano lover himself, Sir William Hamilton, was judged against Sontag's criteria of originality, discipline, invention and zeal. Hamilton was found wanting, but these are Marina's possessions. Sontag celebrates them with this novel about one woman's specialness.

In America is a bold attempt to inhabit the experience of success. The problem is that Sontag is rarely able to animate the past or, in particular, her characters. Sontag is essentially a collector, the figure she has so often written about, and her novels are the product of fascinations. The result here is inventive non-fiction awkwardly parading as a novel. Sontag's appetites, perspectives and exactitudes would sparkle in almost any other form.

In *The Volcano Lover*, Sontag produced a vivid portrait of late-18th-century Naples. Her fascination with Neapolitan society in

the age of Nelson and Napoleon was so effective that it compensated for the absence of a pumping heart in her story of Nelson and Emma Hamilton's love affair. For *In America*, the equivalent object of fascination is the actress's mobile world of veils, feints and flaming egotism. When the book is over, this leaves almost no residue. Further, Sontag has attempted to re-jig the 19th-century novel, which must teem with life, but cannot sustain the required imaginative autonomy.

Marina wonders whether "she had used up the allotted number of impossible feats her will could make possible". Sontag writes often and well of American "willing", the knowledge "that I can triumph by sheer stubbornness, by applying myself harder than anyone else". Which is laudable - until the rigid fruit of such stubborn labouring is before you.

So few writers will risk their intellectual ambitions in the form of a story now that it's tempting to minimise the failings of this attempt. But Sontag, aiming for absolute achievements, deserves more than tempered praise. The way that *In America* re-stages the American dream speaks urgently to the present; combined with Sontag's abilities, it could be a triumph. Yet it fails because of her limitations as a fictionaliser, as she proves unable to free her narrative voices from authorial echo and prod - and, dare I suggest, a blinding self-regard.

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