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REVIEW OF BOOKS

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David P.
Goldman:
**Israel &
Civilization**

Daniel J.
Mahoney:
**Reading
Churchill**

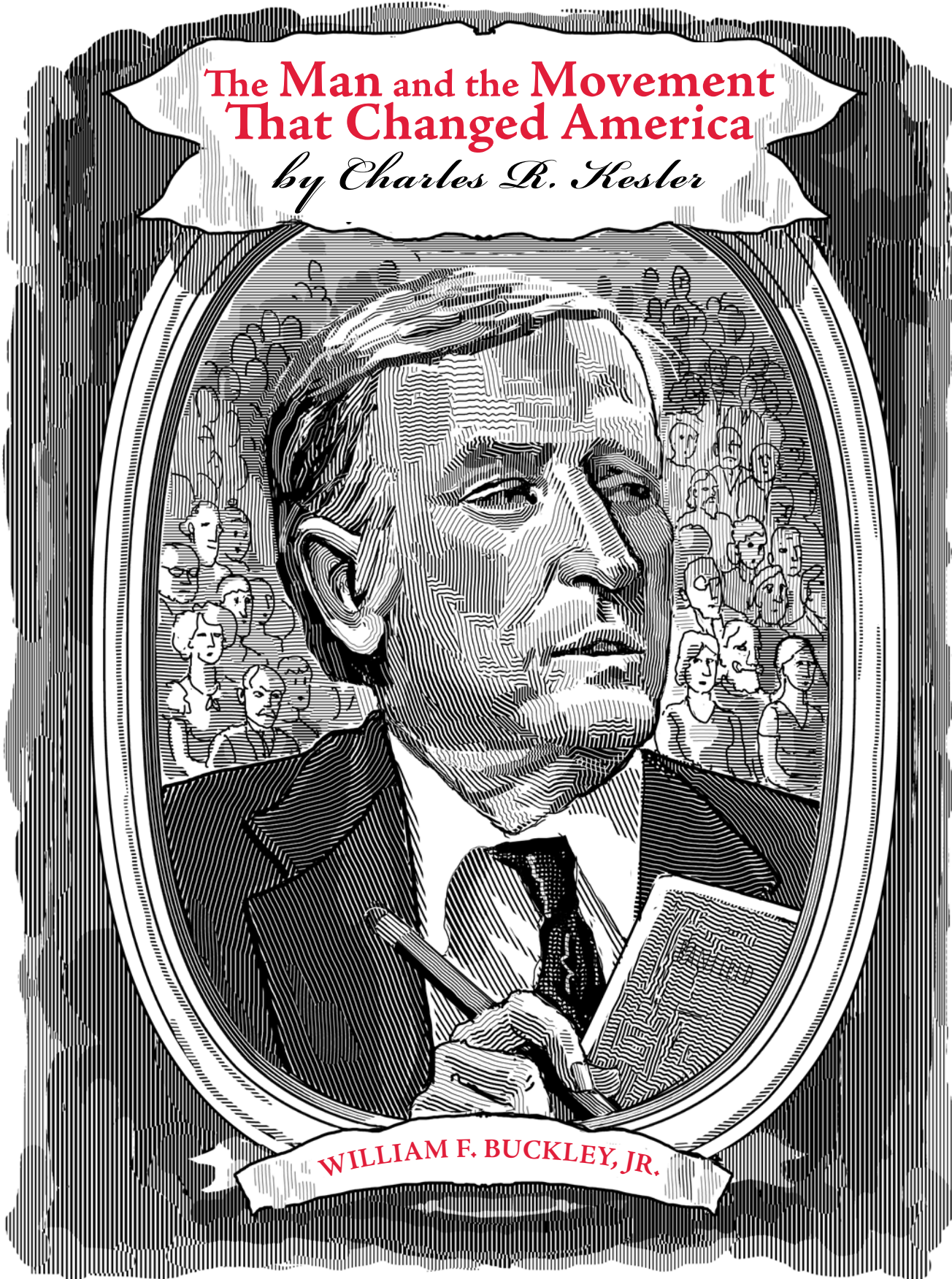
Victor Davis
Hanson:
**War in
the Pacific**

Paul
Gottfried:
**From Marx
to Marcuse**

Algis
Valiunas:
**Goethe's
Faustian Life**

The Man and the Movement That Changed America

by Charles R. Kesler



WILLIAM F. BUCKLEY, JR.

John
Rosenthal:
**How the
E.U. Censors
America**

Christopher
Flannery:
**Mark Twain's
Biographers**

Carnes
Lord:
**Sparta's Grand
Strategy**

Anthony
Esolen:
**Dana Gioia's
Enchanted Poetry**

Vladimir
Golstein:
**Tchaikovsky's
Empire**

Christopher Caldwell: **The Tariff Crisis**
William Voegeli: **Supply-Side Liberalism**



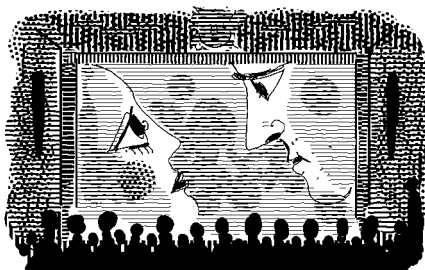
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SHADOW PLAY

by Martha Bayles



Almost Redeemed

“THE ENDING ALMOST REDEEMS IT.” So remarked my husband after sitting patiently through *Anora*—which swept this year’s Oscars with five wins, including Best Picture and Best Actress—about a young woman from Brighton Beach, the Russian section of Brooklyn, who works as a lap dancer in a Manhattan strip club. I agree, especially with the word “almost.”

The opening scene shows *Anora* “Ani” Mikheeva (Mikey Madison) plying her trade in an establishment upscale enough to have rules for its male customers. They are discouraged from touching the lap dancers, talking dirty to them, treating them like prostitutes, or interacting with them without plenty of cash. To the credit of writer-director Sean Baker, *Anora* does not sugarcoat the fact that only one of these rules—the last—gets enforced.

What *Anora* does not show is that the majority of lap dancers, pole dancers, and strippers are not employees but freelancers, whose sole income is the money they can extract from the customers. Nor does it show how large a cut is taken by the clubs in the form of house fees, rental fees for the requisite ten-inch platform shoes and bra-and-panty sets, payment for alcohol consumed on the job, and fines for being sick, late, or uncooperative. One former lap dancer put it this way in a 2007 interview: “From my very first night I was in debt to the management.... It’s the only job I’ve ever had where some nights I could end up paying to be there.”

Understandably, these women often dream of meeting a Prince Charming with a limousine idling outside. For Ani, that dream comes true, sort of, when Ivan “Vanya” Zakharov (Mark Eydelshteyn), the gawky, spoiled-rotten son of a Russian oligarch, pays her \$15,000 to spend a week servicing him in his parents’ vacant mansion in south Brooklyn. After falling

in love, sort of, they fly to Vegas and get married in a neon-lit chapel.

When the news reaches Vanya’s parents in Russia, they send Toros, their Armenian-American factotum (Karren Karagulian), to force an annulment. Shamefully, Vanya turns tail and runs when he sees Toros coming with his two henchmen, Garnik (Vache Tovmasyan) and Igor (Yura Borisov). Fiercely, Ani stays and fights, but to no avail. By the time the Zakharovs’ private jet lands in New York,

Discussed in this essay:

Anora, directed by Sean Baker.
Screenplay by Sean Baker. Neon

both she and her lily-livered “husband” have been brought to heel.

It’s a simple plot, but in keeping with Baker’s filmmaking style, it unfolds sluggishly, through long, repetitive scenes that strain to be comic but are weighed down by the leaden banality of the dialogue, which is so tedious it could just as well have been generated by a chatbot prompted to use the f-word, or some variant of it, as frequently as possible.

Decency versus Suspicion

BUT TEDIOUS IS THE LEAST OF *ANORA*’S problems. More serious is the clash between two different moral perspectives, each with its own way of judging the behavior depicted on screen. These two moral perspectives are by no means unique to *Anora*. Quite the opposite: they pervade the larger culture of America and the West in a way that breeds dismay among those who are mindful of the difference, and cynicism, sometimes nihilism, among those who are not. The first moral per-

spective is what political theorist Harry Clor called an “ethic of decency.” As set forth in his 1996 book, *Public Morality and Liberal Society: Essays on Decency, Law, and Pornography*, this ethic is rooted in classical virtue ethics and Biblical morality, and

can be seen as reflecting or representing two fundamental desiderata: *self-control* and *a kind of civility*. The former has, in part, a view to human ends or goods more elevated than sensual and material gratification. The latter involves a degree of respect for other people that precludes their treatment (at least in an erotic or physical way) as mere interchangeable objects of one’s self-centered desires.

The second moral perspective is an ethic of suspicion, rooted in Marxian-Freudian critical theory, which enjoins every member of a marginalized group to treat every encounter with the dominant group as a power struggle requiring vigilance, distrust, and resistance. Needless to say, the number of would-be marginalized groups has now swollen to the point where every American, regardless of identity or ideology, feels vexed and oppressed by some other American. The result, predicted by James Madison in *The Federalist*, is a locust swarm of “mutual animosities” and “unfriendly passions.”

Can Sean Baker tell the difference between these two moral perspectives? I suspect not, but to judge by the ending of *Anora*, he has an intuitive sense of how they affect the lives of people disadvantaged by poverty, race, class, sex, disability, or some other attribute. When such people strive to uphold the ethic of decency, they attract the sympathy of others, rich and poor, who partake of the same ethic. But when they engage in drug-dealing, prostitution, and other vices, they get no sympathy



In the Next Issue

CRB Summer 2025

Myron Magnet
Racial Justice in Detroit

Daniel J. Mahoney
Secularist Violence

Helen Andrews
Joan Didion

Steven F. Hayward
Sleepwalking into Wokeness

Justin Dyer
The Totalitarian Impulse

Jakub J. Grygiel
Zbigniew Brzezinski

Eric Kaufmann
Beyond Tribalism

Alexander Orwin
Huey Long

James R. Stoner, Jr.
The Libertarian Society

Spencer A. Klavan
Horace

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from their fellow poor, who must live with the resulting blight. And any sympathy they get from the rich tends to come from elites schooled in the ethic of suspicion, who either excuse vice as a necessary means of survival or (worse) ennoble it as a form of resistance.

With the exception of *The Florida Project* (2017), which focuses on a trio of young children living in a rundown motel a few miles from Walt Disney World, Baker's films have focused on adults doubly marginalized by poverty and involvement in the sex trade, such as transvestite prostitutes, male porn stars, and now lap dancers. Flush with the success of *Anora*, he has declared his solidarity with all "sex workers" and his intention to make another film that will help "remove the stigma that's been applied to this livelihood."

Why that stigma exists, Baker does not say. But my guess is that he views this "livelihood" through a narrow lens that blocks out anything that interferes with his one trick, which is to play up his characters' humanity while downplaying the harms inflicted by their "livelihood" on others as well as themselves.

There's a scene in *Anora* in which Ani is reprimanded by the genial manager of her club for missing work, and she shoots back, "Jimmy, once you give me health insurance, workers' comp, and a f-cking 401K, then you can tell me when I work and when I don't work." A clever retort, if we agree with Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez's pronouncement that "[s]ex work is work." This is true in the sense that women who spend hours every day writhing on the laps of strangers tend to lose all pleasure in sex. In the blunt testimony of one practitioner, "I joke around with my coworkers all the time about how we act so horny at work, but, as soon as we leave, the last thing we want to see is a d-ck."

The View from the Locust Swarm

BUT AOC'S PRONOUNCEMENT IS NOT true in the sense that selling your body is a job like any other. The most highly paid "escorts" get roughed up by clients, and the lap dancers and strippers in the toniest clubs often numb themselves with drugs. Further down the scale are the countless miseries blocked out by Baker's narrow lens: drug-addicted prostitutes flagging down cars in rough city neighborhoods; scared teenaged girls like the ones I've seen in Poland, dressed in mini-skirts and stationed every few miles along a two-lane forest highway frequented by continent-crossing trucks; destitute women and children trafficked across borders, smuggled into faceless buildings, and forced to submit to the demands

of every john, no matter how cruel and degrading. At this level, we are no longer talking about "sex work." We are talking about servitude—and slavery.

Several reviewers have compared *Anora* to *Pretty Woman*, a 1990 romantic comedy in which a perky Hollywood prostitute played by Julia Roberts wins the heart of a billionaire businessman played by Richard Gere. If there were an Oscar for Most Squeaky Clean Picture About a Happy Hooker, *Pretty Woman* would have won hands down. But what looked charming and silly 35 years ago looks ludicrous today, when by all reports, the erotic lives of many young people bear zero resemblance to what used to be called romance. In her essay "Sex Without Women" for *The Atlantic*, social critic Caitlin Flanagan describes one elephant-in-the-room reason:

Watching online porn has become most adolescents' first sexual experience. The average 14-year-old boy today has seen more hard-core porn than all of the American fighting forces in the Second World War.... [And] because of the way these algorithms work, young people quickly proceed to more and more extreme videos.... You can't spend 15 minutes scrolling through a porn site without coming across a video in which a woman seems to be not *performing* fear or pain, but actually *experiencing* those things. If you're one of those people who enjoy watching coerced sex, you'll never be bored for a second of your life. [Emphasis added]

Here the clash of moral perspectives is intense. Adherents to the ethic of decency have no choice but to condemn today's porn epidemic. (Harry Clor, whom I knew and admired, would find it appalling.) But believers in the ethic of suspicion, ever alert to the hidden power struggle, can find resistance in even the most blatant loss of self-control and disrespect for others. When a man wasted on alcohol gets a similarly wasted woman to agree not just to sex but to being choked unconscious, who is the oppressed and who the oppressor? It may seem obvious that feminists would side with the woman, but you never know. There's always a "sex-positive" splinter group out there defending the unalienable right of every human being to choke and be choked.

As for the masculine view, it ranges from "I thought she wanted it" to the theory propagated by Andrew Tate, Imperial Wizard of the manosphere, that men have become so thoroughly emasculated by women, they

have the right—nay, the obligation—to treat women as viciously as possible. Indeed, in Tate’s teaching, viciousness is the coolest form of resistance to the hegemonic power of “Females,” who, as he recently informed his fans, “are barely sentient.” And so on, through the locust swarm.

The Almost Redemptive Ending

WHEN THE ANNULMENT WITH ANI is finally accomplished, Vanya is packed off to Russia by Galina, his domineering mother (Darya Ekamasova), and Nikolai, his cynically amused father (Aleksey Serebryakov). Both actors are stars in Russia, so I find myself wondering why they accepted such minor, not to mention stereotypical, roles in a film no one expected to win five Oscars. Whatever the reason, *Anora* did well in Russia, earning almost \$2.8 million at the box office. And Serebryakov, who exiled himself for a while by moving to Canada, has returned to Russia and is finding lots of work and no doubt accepting kudos for appearing in such a celebrated film. I find this unfortunate, because there are plenty of Russian expats in the West who could have taken these roles. But at the same time, I find it hard to quarrel with the choice of another Russian national to play Igor, Toros’s number-two henchman. It is a brilliant performance.

When we first encounter Igor, he seems another stereotype: a fair-haired Russian thug in a hoodie who could be Putin’s better-looking son, waiting for the order to start breaking heads or snapping necks. But *Anora* does not

go in for graphic gore. After Vanya flees and Ani starts fighting Toros and his henchmen, I was expecting the usual assault and battery. But none of them beats her, not even when she bloodies them. Finally, Igor subdues her by wrapping his arms and legs around her and holding on till she stops screaming and agrees, grimly, to the payoff being offered by Vanya’s parents.

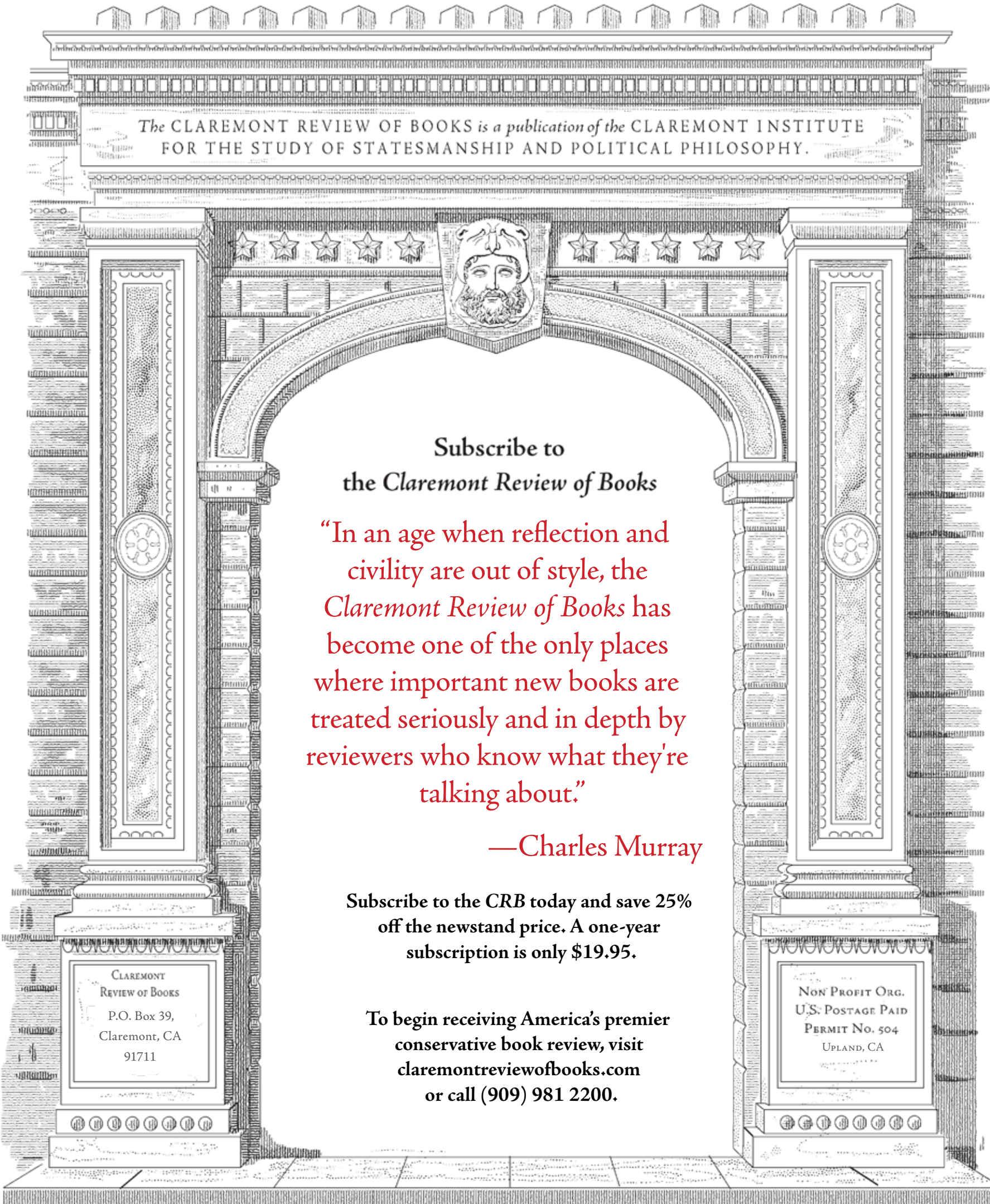
After that, Ani behaves like a captive and is treated as such. But keep an eye on Igor, and you will see Igor keeping an eye on Ani that is not the eye of a captor. Amused but also admiring, his gaze is too subtle for anyone, especially Ani, to notice. But slowly it grows fonder until the final night of the story, when he is assigned to stay with her in the Zakharovs’ mansion until the banks open in the morning.

There’s a blizzard starting, and Igor is relaxing on the sofa while Ani sits hunched on the floor, both idly smoking and watching the weather report on TV. He mentions that the previous day was his birthday, and she says, “Happy f-cking birthday, I guess.” He then remarks that he likes the name Anora better than Ani, to which she replies, “OK, says the f-ckhead named Igor. Igor, what a stupid name.” Smiling a little, he tells her it means warrior, and she says, “Yeah? Igor means ‘hunchback weirdo,’ you f-cking piece of sh-t.” And so on, Ani exhausting her limited vocabulary and Igor exuding a steady warmth that finally gets through to her. I say this because, after hurling the last insult and marching upstairs to bed, she comes back down to toss him a blanket. Covering himself, he says “good night” in Russian.

The next morning, in the driving snow, Igor drives Ani to the bank, then back to the Brighton Beach row house where she lives with her disapproving sister. They park, engine running and windshield wipers thumping, and from his pocket Igor retrieves the 4-carat diamond ring that Vanya bought for her and Toros removed from her finger after the initial fight. “Don’t tell Toros,” he says. He then carries Ani’s bags up the steps to her porch. When he returns, she is back in defensive mode, disparaging his shabby car. “It’s my grandmother’s,” he says quietly, and for once she has no reply. Except to remove her winter jacket and climb onto his lap.

It starts, I guess, as a thank-you lap dance. But very quickly it becomes real, as evidenced by the force of Ani’s breathing and the total absence of the posturing, hair-tossing, and phony smiling that are part of her “sex work.” And because it is real, Igor responds the way any man in love would, with a kiss. But that is too much for Ani, so she hammers him with her fists until she realizes he is not going to hammer her back, he is going to hold her in his strong arms while she weeps. No music, just the sound of Ani sobbing and the windshield wipers thumping. Fade to black.

It’s a scene that surpasses anything this director has done, but for some reason he and his publicity team feel compelled to interpret it to the fans as a moment of class solidarity between two oppressed workers. I suppose that is safer than taking sides in today’s unbelievably nasty war between what used to be called the sexes. But I’m old-fashioned enough to conclude that in spite of everything, *Anora* is one hell of a love story.



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