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Appetite for Adventure

BY RIEN FERTEL

IF THERE'S any doubt about Anthony Bourdain's outsize influence on 21st-century culture, consider his inclusion in the "Last Interview" series, a collection of small-format volumes that reprint the final public conversations, and then some, of preeminent artists and intellectuals such as Hannah Arendt, James Baldwin and Kurt Vonnegut.

Bourdain was a self-described "journeyman chef of no particular distinction" whose midcareer swerve into bestselling author, travel influencer, celebrity journalist, social activist and noodle enthusiast came as a surprise—most of all to himself. "I used to think that basically, the whole world, that all humanity were basically bastards," he admitted to one interviewer in "**Anthony Bourdain: The Last Interview**" (Melville House, 144 pages, \$17.99).

Then, after accruing more miles than just about anyone who has ever circumnavigated the globe, he came to the realization that the world is full of "nice, incredibly hospitable people, often very reasonable people." In doing so, he became our eyes and ears on the ground, our international culinary chaperone and, most importantly, our conscience. "Unfortunately," he continued, "another constant is that nice, reasonable people are being ground under the wheel."

Now, three years after his death in 2018, a handful of books reckon with Bourdain's life and legacy.

For an exhaustive overview of the man provided by family, friends and collaborators, "**Bourdain: The Definitive Oral Biography**" (Ecco, 443 pages, \$29.99), compiled by his longtime assistant and co-author, Laurie Woolever, is a tremendous resource (at least until a traditional biography that properly contextualizes him arrives).

Born in New York City and raised in the New Jersey suburbs, Bourdain honed his sharp wit and knife



as anyone with his eyes open." Unfortunately, the last quarter of the book becomes entangled, like Morgan Neville's recent "Roadrunner" bio-documentary, in casting blame for Bourdain's suicide.

Thankfully, Tom Vitale's "**In the Weeds**" (Hachette, 304 pages, \$30) digs deep into how Bourdain lived. The producer and director of nearly 100 episodes for Bourdain, Mr. Vitale joined "Tony's 'band of misfits'" in 2002, when both of them were new to television, and earned five Emmys for his efforts. Recounting stories from some of the 50 countries he visited alongside Bourdain, Mr. Vitale shines a light on how "isolating, all-consuming, overstimulating, and morally taxing it could be having 'the best job in the world.'" It was Mr. Vitale's job to ensure that the former Burmese political prisoner who ordered 37 dishes adhere to the crew's strict shooting schedule,

skills at Vassar College, where, cash-poor and uninterested in classes, he ransacked the kitchens of unoccupied summer homes to prepare meals for friends. After two years, he dropped out to attend the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., before heading to the grimy basement galleys of the big city. “He wasn’t a genius cook,” says one early workmate. “He was a show-up guy...a proficient mechanical cook.” But blessed with a Gothamite’s roguish charisma and ragged charm, Bourdain looked just as good lingering on urban sidewalks with his trademark leather jacket and cigarette, à la Lou Reed—to whom he bore more than a passing resemblance—as he did clad in chef’s whites, while shouting orders in a smoke-filled kitchen pass.

In the 1980s, Bourdain juggled addictions—cocaine, heroin and crack—and aspirations to be a published author. He studied creative writing with the writer and former editor Gordon Lish, eventually publishing a pair of tepidly received crime novels.

Then came “Kitchen Confidential.” Spun from an unsolicited essay published in the *New Yorker*, Bourdain’s 2000 memoir heralded an innovative and authoritative perspective. “It was perfect. It was everything,” the writer and editor Sam Sifton recalls of the original article. “It was picking up a rock off the restaurant scene and showing everything that was underneath it.” It was also, according to interviews Bourdain gave years later, “so over-testosterone and so obnoxious” and “the meathead Bible for . . . restaurant employees and chefs.” The lurid tell-all not only made an overnight superstar of the 44-year-old Bourdain, it ignited a new era in culinary storytelling and continues to inspire generations of professional and home cooks.

Bourdain quickly parlayed the book’s success into a string of travel shows. On camera, as in real life, he could be, as several of Ms. Woolever’s interviewees agree, socially awkward. Yet, whether slurping ramen in Tokyo or goat’s head soup in Nairobi, his gravelly but empathetic voice remained consistent as he jumped from one program to the next. The journeyman chef had finally found what made him distinct: sharing tables, inviting conversation, embracing humanity with an open heart and mind.

From “A Cook’s Tour” to “No Reservations” to “The

that Bourdain’s maddening quest to cook *coq au vin* on a Congo River trawler panned out, and that President Barack Obama didn’t sweat on camera while eating bowls of *bun cha* in Hanoi.

It was also up to Mr. Vitale to balance his love and fear of his boss. “Tony was hard to be around, and painful to be away from,” he confides. Bourdain elicited a fierce devotion from his crew, which Mr. Vitale likens to a cult, for using his platform for good. But there was also Bourdain’s occasionally violent wrath to contend with. In Borneo, he attacked Mr. Vitale, hands “squeezed as tight as he could” around Mr. Vitale’s neck. “We will never speak another word about it again,” Bourdain told him the next morning. “Is that clear?”

What is clear is that Mr. Vitale tells the stories others will not. He even sits down with the Bourdainites’ ultimate *bête noire*, Asia Argento, Bourdain’s girlfriend at the time of his death. Hers was a voice that Ms. Woolever did not include in her biography. Part memoir, part eulogy, “In the Weeds” is rambly and scatter-shot, big-hearted and engaging, all the qualities that fans loved best about Bourdain.

“Anthony Bourdain Remembered” (Ecco, 208 pages, \$ 37.50), a photo album produced by CNN, the home network of “Parts Unknown,” allows some of those fans to reminisce and offer personal remembrances in between images of Bourdain at work and at play. Most credit him for the stamps that decorate their passports, or their first bowl of *pho*. “What Bourdain did best wasn’t necessarily extraordinary,” one writes. “His gestures of compassion, open-mindedness, and fairness lifted spirits, put opportunities within reach, and saved lives. But they were merely simple acts, of which each and every one of us is capable.”

“He was such a natural poet,” writes another, “easily going from profound to profane, sometimes in a single thought.”

A third sums up Bourdain best of all: “He was perfectly imperfect.”

Mr. Fertel is the author of three books, including “The One True Barbecue.”

In traveling the world producing his show he

Layover” to “Parts Unknown,” the shows, like Bourdain himself, became increasingly moodier, darker, smarter, more reactionary, more transgressive. “The line between Tony and the show was very thin,” says one of Bourdain’s directors, “if it existed at all.” He became increasingly withdrawn, despondent. In one colleague’s estimation, “Tony was as depressed

became our eyes and ears and conscience, and bore the burden that came with it.

JOURNEY MAN Bourdain, right, with Eric Ripert in Marseille, France, in 2015; below, in Hanoi, 2016.

CNN; TOM VITALE; ON C5: CNN

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Saturday, 10/02/2021 Page .C010

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