

Reidel, James
VANISHED ACT
The Life and Art of Weldon Kees
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A long overdue biography of an important America poet.

James Reidel, an independent scholar and a poet in his own right, is the editor of the as-yet-unpublished Kees satirical novel *Fall Quarter* and the editor of a Kees website sponsored by Creighton University. Largely ignored by the academic community, Kees has nevertheless developed minor cult status among those who appreciate the “dark beauty” of his often nihilistic verse, including poet and critic Dana Gioia. Despite the publication of more than forty of his short stories in the best literary journals of his day, Kees never achieved the celebrity of other members of the between-the-wars generation, such as Robert Lowell and Elizabeth Bishop. His own ambivalence toward prominence was expressed in his desire to attain critical success as a writer without its attendant burden of fame. To that end, he arrived in New York in 1942, where he managed to avoid being drafted, most likely for “defects above the neck.” Unfortunate timing, as Reidel suggests, may also have played a role in keeping Kees in the minor leagues. His “light novel about campus life in the Middle West,” as an editor at Knopf put it, happened to cross the editor’s desk the day after Pearl Harbor. After its rejection, Kees concentrated almost exclusively upon poetry and devoted himself to the many other creative ventures of the last decade of his life. An accomplished polymath, Kees gave expression to his creative impulse as a book reviewer and cultural critic, a jazz musician and songwriter, an abstract expressionist painter, photographer, and experimental filmmaker. Yet the level of success he wished for eluded him in all these endeavors, and he died, a presumed suicide, in 1955 at the age of forty-one. The current publisher’s efforts notwithstanding, Kees was almost universally excluded from the academic literary canon. His works, including several theater pieces, seemed destined for what Vladimir Nabokov termed the “Lethan Library” of obscurity. But Kees’ enthusiastic champions, Reidel and Gioia among them, have determined to alter that river’s course.

Reidel’s two decades of scholarship fleshes out the details in the life of this enigmatic mid-twentieth century writer and artist.

[33 photographs]