

Great minds think alike

Stephen Fry (left) and Simon Callow, English actors who happen to write books as well



FRY: YORAM KAHANA/SHOOTING STAR; CALLOW: SCOTT SCHULMAN/SHOOTING STAR

books

The British are writing

Actors Stephen Fry and Simon Callow publish new American editions of their very different but equally fascinating memoirs **By Michael J. Giltz**

British actors have always seemed blithely multitalented. They skip from acting to directing, from television to theater to film. They do it all well, and when they toss off a book in their spare time (think of Emma Thompson or Rupert Everett), it's invariably witty and charming. Judging from their latest books—two markedly different memoirs that arrive on our shores at the same time—actors Stephen Fry and Simon Callow are no exception to Britannia's rule.

Fry, a large and imposing fellow with a scathing tongue, first burst into our consciousness with the TV series *Jeeves and Wooster*—the definitive take on P.G. Wodehouse's droll classics. That was followed by comic novels such as *The Liar* (autobiographical, as his memoir makes clear) and films

Moab Is My Washpot ■ Stephen Fry
■ Random House ■ \$24

Love Is Where It Falls: An Account of a Passionate Friendship
■ Simon Callow ■ Fromm ■ \$23

like *Peter's Friends* and *Wilde*.

Callow also made his mark in television, on a British sitcom called *Chance in a Million* (on which Fry, coincidentally, once played a bit part). But Callow is better known in the States for films such as *A Room With a View* and *Four Weddings and a Funeral* as well as his acclaimed biographies of Charles Laughton and Orson Welles.

Fry's engaging, discursive book charts the first 20 years of his life, and, really, he was a hateful child—constantly disappointing his family, shirking

schoolwork, stealing money from his classmates, and lying about it all with an ease that astonished even him. As he writes about one of his earliest fibs: "The moment I began to speak I found I became more than simply nerveless. I became utterly confident and supremely myself. It was as if I had discovered my very purpose in life."

Reading *Moab Is My Washpot*—the title, according to Fry, is biblical—is like joining the author for a long lunch and several bottles of wine. He may start with an anecdote about public school, but soon he wanders off into his thoughts on corporal punishment and *The Exorcist*. Although he seems genuinely contrite about the misery he caused others, Fry is so amusing about it all that one gets the queasy feeling we're letting him off too easy. Someone less glib, less clever would seem more ▶

of a wanker. Still, it's hard to hold a grudge when the linchpin of *Moab* is his frank and disarming description of an earthshaking, head-over-heels, wildly romantic schoolboy love for the Perfect Boy, one Matthew Osborne.

A very different sort of love is the subject of Callow's book, which is subtitled *An Account of a Passionate Friendship*. Callow, at 30 was a rising actor, madly enamored with a moody Turkish-Egyptian filmmaker named Aziz, when he stumbled into the orbit of legendary play agent Peggy Ramsay (who nurtured such outrageous playwrights as Joe Orton). A formidable woman of 70 when a nervous Callow first came into her office, she catapulted him straight into her world as she harangued the rich and famous on the telephone: " 'But your play's no GOOD, dear,' she cried..., then informing [the caller], 'I've got *Simon Callow* here and I'm telling him your play's no good.' "

It was love at first chat, and Callow's life would never be the same. He quotes liberally from his correspondence with Ramsay, and, believe me, there was a lot of it. Typically they would talk all night, then go home, write each other lengthy letters about what they'd discussed, exchange those letters the next day along with little gifts, dash off a note or two during the afternoon, and then do the whole thing all over again that night. There was anything but an unexamined life.

Unquestionably they shared a bond that anyone would be lucky to find. Until Ramsay's death in 1991, Callow challenged her, soaked up her knowledge and love, and shared his most intimate thoughts. Ramsay bought him an apartment, championed his acting and writing, and, by his own account, made him a better man. "I have your letters stored up in box after box," he wrote to her in 1990, "and they are the living record of everything we've shared—of what you've taught me—above all the courage to feel—to feel love and to feel art and to give in to it all, and then—your words engraved on my heart—then to pick up the bill." ■

Giltz is a regular contributor to the New York Post, Entertainment Weekly, and other periodicals.

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