

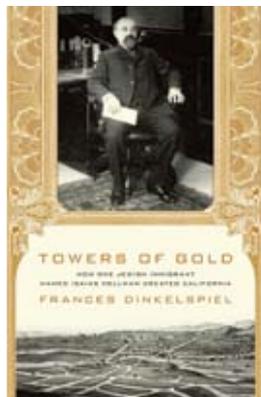


TV
THE RACHEL MADDOW SHOW
(MSNBC, weekdays, 6 and 8 p.m.)

Pundit isn't the right word for Rachel Maddow, but that's partly why her voice is so welcome in the cable-news fray. An affable, reasonable commentator whom even the other side can respect, Maddow might soon become the David Brooks of the left. Since *The Rachel Maddow Show's* MSNBC premiere in September, it's not as if the talking points haven't given her opportunities to be smug (Troopergate, anyone?). But Maddow, a 35-year-old Stanford graduate, Rhodes Scholar, and Air America Radio host from Castro Valley, seems to prefer a tone of alert civility. In response to McCain campaign manager Rick Davis's testy demand for "deference" from the media toward Sarah Palin, Maddow gently quipped, "To my mind, deference has about as much of an appropriate role in journalism as vertigo has in trapeze." Then she went on to discuss the issue with Pat Buchanan, whom she considers herself lucky to have on the program, despite the fact that he once made her cry by calling for a culture war against gay people. Yes, Maddow is a lesbian—but identity politics is for pundits.

A

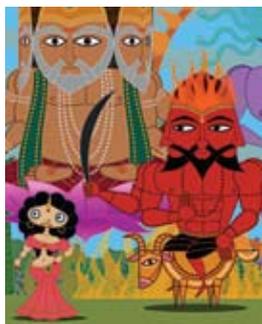
JONATHAN KIEFER



BOOK
FRANCES DINKELSPIEL: TOWERS OF GOLD
(St. Martin's Press)

Visionary financier Isaias Hellman was the Warren Buffett and Alan Greenspan of early California rolled into one. He arrived in L.A. as a practically penniless, 16-year-old German Jew when there were only 300 other Europeans in town. Three decades later, he controlled much of the booming city's capital, land, and public works—then he acquired Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco through a merger, earning headlines as the West's richest man. Hellman starred in so many aspects of the state's phoenixlike rise between the Civil War and the Depression that he became our Zelig, only with a really thick portfolio. The banker's bonds with the financial elite—fellow Jews like Meyer Lehman (his brother-in-law), gentiles like Collis Huntington—made skittish pioneer depositors in both cities less prone to panic. Still, this giant figure had been lost to history until local journalist Frances Dinkelspiel, Hellman's great-great-granddaughter (and the sister of this magazine's president), stumbled onto his papers at the California Historical Society. Eureka! Many underappreciated developments in California's astonishing adolescence—the emergence of SoCal, the UC system, post-1906 San Francisco, Hiram Johnson, Lake Tahoe, Southern Pacific Railroad, Hetch Hetchy, U.S. Zionism, you name it—are recovered here in elegantly restrained prose. **A-**

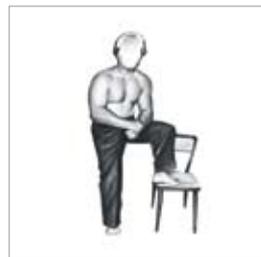
BRUCE KELLEY



FILM
SITA SINGS THE BLUES
(S.F. International Animation Festival, Nov. 13–16, Landmark Theatres Embarcadero)

If this year's San Francisco International Animation Festival were judged solely on the merits of the only one of its features available for review at press time, that wouldn't really be fair, would it? But it would be encouraging, because Nina Paley's *Sita Sings the Blues* is a deceptively enjoyable tour de force. It combines a hilarious telling of the Indian epic *Ramayana* (about the goddess Sita's highly taxing separation from her husband, Rama) with the filmmaker's own true tale of moving from San Francisco to India with her husband, then coming home, only to get dumped via email—plus some spicy '20s torch songs by Annette Hanshaw. Thanks to Paley's apparently unlimited visual imagination, each thread gets its own distinct style, and the braid is lovely. In her capable hands, animation is both an immensely sophisticated mode of motion-picture storytelling and the childlike cartoon fun we all remember and understand. That's just the right medium with which to articulate the universalities of myth and poignant romance. **A**

JONATHAN KIEFER



ALBUM
DEERHOOF: OFFEND MAGGIE
(Kill Rock Stars)

Deerhoof's career has been built on cultivating surprise by cramming as many disparate parts into its songs as possible. On the Bay Area avant-rock quartet's 10th album, however, the biggest shock is how straightforward the band sounds. For the first time, the musicians—vocalist/bassist Satomi Matsuzaki, guitarist John Dieterich, drummer Greg Saunier, and new guitarist Ed Rodriguez—try streamlining their tunes. The postpunk track "Snoopy Waves" gets in a groove and actually stays there, while "Numina" rides the pleasant wave of a Latin jazz beat. The guitar playing is brawnier and more succinct than usual, as if the band had been listening to classic rock. There are some truly odd numbers, like "This Is God," in which Matsuzaki mumbles over free-jazz skronk, but also some pretty acoustic tracks, like "Family of Others," which sounds like a very lost Beach Boys song. Matsuzaki has never been traditional: Her voice sounds like a squeaky instrument, and her lyrics tend toward nonsensical. But she tackles a conventional topic on the title track, bemoaning "hundreds and thousands of love messages" left on an answering machine. Deerhoof may never be mainstream, but the closer the band inches toward it, the more fascinating it becomes. **A-**

DAN STRACHOTA



BOOK
DON FREEMAN & SUSAN YELAVICH: TED MUEHLING
(Rizzoli)

Anyone who pores over the objets d'art at Federico de Vera's Maiden Lane boutique invariably fixates on Ted Muehling's jewelry. Even the owner is a devoted fan: He opened his New York gallery across the street from Muehling's shop in SoHo. Photographer Don Freeman was similarly drawn to the designer, and for the past 20 years, he has documented Muehling's intricate pieces, which mimic flower buds, twigs, and other natural objects. A new book celebrating Muehling—published this month, with photography by Freeman and text by Susan Yelavich of Parsons, the New School of Design—juxtaposes images of the designer's baubles and workspace with Freeman's shots of flowers, statues, seaweed, and shells. The inspirations for Muehling's work are cataloged like entries in a naturalist's journal, a tactic that trains readers to look at each creation not only for its shape or color, but also for the way in which it relates to a cloud pattern or a curl of smoke. If you prefer your art accompanied by neat conclusions, then this book may lose you; but if you tend to spurn guided museum tours, you'll be captivated by the original presentation. **A-**

ELIZABETH VARNELL