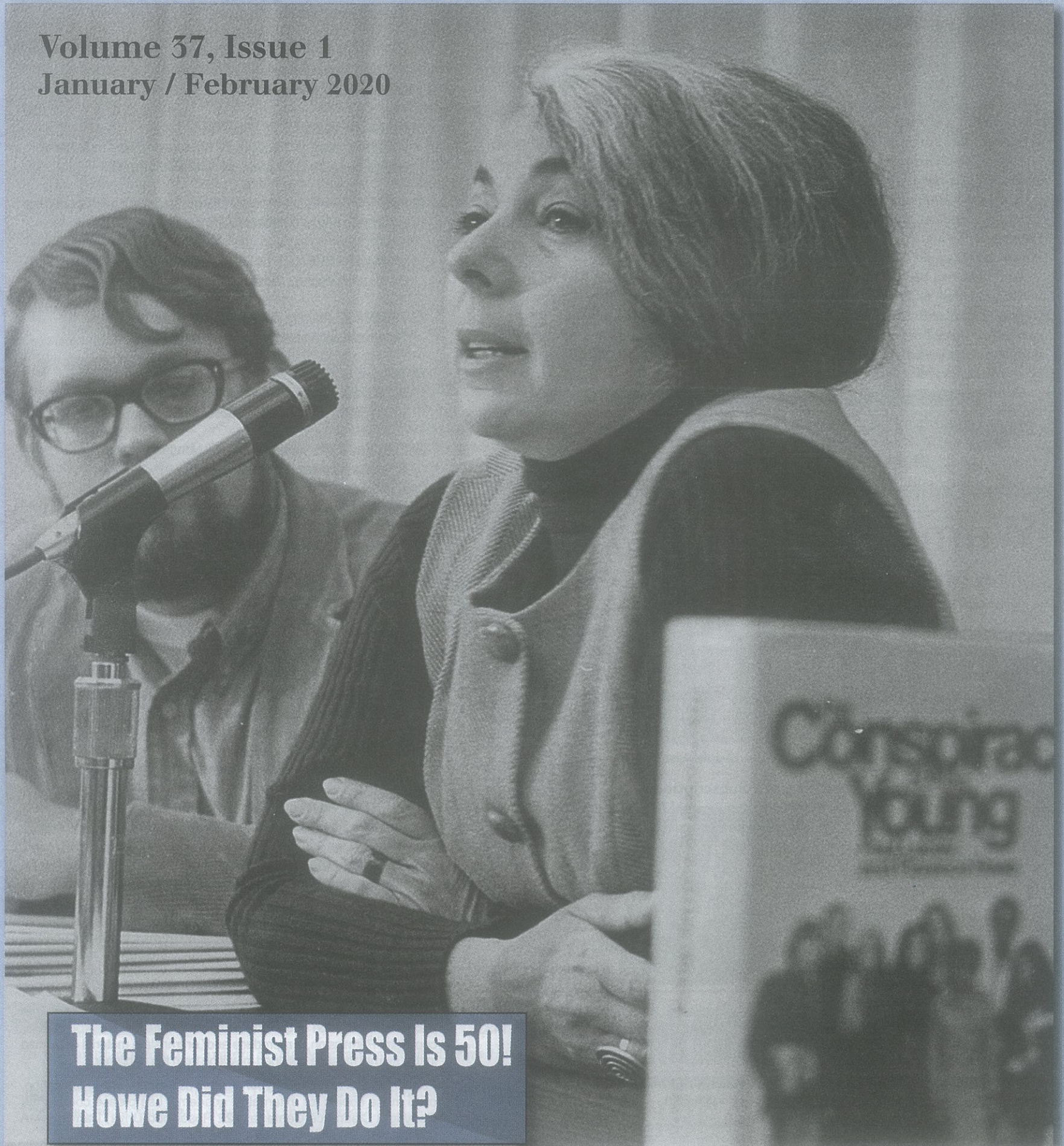


# Women's Review of Books

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*Feminist Press founder Florence Howe in 1971, speaking at Portland State University about the emerging discipline of women's studies. The director of the PSU speaker's program, Mark Peterson, looks on. Photo by David Falconer, staff photographer for The Oregonian.*



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# A Thousand Words

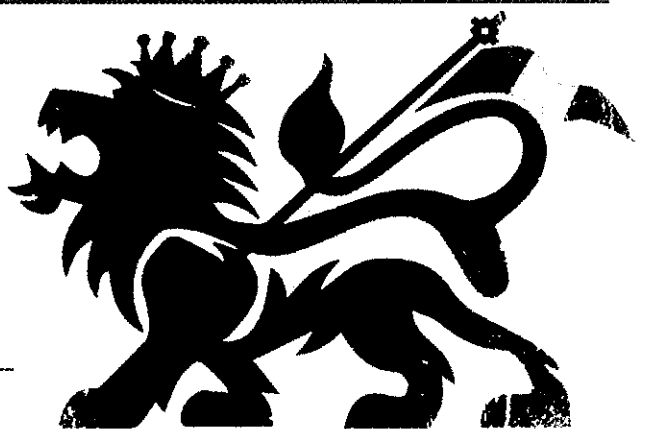
*The Shadow King*

By Maaza Mengiste

New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2019, 448pp., \$26.95, hardcover

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*Reviewed by Naomi Elias*



**D**uring both the 1890s and 1930s, Italy made two failed attempts to colonize Ethiopia. *The Shadow King* is set during the second attempt, in 1935. In this novel, her second, Maaza Mengiste is not trying to rewrite history, but to surface a forgotten one.

"The story of war has always been a masculine story," Mengiste explains in an author's note, "but this was not true for Ethiopia and it has never been that way in any form of struggle." Countless Ethiopian women (like Mengiste's own great-grandmother) fought behind, beside, and at times in front of Ethiopia's soldiers. With this novel, Mengiste transforms these women from "errant lines in faded documents" into heroes of a bloody and nearly forgotten colonial conflict.

In *The Shadow King*, women take center stage as cooks, wives, allies, spies, strategists, rape survivors, and soldiers. The central figure isn't the titular shadow (or fake) king but his guard, Hirut, whose fictional journey from servant to soldier is the heart of the story, inspired by an actual photograph Mengiste owned of a young Ethiopian

girl. At the start of the novel, Hirut is the servant to a married couple, Aster and Kidane. They are grieving the loss of their son, which informs each's relationship with Hirut; Aster is cold and resentful of Hirut's youth, and Kidane seeks unreciprocated intimacy with her. As the war begins, Kidane is charged with leading an army and pulls Hirut and

only when fighting the threat of occupation from abroad but in facing the oppression at home. In one scene, an Ethiopian maid pretends to ignore an Italian photographer who is monitoring her movements near a kill zone where countless Ethiopian men have lost their lives. Mengiste writes that the maid knows how "blood can conspire to

**"The women wait for a whisper that carries on a gust of wind:  
We are more than this."**

her most prized possession—a gun given to her by her late father—into service. As the war stretches on, Hirut rapidly finds herself adapting to the crudeness and cruelty of armed conflict as the book begins to reveal its purpose.

Though the story is set during the second Italo-Ethiopian War, Mengiste's focus is not on specific battles but rather on the women soldiers whose bodies become battlegrounds. Through Hirut's lens, Mengiste explores what women endure, not

give life and to take it, to murder and to bless, to confirm a woman's place in the world every month, and deny it." The novel's most bracing scenes are when Hirut and the other women negotiate power back from men accustomed to wielding it over them. Hirut suffers abuse at the hands of her Ethiopian employers. She is raped and taken prisoner by the Italians, although for her, capture is not an end but a new beginning. A career servant, Hirut is both familiar with and unfazed by the



Nina Subin

Maaza Mengiste

power imbalance, so she uses her time in captivity to study her captors. The soldiers who believed imprisonment would automatically force her to yield her cause learn—through her resistance to their jeers and later upon her escape—that it only emboldened her to fight harder.

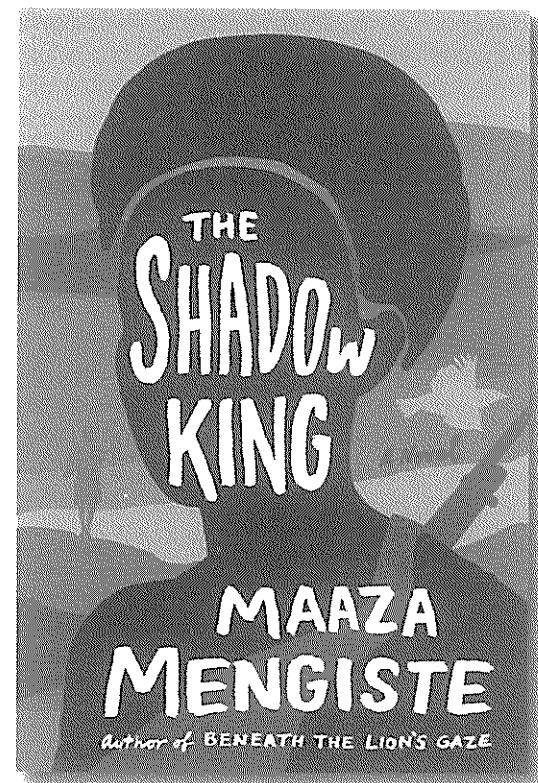
Mengiste's knack for rich but uncluttered writing is on full display in this breathtaking novel. Her worldbuilding is swift and easy to follow, yet multilayered. Contributing to the novel's epic tone are scattered chapters within the book entitled "Chorus," that are written in the voice of an unnamed omniscient narrator who speaks of the women, the fallen, and their journeys. "On the flat ridge of the mountain," one choral interlude reads, "the women wait for a whisper that carries on a gust of wind: We are more than this."

The book is at its best when Mengiste guides us through Hirut's inner life. The short chapter structure also allows the reader to seamlessly dip in and out of the perspectives of other key players during the war and offers glimpses of other critical time periods in Ethiopian history, such as emperor Haile Selassie's being dethroned in 1974. Other characters whose inner lives we explore include Selassie, who lives in exile in England during the battle (prompting the creation of a "shadow king" to take his place); the barbarous Italian colonel Carlo Fucelli, who intends to win the war for Ethiopia by any means possible; and camp photographer Ettore Navarra, whose primary job is to document Fucelli's triumphs for Italians back home.

Navarra has a curiously prominent role in the novel, despite not being an actual belligerent in the conflict. He refers to himself as "an archivist of obscenities, a collector of terror," because he is instructed to photograph the deaths of Ethiopian soldiers who the Italians routinely throw off cliffs. He reduces Ethiopian women like Hirut, held as a prisoner of war, into prize photographs. In Navarra's complex relationship with Hirut, Mengiste is able to explore an idea she had while examining Italy's war archives: that documents can have an agenda. "To photograph," as Susan Sontag once wrote, "is to confer importance." Navarra's photos are often staged and only taken during moments of triumph, distorting history to fit a narrative. When Hirut is taken prisoner by the Italians and finds herself staring into Ettore's camera, their interactions help

Mengiste elucidate the limits of photography, to demonstrate how what is photographed dictates what is remembered, and how all of that depends on who is behind the camera.

Mengiste devotes pages to describing who or what is in a photograph. For instance, a woman has "a row of braids that fan out to thick, dark curls. Tattoos gracing the line of her throat up her jaw. Bruises near her eyes, at her mouth, a thread of blood dried against her ear. She is mid-sentence, her tongue against her teeth, curving around a word lost forever." These aren't mere captions but detailed catalogues of a subject's emotions and physicality. Photographs are silent, and in *The Shadow King* Mengiste explores how they are silencing, too, omitting stories about the people trapped in them, their thoughts, fears, and accomplishments buried within and sitting just outside the frame. This is the book's ultimate agenda: bringing Hirut and the other female characters to life by giving us the thousand words instead of just the picture. While Ettore Navarra snaps away at a caged Hirut, here is what goes unphotographed: Hirut's rage, defiance, and ability to endure. "When Hirut turns her head so that rays scallop around her like a brilliant flame, what can the eye see but just a young woman seeking comfort in the warmth of the afternoon sun?" Mengiste writes. "What can the camera see of her later mercy and that lifelong rage?"



Naomi Elias is a freelance writer based in Los Angeles. Her work has appeared online and in print at a variety of publications including *New York Magazine*, *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, *Longreads*, *Electric Literature*, and *The Brooklyn Rail*.

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