

Tenure and Dissidence

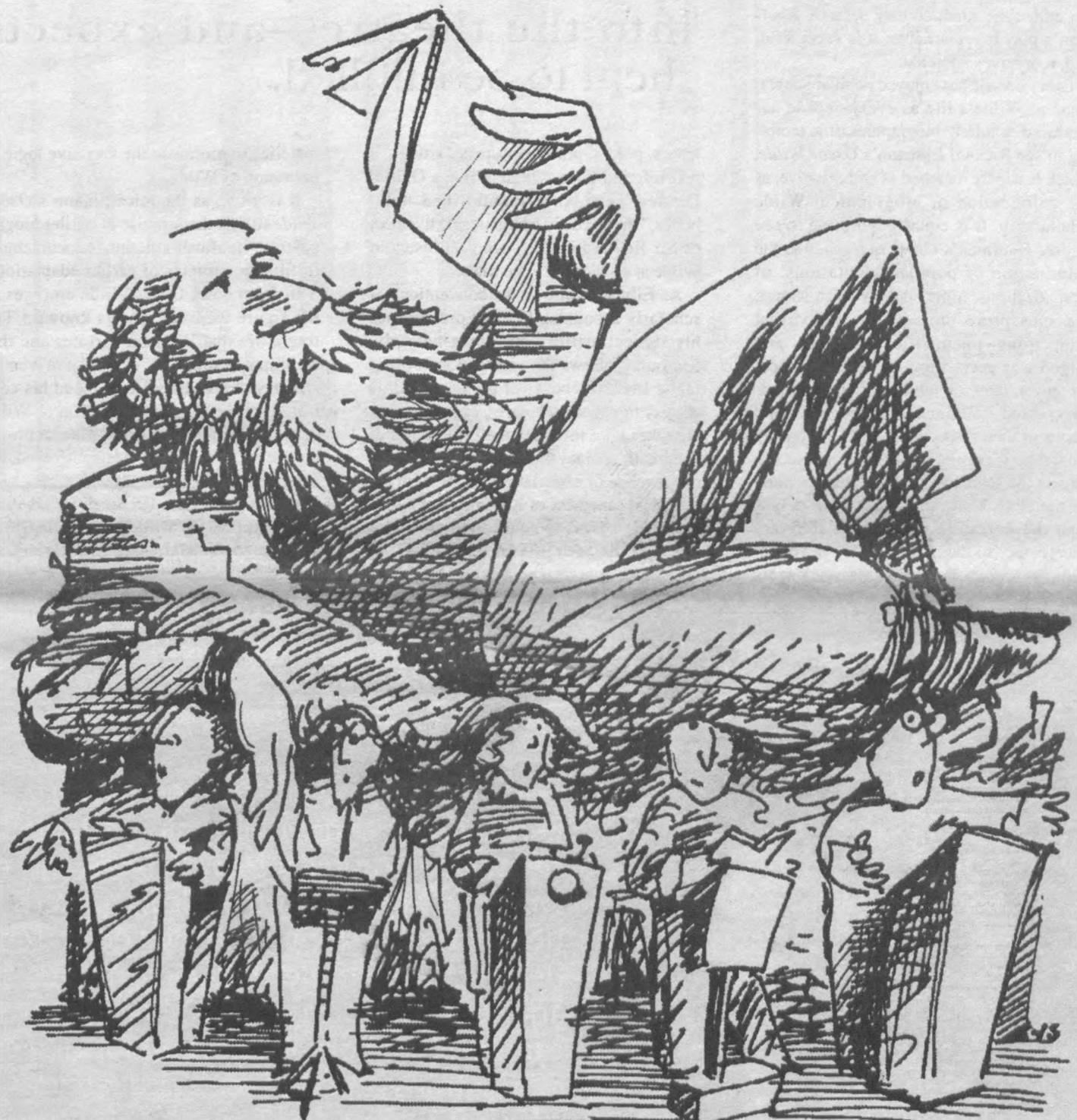
Manifesto of a Tenured Radical
Cary Nelson
New York: New York University Press,
\$17.95, 243 pages

John Vernon

Cary Nelson's new book is two books: one an admirable and impassioned plea for political action in the face of the downsizing of humanities programs in the corporate university of the 1990s—the other a series of reports from the culture wars front by an advocate for cultural studies, the latest wave of literary theory to wash over the academy. The tenuous link between these two themes lies in the Marxist roots of cultural studies. America needs fully funded research universities, says Nelson, as a gadfly source of alternative social analysis because higher education remains “the only large-scale corrective for the ravages of capitalism.” The title of his book, it should be mentioned, is a tongue-in-cheek reference to Roger Kimball's attack on the politics of academe, *Tenured Radicals*.

Yet, Nelson may not realize—or refuses to acknowledge—the degree to which the grab bag of cultural studies has weakened, not strengthened, the analysis he calls for, as well as softened public resistance to attacks on higher education by creating the impression that the liberal arts are irrelevant and the professorate at our universities insular.

First, the call to action. Nelson is especially enraged by the exploitation of graduate assistants and adjunct teachers on university campuses. He is eloquent on the miserable job market, though, surprisingly for a Marxist, virtually silent on its roots in the larger economic and social world. Today, seventy-five per cent of those receiving Ph.D.s in English will not achieve tenured teaching positions. One major reason for this is now well-known: every university depends on a pool of cheap labor provided by graduate students and adjunct faculty—many of whom are recent Ph.D.s from the same university—to staff its freshman and sophomore level courses. As university faculties are downsized through early retirements and hiring freezes, enrollments remain the same, or even increase; the only solution appears to be to outsource poorly paying teaching jobs to this cadre of part-time faculty, who in turn take them because of the lack of full-time jobs. In Nelson's view, this self-producing, self-consuming system ensnares us all—full and part-time faculty alike—although, ironically, “some of those who have helped lead the fields' intellectual revolution are among those most indifferent to the fate of their more vulnerable colleagues.” His prime example of the latter is Yale, whose strike of teaching assistants in 1995 was opposed by most of its tenured faculty. Yale, it should be mentioned, is not exempt from the virtual universal dependence among research universities upon a sub-class of gun-for-hire



Jack Sherman

Ph.D.s. Two-thirds of the undergraduate classes at Yale are taught by graduate assistants and adjunct faculty.

The traditional justification for low-paid teaching assistants is that they are apprentices, not employees. Nelson quotes Peter Brooks, professor of English and Comparative Literature at Yale, who once gushed to *The New York Times* that Yale's graduate students ought to be thankful for the opportunity to work there. They “really are among the blessed of the earth,” he said; “so I sometimes feel annoyed at them seeing themselves as exploited.” Nelson is especially good at flaying such fatuous and supercilious remarks to reveal their hypocrisy. As he points out, if there are no jobs for even Yale Ph.D.s, the logic of apprenticeship collapses, and graduate teaching assistants become exploited labor.

The degree to which this system has rooted itself kudzu-like in universities is truly amazing. At Nelson's campus, the

University of Illinois, to hire full-time faculty to do the work of graduate assistants and adjuncts would cost the English Department alone more than four and a half million dollars. “The conclusion is entirely unambiguous,” he says: “my department is completely dependent on cheap graduate student labor.”

His horror stories mount. Many colleges and universities now invite prospective candidates for their rare vacancies to interview on campus at their own expense. (One hesitates to even mention such practices, for fear that it will pull the string of a forty-watt light bulb in some administrator's head on one's own campus.) Conference organizers sometimes charge graduate students fees as high as \$200 to read papers, so they can have a line on their vita. And so on.

The solutions offered by Nelson, though stopgap, are sensible and just. Graduate students and adjuncts should be allowed to unionize, and tenured faculty should sup-

port this effort. Faculty should sacrifice salary increases to fund pay increases for teaching assistants and adjuncts. He grants this will be a hard sell; the last thing full-time faculty want to admit, says Nelson, is that they are in competition with graduate assistants and part-timers. Additionally, marginal Ph.D. programs should be shut down, older faculty should be encouraged to retire, then rehired part-time while they draw on their pensions, and the profession should learn to do a better job of communicating with the general public, in order to counter the right's virulent attacks on higher education.

This business of communicating with the general public may be Nelson's own small measure of hypocrisy. In asking the question as to whether literary theory has undermined the discipline of literary studies or “kept it adaptable and enabled it to survive,” he clearly suggests the latter is

continued on page 5

The Life of a Literary Legend

Oscar Wilde and the Theater of Moisés Kaufman

Sandra F Siegel

From the time of its inception last March in New York at The Greenwich House in a small theater that seats two hundred, the spirited all male cast of *Gross Indecency*, written and directed by Moisés Kaufman, played to enthusiastic audiences. In July, when it moved to the slightly larger upscale Minetta Lane Theater, it continued to play to enthusiastic audiences. It is not unusual for mediocre theater to succeed and we are seldom surprised when remarkable plays do not attract the attention they deserve. Kaufman's play is remarkable; it is successful; and, it deserves attention.

Every decade has enjoyed popular adaptations of Wilde's life as every decade has produced scholarly biographies. It is tempting to see Richard Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde*, which is widely regarded as authoritative, as the culmination of biographical Wilde scholarship. It is equally tempting to see Moisés Kaufman's *Gross Indecency* as the culmination of popular adaptations: of dramatizations, films, and one-man shows; of poems, prose, prose-poems, clairvoyant projections, pneumatic retrievals, and forged wax recordings of Wilde's voice. Moreover, they resemble each other in their unexpected resistance to the conventional claims of their respective genres. Ellmann's biography is crafted so artfully one quickly forgets the scholarly scaffold that supports the narrative. There are, in fact, more details than the narrative requires. If they are unnecessary to the narrative they nevertheless empower its dramatic force: one lingers

over details that defer calamity; delights in Wilde's sparkle even as, with knowledge of hindsight, one anticipates decline; feels powerless to intervene as innocent choices augur disaster; senses the inevitability of tragedy yet never doubts agency and responsibility. Kaufman, working with similar material, bends the conventions of his art to resemble a scholarly work. Texts are held before the audience as though their presence confirmed otherwise doubtful truths; actors identify passages before they read from their sources among which are

ers—who speak for themselves in their own words (even if, often, what they say has been attributed to them by others). Kaufman's voice is never more audible than when, on stage, others speak. His own reading of Oscar Wilde is never more persuasive than when, on stage, Wilde and Douglas enact, silently, their affective attachment to each other at the same time that, in the courtroom scenes, Wilde denies the patterns of behavior such visual evidence suggests. Similarly, Ellmann's biography, which seems to depend so deeply on archival

trials, more than any other single consideration, supply the putative evidence for picturing Wilde's skewed desires—whatever those were and are considered to be—and account for his reckless irresponsible life. How—and why—this became the presupposition of Wilde criticism requires more space than this brief review allows. Here, I wish to emphasize that Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* does not inaugurate this view: the force of the biography is devoted to confirming it. Kaufman's *Gross Indecency* relies upon the same conception and tells the same familiar story. Their narratives are especially compelling not because we are ignorant of the outcome. They are compelling because the outcome is already known. Knowledge of the outcome frees the imagination to take pleasure in Ellmann's formidable display of scholarship and in Kaufman's fresh theatrical inventiveness. (Here is not the place to pause over Ellmann's inaccuracies to which Horst Schroeder, among others, has called scholarly attention.) One admires Ellmann for the imaginative sympathy he brings to his subject which is the same sympathy that informs *Gross Indecency*.

It should not surprise us that Ellmann and Kaufman repeat the story that a century has made familiar. Both accommodate Wilde's life to the same anachronistic model, of a homosexual or of a gay man, a model which would not have been familiar to Wilde. Moreover, both presume, as in my view they should not, that *De Profundis*, which Wilde wrote in prison, probably in 1897, reveals accurately what transpired earlier in his life in the eighties and especially earlier in the nineties, between himself and Douglas. Finally, it must be said that the so-called transcripts and the shorthand

continued on page 4

Every audience brings its own collection of fantasies about Wilde into the theatre—and expects them to be fulfilled.

letters, poems, prose, newspaper articles, a text referred to as "Oscar Wilde's Oxford Diaries," and, the "unpublished notebooks," displayed in a large legal envelope, of Sir Edward Clarke, who represented Wilde at each of the three trials.

As Ellmann follows the conventions of scholarly accountability, yet orchestrates his subject artfully and imaginatively, Kaufman follows the conventions of dramatic inventiveness yet orchestrates his subject to appear scholarly, even archival. He takes care to create the impression of historical accuracy and precision. This curious reversal of expectations alerts us to the theatrical canniness of Kaufman's achievement. He seems to subordinate his own voice to the authority of the "texts": to Wilde, Douglas, Queensberry—and oth-

material, conforms to the narrative logic of his vision of Wilde.

It is, then, as though Ellmann's *Oscar Wilde* fulfills the promise of earlier biographies as Kaufman's fictional documentary fulfills the promise of earlier adaptations. Yet, from both, Oscar Wilde emerges as the figure we have always known.¹ The tragic life that Ellmann narrates and that Kaufman dramatizes, of a man driven by self-destructive impulses beyond his control, has been the presupposition of Wilde criticism since the turn of the century. Above all, as they have been conveyed, the

1. I am indebted to Ian Small for his valuable reflections on Wilde criticism in Chs. 1 and 2 of *Oscar Wilde Revalued* (North Carolina, 1993).

The Boys of My Youth

By Jo Ann Beard



The year's most anticipated literary debut—a fierce, funny, and wholly unforgettable collection of autobiographical stories from the only new writer to appear on the New Yorker's 1996 fiction issue. Writing with perfect pitch, Jo Ann Beard brings to life the personalities, incidents, and epiphanies that have shaped her life—and captures the collision of youthful longing and the hard intransigence of time and fate.

Jo Ann Beard's work impresses me to no end. Funny without being sit-comish, self aware without being self absorbed, emotional without being sentimental, pointed without being cruel.

Jo Ann Beard is a fantastic writer, an Athena born fully formed out of her own painstaking head.

—Jeffrey Eugenides

\$22.95 • 224 pages • hardcover • Little, Brown and Company

SUBSCRIBE TO:

The BOOKPRESS

The Bookpress BRINGS YOU A STIMULATING COLLECTION OF REVIEWS, INTERVIEWS AND ESSAYS EIGHT TIMES A YEAR.

For only \$12, the next eight issues will be delivered directly to your door.

Name: _____
Address: _____

Phone: _____

TO SUBSCRIBE, PLEASE SEND IN YOUR PAYMENT OF \$12 TODAY TO:

The Bookpress, DEWITT BUILDING,
215 N. CAYUGA ST., ITHACA, NY 14850.
(VISA/MC/DISCOVER, CHECK OR MONEY
ORDER ACCEPTED. PLEASE MAKE CHECKS
PAYABLE TO The Bookpress.

The BOOKPRESS

Publisher/Editor: Jack Goldman

Managing Editor: Cara Ben-Yaacov

Contributors:

John Bowers, Steven Chapman, Edward T. Chase,
Dan Collins, Harvey Fireside, Jon Michaud,
Kevin Murphy, Nick Salvatore, Cushing Strout, Paul
West

Art:

Adam Berenstein, Don Karr, Gary Kass, Jack Sherman,
Bente King

Interns:

Kalliroi George, Kythe Heller

The entire contents of THE BOOKPRESS are copyright
©1998 by THE BOOKPRESS, INC.. All rights reserved.
THE BOOKPRESS will not be liable for typographical error
or errors in publication.

Subscription rate is \$12.00 per year. THE BOOKPRESS is
published eight times annually, February through May and
September through December.

Submissions of manuscripts, art, and Letters to the
Editor should be sent, SASE, to:

THE BOOKPRESS, DeWitt Building
215 N. Cayuga Street, Ithaca, NY 14850
(607) 277-2254; fax (607) 275-9221

Friends of the Bookpress

M. H. Abrams	Kenneth Evett	Isaac Kramnick	Sonya Pancaldo
Diane Ackerman	Lydia Fakundiny	Martha & Arthur Kuckes	Andrew & Nancy Ramage
Helen T. M. Bayer	LeMoyne Farrell	Eva Kufner-Augsberger	Mary Ann Rishel
Martin & Leslie Bernal	Bryna Fireside	Sandra & Walter Lafeber	Edgar Rosenberg
Jonathan Bishop	Harvey Fireside	R. Carolyn Lange	Nick Salvatore
Miriam Brody	Sheldon Flory	Deborah Lemon	Jane Parry Sleeper
E. Wayles Browne	Mrs. William D. Fowler	Alison Lurie	Cushing Strout
Patti & Jules Burgevin	George Gibian	David Macklin	Ann Sullivan
Edward T. Chase	Jody Gladding	Myra Malkin	Deborah Tall
R. F. Cisne	Henry Goode	Dan McCall	Ree Thayer
Maria & Gerald Coles	Jerry Gross	James McConkey	Alison Van Dyke
William Cross	Marj Haydon	Maureen McCoy	Gail Warhaft
Jonathan Culler	Neil & Louise Hertz	Terry McKiernan	Zellman Warhaft
Ruth Darling	Eva & Roald Hoffmann	Scott McMillin	Paul West
Robert J. Doherty	Phyllis Janowitz	Louise Mink	Winthrop Wetherbee
Dora Donovan	George & Audrey Kahin	Edward Murray	Marian White
Ann Druyan	Alfred Kahn	Margaret Nash	Carol Ann Wilburn
Joyce Elbrecht	Peter Katzenstein	Benjamin Nichols	

Born to Die

So Far Gone
Paul Cody
Picador USA
\$22.00, 240 pages

Emily Fawcett

A death row novel seems painfully appropriate at the end of a record year for executions in the U.S., and at a time when the death penalty has been reinstated here in New York State. In Paul Cody's new book, *So Far Gone*, Jack Connor awaits execution by lethal injection for the murder of his mother, father, and grandmother in a fictional Massachusetts where the death penalty has been reinstated after fifty years. He's persuaded by a visiting priest to write down everything he can remember about his life in order to try to understand what happened to him and what he did. Cody gives this project a deeper significance by suggesting that Jack's ability to tell his own story is a kind of final redemption. We hear Father Curran through Jack's voice:

Put down everything . . . From as far back and no matter how unimportant and every scrap and shred and shard, maybe something, some pattern or picture or thing will begin to emerge. . . what they will do is erase all of that, and there will be nothing here for us anymore. Only a long silence. A great loneliness.

Jack tells his story in alternating sections from early childhood, adulthood, and the present, labeled plainly "long time ago," "then," and "now." These are interspersed with accounts by "witnesses," other people who knew him, however tangentially, and who are more interested in trying to understand how Jack Connor could have come to commit such a crime than they are in the pros and cons of the death penalty. The book takes its stand on the death penalty only through an examination of Jack Connor's life; like Paul Cody's previous book, *Eyes Like Mine*, this novel is a searching and painful exploration of one man's consciousness. Jack's relentlessly dark, dream-like voice gains considerable power as the novel progresses to a masterfully written conclusion that leaves us full of grief at his death.

In his first memory, foreshadowing his last, Jack is a young child on a hospital gurney, being wheeled down the hall, stuck with needles. Although we don't find out why he's there until the end of the novel, his sense of helplessness and utter lack of control in this scene becomes a theme of his entire childhood. He is constantly reminded by various members of his family that he is unwanted. His grandmother, while at times cossetting him, threatens him with terrifying stories, and locks him in the closet or the cellar. Once, she drives him out to the woods, leaves him there as it is getting dark, admonishing him to reflect on his sinfulness (for having been born, and for secretly, the grandmother believes, cherishing hateful thoughts about the family). Jack refers to himself in the third person throughout the childhood sections, perhaps to distance himself from that time.

Jack's mother is too frustrated by her own circumstances—her jealous mother-in-law and weak husband—to do more than regale Jack with sad stories of her own orphan childhood. The father, an alcoholic who relies heavily on prayer books and daily devotionals to make it through each day, is bound in an unnaturally close relationship with his mother that renders him unable to protect his own son. As a result of his family's abuse, Jack is a child who has trouble distin-

guishing reality from nightmare and works as hard as he can to remain invisible—which, ironically, leads his grandmother to accuse him of sneaking around the house. Here and throughout the novel he rarely tells us how he feels, sticking to straight descriptions of what he sees, hears and does. These divisive family dynamics become more horrifying and clearly delineated as the novel progresses, and the unfolding of the mystery initially surrounding them gives the book some of its suspense. The reader must put together events, infer causes and results, and imagine Jack's accumulating anger, fear and frustration.

As an adult, Jack stays twice in a mental hospital, lives on welfare in an apartment on the third floor of his parent's house, "the smallest, loneliest place," and spends much of his time high on prescription drugs. Not surprisingly, given his childhood, he seems to hate himself as well as his family. Jack, like his father, escapes on periodic trips away from home—in Jack's case usually involving one-night stands with women he never meets again. Like his father, Jack always returns because, as he says in one of the final sections of the novel: "that was where everything was all along anyway. Where else was there any life or hope to go to?"

Yet he is accused of meditating the act he finally commits and family members repeatedly threaten to call the police and have him re-admitted to a mental hospital. He keeps his apartment spotlessly neat (we learn from the policeman who comes to investigate the murders) in contrast to the sprawling mess on the second floor of the house where his parents live (his grandmother lives on the first floor). He spends his time reading true crime novels (presumably to diffuse his feelings of anger and violence), cutting himself with an exacto knife, and going out at night to prowling around other people's backyards. There is something menacing as well as pitiful about this habit, as if Jack is trying to escape his own life by watching others' from the

outside. Most often he seems to exist in a state where he has repressed all emotion and looks in on himself as if he were a bystander disconnected from his own impulses. Parked at the side of the road in a suburban neighborhood one night he tells us,

All the chemicals were moving through me, up and down my arms and legs, into my fingers and toes. My head was like some highway interchange at the edge of a city at night. It was empty, then a car, a truck, a van, a cab raced through so fast that I couldn't keep track. There were only traces of headlights.

After leaving the car and creeping into a backyard, he tries to imagine being a normal person living a normal life and sleeping the kind of restful sleep that would allow him to escape this horrible world,

in that house, in that bedroom, under those covers, someone beautiful was deep in the arms of sleep. Someone was dreaming. Someone was far far gone.

Despite his torturous circumstances, Jack's narration sometimes has a beautiful, fragile tone, as in his description of his lonely third-floor residence:

The sun coming through the windows at a slant, then from higher up, and then late in the afternoon the light would soften, would turn yellow and gold, like something polished and old and valuable.

At the end of the novel, on the way to the execution chamber, Jack says of the attending priest: "I turn my head to the side and see his old gray head bent over with the years and the weight." It is this voice, this sensibility that seems capable of compassion and dignity, that the reader finally mourns.

Cody's prose is not, however, without flaws. Although the repetition in Jack's memories contributes to the cumulative power of the novel, it also sometimes

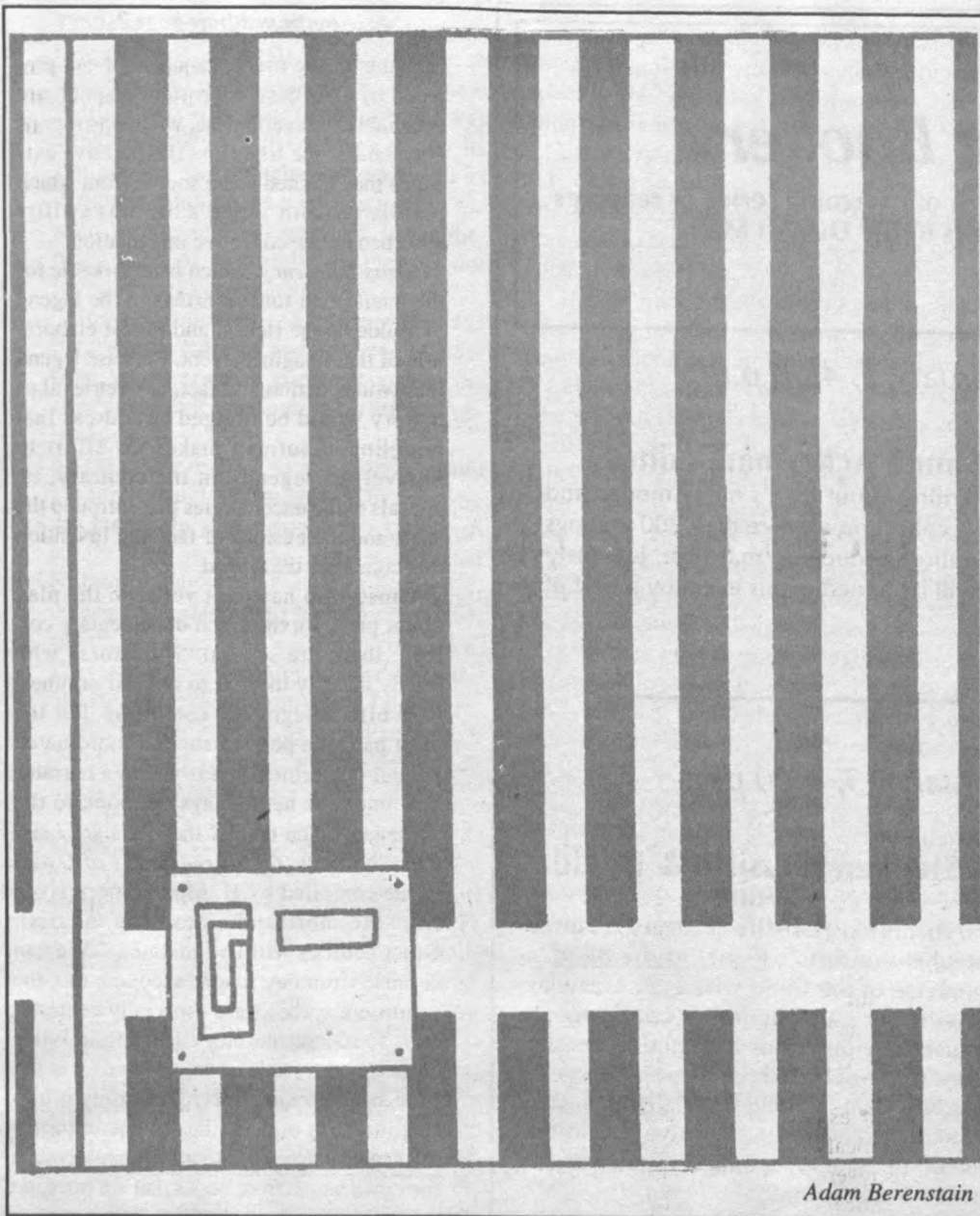
grates on the reader's ear. And Cody's sentences themselves at times become a series of clauses monotonously linked by conjunctive "ands," perhaps a result of his emphasis on reporting sensory information without reference to cause and effect. So the reader is thankful for the regular comments of the witnesses, whose voices differ as widely from each other as from Jack's, leavening the grim story. They are all much more frank about their feelings than Jack is and we feel we know them better in seven or ten pages than we ever know Jack. Perhaps the most compassionate is Father Curran, who denounces the death penalty and confesses,

I am a human being and John is a human being, and if I were him and had his mind and heart and soul, if I had his experience, I may well have done the very same thing. Who ever knows?

In varying degrees, other witnesses also sympathize. Connor's next door neighbor recalls seeing him in his backyard late at night when she herself couldn't sleep, and, while she is struck by his loneliness, she draws the line at trying to understand the murders. She says of Jack, "And then everything happened, and he was nobody I knew anymore." In the memories of these and various others—Spider Warfield, a fellow mental patient on the acute care ward at Medfield, and Chuckie McManus, a former classmate—Jack figures as a reserved character who was always on the fringes of the action, picked on by older kids and friendless. Although many of these witnesses can't accept what Jack has done, their points of view, combined with Jack's own, contribute to our recognition of his humanity.

That the reader comes to care about a man who is, finally, a killer is not the only source of the novel's power. The inevitability of his act of murder and his execution leaves the reader with a simultaneous sense of sadness and relief, of outrage at his execution and acceptance of the appropriate conclusion to a tragic cycle of events. Jack hates his family but he cannot leave it. His fixation with time—whether listening out of sheer boredom to the clock tick in his room, or counting the hours until his execution,—heightens our sense of unendurable tension and inevitable doom. The reader is almost glad when Jack finally takes action to kill his family, and Jack himself tells us that "this was not in hate but in mercy." In the inexorable logic of his world, Jack is now no longer the victim but the victimizer, who must himself die. He's so miserable that we feel death will be a release for him, and indeed, he wishes for it at least once. The only act left for Jack is the task of trying to remember and understand his life—in fact, he's in the unique position, for a memoirist, of knowing the exact hour of his own death (a little like Christ in Gethsemane, is the priest's inevitable analogy). As readers of Cody's novel we participate willy-nilly in this self-examination and we cannot help but admire Jack's ability to look back clearly and unapologetically at his actions, and to accept the approach of his own death with dignity. If compassion for a killer is what Cody set out to instill in the reader, then he has certainly achieved his end. In so doing, he leaves us feeling that, however right it is for Jack to die at the end of the novel, the death penalty itself is morally suspect.

Emily Fawcett studied creative writing at Oberlin College. She lives and works in Ithaca.



Legend

Off Campus

At The Bookery

This presentation is part of our ongoing series of readings and talks upstairs in the DeWitt Mall.

Sunday, February 1, 4:00 p.m.

Jeanne Mackin & Dianne Ackerman, editors

Enjoy a panorama of fine writing about love's many moods and forms in **The Book of Love**, a collection of more than 200 writings covering all the veils of flirtation, seduction, marriage, jealousy and heartache. The editors will be joined at this event by a host of contributors

Sunday, February 15, 4:00 p.m.

Stephen Kuusisto & David Weiss



First, take a real-life journey through Stephen Kuusisto's **Planet of the Blind**, a universe of the blind where an everyday encounter can become a challenge, a cause for ridicule or a source of revelation. This will be followed by David Weiss reading from his new novel **The Mensch**, which chronicles an explosive day in the life of an unhappy manager of a tenement in the South Bronx.

Sunday, February 22, 1:00 p.m.

Love Shook my Heart

Irene Zahava, the editor of **Love Shook My Heart**, a new collection of lesbian love stories, will be joined by contributors Yvonne Fisher and Roey Thorpe.

Sunday, February 22, 4:00 p.m.



Jo Ann Beard

The only new writer to appear in *The New Yorker's* 1996 fiction issue, will read from **The Boys of My Youth**, her collection of personal narratives which summon up a lifetime of romantic awakening and disillusionment.

Sunday March 1, 4:00 p.m.

Paul Cody

Ithacan Paul Cody will read from his new book **So Far Gone**, a multiple murderer's confession and life story, a profound and powerful novel about childhood and getting lost in America.

The Bookery

DeWitt Building,
215 North Cayuga St., Ithaca
For more information call (607) 273-5055
or E-mail: offcampus@thebookery.com

continued from page 2

accounts of the trials, not having been prepared by an official court stenographer, are unreliable.² Nevertheless, what was reportedly said at the trials and the putative evidence they elicited is the source from which familiarity with Wilde's life was swiftly absorbed by the collective imagination.

Gross Indecency, which is remarkable for the intellectual force it brings to the legend of Wilde, is the richest and fullest elaboration of that imagined event. Because legend intertwines fiction and fact, any retrieval of history would be obliged to address that mingling. Kaufman makes no effort to unravel the legend: on the contrary, he appeals to the uncertainties that surround the trials and the elisions of fact and invention that constitute the legend.

Those who have not yet seen the play might picture a theatrical documentary collage: there are several "Narrators" who briefly identify the text to be read or otherwise offer telegraphic comments. For the most part, the performance is coordinated around one principal text which a narrator announces as he displays the book to the audience: "The text of the trials are / sic / from the book *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* compiled by H. Montgomery Hyde from the shorthand notes from the trial. Other sources will be indicated." We can surmise from newspaper accounts that the courtroom scenes were especially contestatory. The comments they elicited from Wilde himself and from his contemporaries, at the time and retrospectively, are brought into relation with one another to encompass a medley of voices speaking for themselves in their own words from books that are there, on stage. At times texts seem to interrupt each other, which might trouble some auditors

2. Hyde, b. 1707, Belfast, enjoyed a varied career as an Attorney, Legislator, and Author. His writings include *The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (London, 1948), which has for the past fifty years served as the principal account of the trials. In the foreword, The Rt. Hon. Sir Travers Humphreys, P.C., suggests that H. Montgomery Hyde "relies for his facts upon a transcript of shorthand notes . . . (1)." In his own introduction, however, Hyde refers to "the publication of their / the trials / proceedings here in as full a form textually as it has been possible to reconstruct them from the sources available" (10). The one source we can be certain was not available was a shorthand account prepared by a court appointed stenographer which is the only account that, under the circumstances, would be reliable. "Stenographic (shorthand) reports of criminal trials in this country / England / did not become compulsory until 1907 . . . Before that date it was left to the parties to employ a shorthand writer if they wished. There is no complete account of the three Wilde trials in existence." H. Montgomery Hyde, June 11, 1981. From my personal correspondence, SFS. But also, see, The Criminal Appeal Act, 1907, Section 16.

who wish to keep each voice in place. Such elisions will not trouble others who hear the voices merging as dancers might be joined and then part from one another in a carefully choreographed movement. Still others might be troubled by Kaufman's use of documents. Even, however, if passages were cited from their sources accurately rather than misleadingly and from reliable rather than from questionable texts, the presence on stage of the books themselves and of other documents that are cited enables the performance to command greater authority than fictional accounts, even if, as it must be said, *Gross Indecency* is more richly fictional than its antecedents. It takes full advantage of the unexamined conviction according to which scholars, journalists, and the law proceed in their quest for orderly understanding—and orderly social relations—that "quotation," like a photograph, does not lie.

Everyone has read some version of one or more of Wilde's works and everyone has an opinion about Wilde. From the beginning, whenever that was, the aura that surrounded him mingled fact and invention. Exactly why this occurred is a subject too large to take up here. What does matter here, for it matters to the reception of *Gross Indecency*, is that the mingling of fact and invention, to which caricatures of Wilde contributed so greatly, correspondingly produced a familiarity mingled with uncertainty. As early as the mid-1880s, Wilde responded, self-consciously, to the flood of verbal and visual representations of his appearance, his speech, his poetry, his views on art, his place of birth—Dublin—and, to his countrymen on both sides of the Irish Sea. It is likely that when the subject is "Oscar Wilde," theater audiences anticipate, as they do for no other author, confirmation of what they know—although not everyone knows the same thing. It is also likely that every theater audience fully anticipates some revelation about the many puzzles that surround the legend. Moreover, every audience brings its own collection of fantasies about Wilde into the theater—and expects them to be fulfilled. Kaufman's *Gross Indecency* offers the promise of satisfying those who are uncertain and seek to understand how it happened that so genial, generous, and personable a figure met with catastrophe at the height of his brilliance and success. At the same time, it holds the promise of satisfying those who are certain of the answers to these questions. No other artwork perpetuates the legend of Wilde so ingeniously or holds the salutary promise of having exhausted its possibilities.

Sandra F Siegel, Professor of English at Cornell, writes about British literary culture.

A version of this review was published in *The Wildean*, Journal of the Oscar Wilde Society, whose editor, Donald Mead, I wish to thank here.

Don't Forget

M•O•O•S•E•W•O•O•D

Open for Lunch
and Dinner
(Dinner only Sunday)

Enjoy our innovative, international menu,
plus delicious, savory pitas, hearty soups,
fresh breads, tempting desserts, and an array
of thirst-quenching beverages.

Monday through Sunday
DeWitt Mall • 273-9610
Fine Original Cuisine



Tenure and Dissidence

continued from page 1

the case. I'm not so sure. At this point, I suppose, I must reveal my own ambivalent view of theory; these matters often wind up being autobiographical. I'm from the same generation of Ph.D.s in English as Carey Nelson; in fact, our first books were published by the same press (Illinois) in the same year (1973), and each was advertised on the back of the other. We were both interested in what was then the beginning of the theory revolution: phenomenology and its application to experimental writers. Both our books contained chapters on the now late William S. Burroughs. I organized and participated in protests against the Vietnam war, and I feel certain that Nelson did too. Since the early 1970s, each of us has taught at a state university—Illinois for Nelson, SUNY Binghamton for me.

We've never met, however, and since the late '70s our careers have diverged. All the time I was writing and publishing criticism, I thought of myself as a poet. Then, while the theory revolution picked up steam, I began writing fiction, and after a long apprenticeship started publishing it in the mid '80s. My first three books were literary criticism; my last four have been novels. Nelson, meanwhile, continued as a literary—and, increasingly, social and cultural—critic. *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* makes it clear just how crucial he thinks this work is, and, in fact, it is more than refreshing to read a social and literary thinker with such impassioned views and such an unwavering commitment to social justice.

What isn't refreshing is to be told that I am one of those who "sacralizes" texts and literary studies, who indulges in "literary reverence," and perhaps in my worst moments has even found myself given to "exceptionalist platitudes about the transcendence of art." Not me personally, I should add—rather, me as former literary scholar and present novelist, that is, as someone who believes in the power of the imagination.

To the charge that I believe in the transcendence of art, I should confess myself innocent. I'm skeptical about most forms of transcendence, but the reason is not so much literary theory as my love of what brought us to literary studies in the first place: the good old-fashioned heterodox hedonism that can result from reading powerful novels and poems. I should add that—being cool—I would never admit to literary reverence; enthusiasm perhaps, but not reverence.

That Nelson should feel obliged to herd all of those interested in what Nabokov called "aesthetic bliss" into the camp of the cultural right is disappointing to me, but perhaps understandable. As literary theory gained in prestige and influence during the

1980s and '90s, I felt drawn to its provocations; it was, after all, an alternative to banality, and its analysis of the dominant culture was often on the money. I was simultaneously repulsed, however, by its eye-glazing, self-policing language and its dogmatic thinking, its tendency to offer the same answer to every question. In the theory phase of his book, Nelson is not immune to these tendencies.

Some discourses may be acknowledged as theoretically inflected and informed without being widely credited as contributing to the continuing articulation of theoretical problematics, he says. Oh, really? As my mother would exclaim, "such language!" Anyone who can recognize what a good sentence is will surely reach at that one. The irony is that Nelson is capable of writing good sentences. Something must happen when literary theory enters one's writing, something akin to the transformation portrayed in the old zombie movies. But, hey—I do appreciate Nelson's granting my discourse a thimbleful of validity. Maybe he'll even listen to my arguments.

Cultural studies, theory's current William the Conqueror, and Nelson's own "discursive practice," has contributed much that is valuable to our understanding of literature and history, and to the criticism of such shibboleths as common sense and normalcy in the West. But why must Nelson predicate its importance upon a disdain for the aesthetic and for literary studies? He may be correct in pointing out that, historically, "literary reverence" enabled literary gatekeepers to ignore the works of women and minority groups and effectively exclude them from course reading lists, but surely the widening of the canon does not invalidate aesthetic judgments. In fact, quite the opposite: it fuels them by enriching our literary and artistic culture. Nelson's account of teaching a modern poetry class with a canon pried open to include leftist and minority poets of the twenties and thirties is fascinating, and reveals him as a fair-minded and conscientious teacher. Much of this chapter grows out of his valuable 1989 study of modern poetry, *Repression and Recovery*. But his admission to having spent years trying to convince students not to read literature in his classes so that he could teach them theory is mind-boggling. No wonder students who used to be drawn to literary studies—including some of our best ones—are now flocking to creative writing programs. This is a phenomenon, by the way, about which Nelson is silent. "Creative writing," I should add, is no panacea, and the very term has always made me uncomfortable. It conjures up Playskool, Playdough, and finger painting, all those infantile reassurances of one's "creativity." Caught on airplanes beside businessmen who ask what I "do," I

say I'm a writer; and when pressed, I admit to teaching fiction writing—and sometimes poetry—reserving for myself the observation that writing is not finger painting, but the mastery of a craft, and the freedom of art. What sometimes happens is that the businessperson then begins talking about his own creative musings, which are hidden in the closets of his laptop.

Nelson's argument seems to go like this: there is a job crisis and a weakening of public support for higher education at precisely the time when cultural studies makes the work of tenured radicals, with their critique of American culture, all the more crucial. And since cultural studies teaches us that "value is not intrinsic to literary works but rather culturally constructed and variable," the work of tenured radicals is properly interdisciplinary and political, and can never be limited to literature. Indeed, literary studies comes dangerously close to being irrelevant to that work. Parenthetically, I'll say this: Nelson's relativizing of aesthetic value hardly invalidates aesthetic judgments, as I think he'd admit. But let's go a little further: the job of cultural construction is performed by as well as upon literary works, which are therefore not only products but producers. Since cultural groups, like languages, overlap and borrow from each other to a degree which might become alarming to those who regard them as discrete, too much is made of the cultural relativity that Nelson insists upon. Exhibit A: that loosebaggy, the novel, may very well be an invention of European culture, but it has become an opportunity for aesthetic empowerment and freedom in this century for countless marginalized groups and nationalities, from Eastern Europe to South America to Africa to the Caribbean to various Native Americans.

Finally, the popular image of cultural studies may not be far from the truth, at least in some classrooms—that it buys into the culture of dreck and distractions-for-sale, into the hype of media and the glamor of celebrity and the mantras of brand names, to the degree that what Nelson calls an "alternative social critique" threatens to become a form of cheerleading for the global marketplace. Nelson himself is not immune to this silliness. In his chapter containing a cultural studies manifesto, we learn that "being a fan is not a prerequisite for doing cultural analysis." I slapped my forehead at that one, fearing that my eagerness to pursue a regimen of Jennifer Jason Leigh Studies would be frowned upon. She is, incidentally, far more worthy of a course, book, and perhaps even department of her own than Madonna or Elvis, though I wouldn't go so far as to grant her cultural reverence. I might add that she sat in on a course taught by a friend of mine at Vassar, a course in—yes—Boxing in Film and Literature, because she was studying for a role. SUNY Binghamton should be

so lucky.

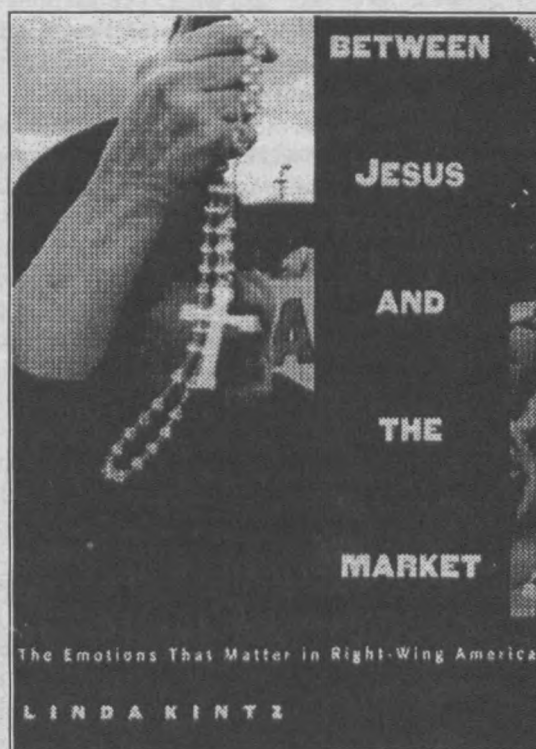
Still, I'm grateful to learn from Cary Nelson that "being a fan gives potential access to important insights," though disappointed to realize that "the challenge is to reflect on fandom and articulate what you learn from it." In other words, those fans who reflect on their fandomness and examine the implications of their practice will accomplish the important alternative cultural analysis needed in this late stage of capitalism. The mosh pit will never be the same again.

My objection to this nonsense is not that certain cultural objects aren't worthy of analysis. Actually, they all are, and one of the ironies is that the analysis invariably turns out to be of more interest and value than the object itself. The same thing happened with, say, the *Annales* historians, who spent lifetimes sifting through parish records and business ledgers and came up with worthy work. No—my objection to the pop side of cultural studies has more to do with my personal difficulty of finding a refuge from the rubbish and noise of fandom, from the celebrity culture, and from consumerist technology. The act of reading a poem or novel, beset on all sides by distractions and gadgets, may very well be the only truly odd and dissident act, when our colleagues are busy watching MTV. And the act of writing a poem or novel—well, I'd like to make a case for its radical nature.

The aesthetic is political, but not just because its forms are cultural forms—that's a given—rather, because its very existence in the context of political and corporate orthodoxies is heretical. Heretical for countless reasons, some contradictory: because of its uselessness, because of its hedonism, because of its darkness, its beauty, its skepticism, its potential for truth telling—its celebration of the solitary and singular mind against the power of the state—its unabashed subjectivity and its ground level X-ray panorama of social secrets and mores. We ought to remember when we look out upon a classroom of baseball-capped and platform-shod undergraduates that each has a lethal bead of mercury in his brain, called the imagination. It won't be ruled by monological thinking, but it can be educated—educated to be impious, empathetic, humble and humbling, and to feed upon wonder by means of technical cunning.

There is plenty of room in English Departments for traditionalists, for "cultural studies people" (Nelson's phrase), and for poets and fiction writers. Cary Nelson does none of us a service by suggesting with feeble but chilling humor that cultural studies is the rat that will eat up the liberal arts. Bring on the rat catchers!

John Vernon is a professor of English at Binghamton University. His most recent novel is *All for Love: Baby Doe and Silver Dollar* (Simon and Schuster, 1995).



**BETWEEN
JESUS
AND
THE
MARKET**

The Emotions That Matter in Right-Wing America

LINDA KINTZ

Between Jesus and the Market looks at the appeal of the Christian right-wing movement in contemporary American political culture. Linda Kintz makes explicit the crucial need to understand the psychological makeup of born-again Christians as well as the sociopolitical dynamics involved in their cause. Kintz focuses on the role of religious women in right-wing Christianity and asks, for example, why so many women are attracted to what is often seen as an anti-woman philosophy.

"Perhaps money, in America, is a force so extreme as to become a religious force, a confusing deity, which demands either idolatry or a spiritual education."
—Beverly LaHaye

\$15.95 • 320 pages • Duke University Press



BURN THIS HOUSE

The Making and Unmaking of Yugoslavia

Jasminka Udonovicki and James Ridgeway, editors

\$16.95 • 352 pages • 14 B&W photographs • 7 maps • Duke University Press

Burn This House is the first book in English to represent the critical, non-nationalist voices inside the former Yugoslavia. Written primarily by Muslim, Croatian, and Serbian journalists and historians, this collection relies on the perspective of the people who live there to portray the chain of events that have lead to the current genocidal wars in the heart of Europe. In bringing together these essays, Serbian-born sociologist Jasminka Udonovicki and *Village Voice* correspondent James Ridgeway provide essential historical background for understanding the recent turmoil in Croatia and Bosnia and expose the catalytic role played by the propaganda of a powerful few on both sides of what eventually became labeled an ethnic dispute.

How the Mind Works
Stephen Pinker
W.W. Norton
\$29.95, 565 pages

Nicholas Nicastro

Stephen Pinker's *How the Mind Works* is an ambitious attempt to bring recent developments in cognitive science to a non-specialist audience. Philosophers' quibbles be damned, Pinker reaches right for the brass ring: his title refers to the mind, not just to gray matters like the brain. Pinker means to do for mentality what Stephen Jay Gould does for life or Carl Sagan did for the universe.

He's got a lot of company. There's been a stampede lately of would-be "rediscoverers" and "rethinkers" and "explainers" of the mind and consciousness, including John Searle, the Churchlands, John Eccles, Alwyn Scott, David Chalmers, Daniel Dennett, et al. Indeed, this field is becoming so crowded it may well take Pinker's cheek to, as the advertisers dream, "cut through the clutter." A recent Amazon.com search of subject terms consciousness + mind returned 234 hits; mind + brain turned up 21 since 1990—an average of three new titles a year.

How the Mind Works reads like a more broadly-focused sequel to Pinker's fast-selling *The Language Instinct* (1994). That book attempted a synthesis of Chomskian generative linguistics and Darwinian natural selection—a shotgun marriage if there ever was one, since Noam Chomsky is renowned for his evolutionary agnosticism. The new book seems to have been written in a spirit of "mopping up" remaining pockets of resistance to Pinker's view of the mind as a bunch of specialized processing "organs," like Chomsky's language module (add a vision module, a physics module, a sex-getting module etc.) Two other leading proponents of this model, evolutionary psychologists Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, have famously advanced the simile of the mind being like a swiss Army knife: an all-in-one collection of purpose-built, content-rich devices, albeit in the mind's case designed not by the Swiss, but by natural selection. Writes Pinker:

The mind is a system of organs of computation, designed by natural selection to solve the kinds of problems our ancestors faced in their foraging way of life, in particular, understanding and outmaneuvering objects, animals, plants, and other people...The mind is organized into modules or mental organs, each with a specialized design that makes it an expert in one arena of interaction with the world. The modules' basic logic is specified by our genetic program.

He develops these ideas into a smooth but selective confection of experimental results, reasonable-sounding argument, and trenchant criticism, leavened frequently with humor and counter-intuitive but demonstrable observations of how the mind "really" works:

When Hamlet says, "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how express and admirable!" we should direct our awe not at Shakespeare or Mozart or Einstein or Kareem Abdul-Jabbar but a four-year old carrying out a request to put a toy on a shelf...I want to convince you that our minds are not animated by some godly vapor or single wonder principle. The mind, like the Apollo spacecraft, is designed to solve many engineering problems, and thus is packed with high-tech systems each contrived to overcome its own obstacles.

The dish goes down surprisingly easily—Pinker makes hundreds of pages of technospeak go by about as quickly as Tom Clancy. Perhaps this is because, like any airport thriller, Pinker's book has clear villains. These are perpetrators of what Cosmides and Tooby call the "Standard Social Science Model": those folks (once based in philosophical behaviorism and psychology, with certain elements inherited by current cultural anthropology and literary studies) who insist on believing that the mind is primarily a social construction, entering the world as a blank slate that gets written upon by the environment and by culture.

As Pinker everywhere argues, "learning" as commonly conceived is simply too underpowered a process to explain the complex abilities the mind acquires and performs, all largely beneath our conscious awareness. Hence those "high tech" features our minds possess as "standard equipment;" hence the special scorn Pinker pours on those who continue to press the "folklore" that language, perception, etc. are the fruits of general learning mechanisms. "...the contents of the world are not just there for the knowing," he asserts, "but have to be grasped with suitable mental machinery."

High-tech and mechanistic imagery aside, a clear intellectual pedigree can be traced from Pinker to Chomsky to Descartes and the decidedly *unmechanistic* Plato. Chomsky himself has been more forthcoming in his debt to these earlier thinkers, on occasion allowing himself to be called "neo-Cartesian."

Indeed, so enamored is Chomsky of his "law and order" view of mental life, he has denied the legitimacy of studying real-life utterances in a "properly" scientific linguistics. Instead, the Chomskian view of language study verges on medieval scholasticism, with colleges of closeted linguists hunched over their manuscripts, musing over rules like how many prepositions can dance on the head of a noun phrase. Actual language, meanwhile, rages on unstudied outside the monastery walls.

Pinker can never quite bring himself to go this far. Sometimes, he comes close:

Systems of [mental] rules are idealizations that abstract away from complicating aspects of reality. They are never visible in pure form, but are no less real for all that...[the idealizations] are masked by the complexity and finiteness of the world and by many layers of noise...Just as friction does not refute Newton, exotic disruptions of the idealized alignment of genetics, physiology, and law do not make "mother" any fuzzier within each of these

systems.

That is, in Pinker's mind the rules are just as real as the reality, though they are abstractions. Of course, what counts as a natural "law" and what counts as distracting "noise" is never so easily resolvable: while it is true that friction doesn't refute Newtonian notions of gravitation, the "laws" of friction are also handy for keeping airplanes in the air and braking your car. What counts as law and what counts as "noise" therefore depends on context. Unfortunately, in the Chomskian case—Pinker included—these are suspiciously often matters of authority and/or selective attention.

The Dawn of the Chuck

As in *The Language Instinct*, Pinker has an unfortunate habit of making issues seem resolved that aren't. As Cosmides and Tooby themselves note, there's a problem with using "learning" as an explanation:

Advocates of the Standard Social Science Model have believed for nearly a century that they have a solid explanation for how the social world inserts organization into the psychology of the developing individual. They maintain that structure

enters from the social (and physical) world by a process of "learning"—individuals "learn" their language, they "learn" their culture, they "learn" to walk, and so on...Of course, as most cognitive scientists know (and all should), "learning"...is not an explanation for anything, but is rather a phenomenon that itself requires explanation.

Cosmides and Tooby use their critique of learning to support their innatist views. However, it also suggests that it is not learning itself that is lacking, but our conception of learning. More to the point, there's some evidence that Skinnerian stimulus-response, rats-pressing-levers-and-running-mazes-type learning is not the only kind of learning there is, especially in infants and children. This has led some fans of general intelligence to tell the evolutionary psychologists to put away their Swiss Army knives.

From outside academe, the differences between camps of cognitive scientists look positively trifling. Most within the field agree that the mind/brain does not come "out of the box" totally unstructured, a blank slate mostly "filled" by culture. Most agree that this innate structure is mediated to some degree by natural selection. There's even some broad agreement that cultural factors (language, for instance), if they operate long enough and consistently enough (a few thousand generations, give or take), can also act as selective pressures, helping to

reshape both the mind and body of what Jared Diamond has called "the third chimpanzee."

From within the field, the remaining arguments look bitter. People like Pinker, Cosmides and Tooby, Dan Sperber, Nicholas Humphrey, and Elizabeth Spelke see modules, modules everywhere, each as innate and superbly adapted for their functions as the pancreas or an elephant's trunk. Meanwhile, "domain-generalists" like Jeffrey Elman, Elizabeth Bates and Anna Karmiloff-Smith turn this reasoning on its head. That is, they don't deny modularity *per se* (modules are, after all, a good way to package complex neural structures in the limited volume inside the skull) but maintain that our specialized abilities emerge from our predisposition to attend to certain regularities in the world. What's innate is not the knowledge, but the capacity to observe the regularities and learn them quickly.

For example, Pinker invites us to marvel at the "software driver" that controls the human hand:

A still more remarkable feat is controlling the hand. . . It is a single tool that manipulates objects of an astonishing range of sizes, shapes, and weights, from a log to a millet seed. . . "A common man marvels at uncommon things; a wise man marvels at the commonplace." Keeping Confucius' dictum in mind, let's continue to look at commonplace human acts with the fresh eye of a robot designer seeking to duplicate them . . .

Typically, Pinker notes a complex adult capacity and wonders how to "reverse engineer" what natural selection hath wrought. He hardly considers the alternative, however: that the mind/brain is disposed to learn quickly and efficiently how to operate whatever appendage it happens to find at the end of its arm, whether it be a hand, a paw, or a flipper.

Neuroscientists have long known that when neurons fire, they not only can make muscles move and glands secrete, they also reinforce their own tendency to fire the same way in the future. (The principle is called Hebbian learning; its dictum is "Fire together, wire together.") Conceivably, the act of using the hand reinforces the pattern of synaptic connections that control the thumb, the fingers, etc. The end result in the adult looks so well-designed and appropriate it might seem like an innate "program" for moving the hand was genetically "wired in"—but it wasn't. We began only with a proper neural connection between hand and motor cortex, and a need to manipulate.

The point is not whether a Hebbian model fully explains motor learning. The point is that "gee whiz" explanations of complex adult abilities don't necessarily prove full-blown innateness. (Most obviously because nobody starts off as an adult!) Furthermore, in evolutionary terms, the weaker model of predisposition, the "disposed to learn" model, is a more parsimonious explanation than inborn mental modules. This is because, in the case of the hand, it doesn't require genes to somehow code the "hook grip," "the five-jaw chuck," "the two-jaw pad-to-side chuck," "the scissors grip" etc. etc.. It only obliges our genes to motivate us to learn.

Indeed, exactly *how* genes might code things like language or "social intelligence" or "natural history intelligence" has never been too clear. DNA, after all, actually regulates nothing more than protein production and other DNA. In this sense, Cosmides and Tooby's critique of learning might also be leveled at the catch-all notion of innateness. Like learning, innateness "...is not an expla-



Mind Works

nation for anything, but is rather a phenomenon that itself requires explanation."

Toy Neurons

Perhaps the most fascinating aspect of *How the Mind Works* is watching Pinker wrestle with the problem of connectionism. On the one hand, the fact that experimenters have succeeded in teaching artificial neural nets to do some pretty human-like things, like recognize written letters and put English verbs into the past tense, is a vindication of one of the pillars of his model: the computational theory of mind. On the other hand, the uncanny way neural nets have of learning the regularities of input data without set rules being programmed in is a challenge to Chomsky's "poverty of the stimulus" arguments for innate knowledge. Some connectionist nets have shown modularity of function, and even human-like cognitive deficits when experimenters simulate "injuries" by removing parts of the system. Importantly, these mind-ish qualities have emerged with learning, and were not introduced pre-formed.

Pinker navigates this quandary by pure elan. After devoting 14 pages to the nature and advantages of "toy neurons" for understanding the mind, and thereby establishing his connectionist credentials, he suddenly takes to calling nets "connectoplasm" (a term clearly meant to evoke that other discredited substance, protoplasm), and asserts "neural networks alone cannot do the job" of accounting for human intelligence:

I do think that connectionism is oversold. Because networks are advertised as soft, parallel, analogical, biological and continuous, they have acquired a cuddly connotation and a diverse fan club. But neural networks don't perform miracles, only some logical and statistical operations.

Of course, nobody thinks networks or neurons "perform miracles." As a supporter of the computational theory of mind, Pinker must also believe that the mind/brain itself, at a certain basic level, performs "only some logical and statistical operations." So what is he talking about?

The real sin of the "strong" version of connectionism—the argument that language, creativity, consciousness itself are all ultimately explicable along con-

nectionist lines—is that it resurrects the associative model of learning. Connectionist nets, after all, learn by doing, and by crudely "associating" certain patterns of inputs and outputs. Following Chomsky, Pinker prefers to imagine a structure of cognitive rules and regulations is doing the real work of mindedness. These rules are not epiphenomenal

artifacts of the learning process, or post hoc abstractions from regularities of behavior. Rather, they are ontologically "real."

To debunk associationism, Pinker makes a list of human-like things that nets can't do (yet). At least one of these is downright silly: Pinker claims that nets can't distinguish individual examples of a class of things from each other. Within the connectionist paradigm, "there is no longer a way to tell apart individuals with identical properties. They are represented in one and the same way, and the system is blind to the fact that they are not the same hunk of matter." People make such distinctions all the time; for instance, identical twins are different people, regardless of how much they look and seem alike: "The spouse of one identical twin feels no romantic attraction toward the other twin. Love locks our feelings in to another person as that person, not as a kind of person, no matter how narrow the kind."

The fallacy here resides in the assumption that any two examples of any real-world class are really identical with each other. Distinguishing individuals has to do with noticing subtler and subtler kinds of variation. It often takes some time, for instance, for field ethologists to begin to see their subject animals as individuals—at first, they all

look the same. To take a more commonplace example, my wife and I own two Himalayan cats that happen to be siblings. Despite the fact that the female is a tortoise-shell point, has a smaller head, and a completely different carriage and personality, houseguests invariably can't distinguish her from her blue-point, big-headed, lay-about brother. My wife and I have had a longer amount of time to make the appropriate, fine associations.

Despite their genetic identity, not even monozygotic twins are phenotypically or behaviorally identical. Indeed, the one place where such identities do exist is the abstract mathematical world that inspired Chomskian linguistics—it's a rule, for instance, that a line segment of length X is identical to any other of length X . This is an area where Pinker's intellectual roots are exposed, and they mislead him. (In the non-mathematical world, incidentally, people do have an uncanny knack for associating certain romantic feelings with the same "types"—the same hair, same build, same foibles. It's no secret. Maybe Pinker just doesn't get out much.)

Some of his other objections are more persuasive. It is indeed hard to visualize how nets can handle complex combinatorics, or alter the quantification of elements in a problem when they're the same-but-different, or process recursively unless specifically constructed to do

so. (In such cases the connection weights have a tendency to interfere with each other.) On the other hand, all of these problems have the definite air of claims once made by reputable Victorian physicists who asserted the physical impossibility of heavier-than-air flight. Above all, we should know by now that it's not too smart to bet the farm on

something(s) being technically impossible.

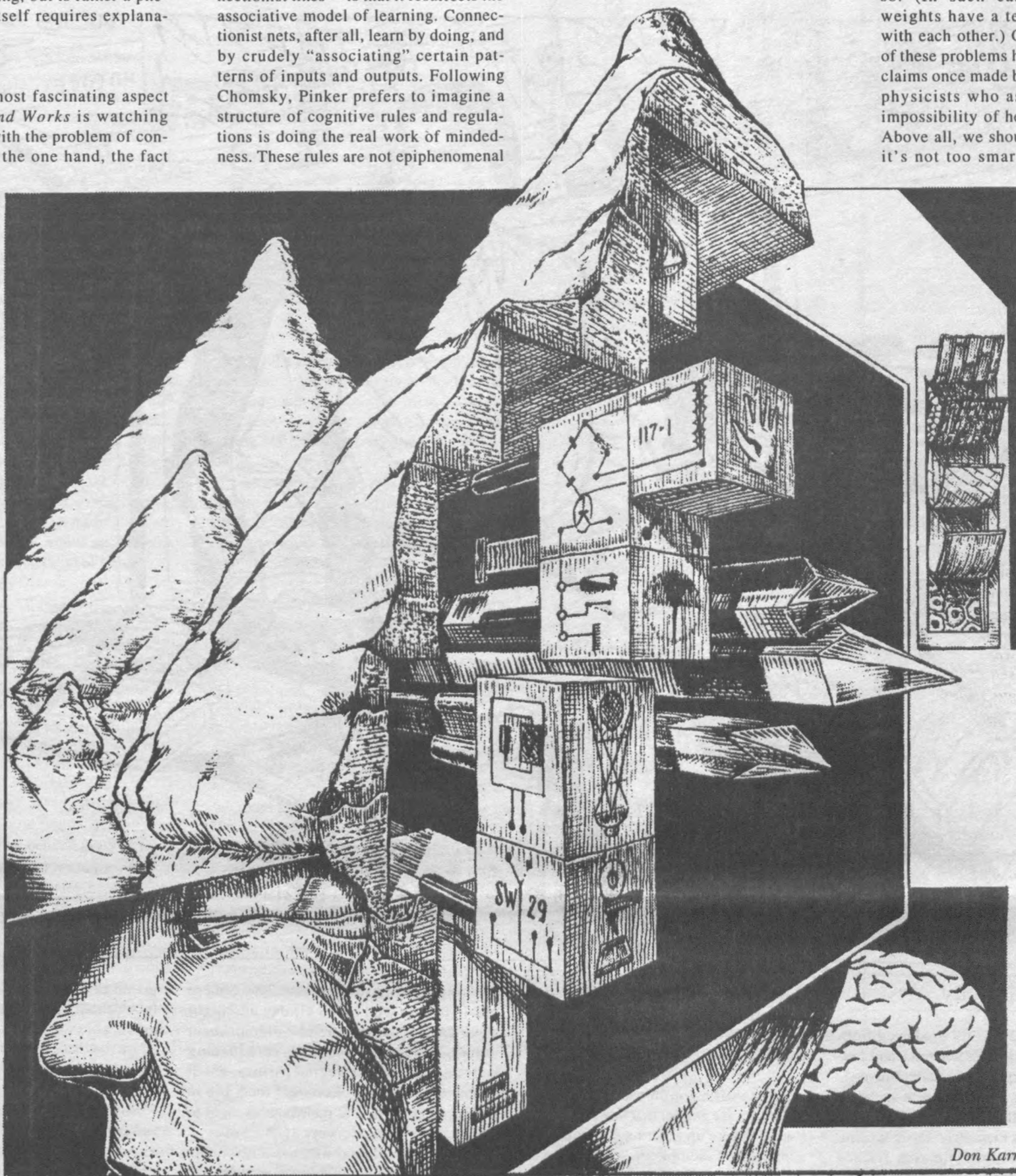
Pinker's treatment of the other key concept in the book—evolution—is equally provocative. He's clearly very much aware of the principles and objections to the reigning synthesis of Darwinian natural selection and Mendelian genetics. Steering clear of the pan-adaptationism decried by Gould and Richard Lewontin, he rightly observes that not everything about an organism is necessarily adaptive: "A sane person can believe that a complex organ is an adaptation, that is, a product of natural selection, while also believing that features of an organism that are not complex organs are a product of drift or a by-product of some other adaptation"

Gould and Lewontin once wrote of the "Panglossian paradigm": the tendency among some evolutionary scientists to mistake how things actually happened for

the optimal way things could have happened. Though Pinker disavows it, his work fits the paradigm anyway. For instance, in a discussion of whether the development of intelligent life is inevitable on any life-supporting planet, he compiles a list of the unlikely factors that "made it especially easy and worth their while [for organisms] to evolve better powers of causal reasoning." First on the list is the primates' fortunate dependence on the visual sense. Why? Because "Depth perception defines a three-dimensional space filled with movable solid objects...Our capacity for abstract thought has coopted the coordinate system and inventory of objects made available by a well-developed visual system."

Compare this to other mammals, such as dogs, who rely more on olfactory information:

Rather than living in a three-dimensional coordinate space hung with movable objects, standard mammals [sic] live in a two-dimensional flatland [the ground] which they explore through a zero-dimensional peephole [the nose]...If most mammals think in a cognitive flatland, they would lack the mental models of movable solid objects in 3-D spatial and mechanical relationships that became so essential to



Don Karr

continued on page 11

Between Schools



Adam Berenstein

Paul Cody

Between June 1972, when I graduated from high school in Newton, Massachusetts, and January 1979, when I began college at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, I spent six years working marginal jobs like housepainting and dishwashing, and did some free-lance writing for *The Boston Globe*, *The Christian Science Monitor* and *The Providence Journal*. I wanted to be a writer.

But more than working at jobs and wanting to be a writer, I spent much of my time reading books, hanging out with friends in and around Boston, drinking and doing drugs.

At one point, I had three or four different doctors, each of whom was writing two or three prescriptions for me, for Valium, Fiorinal, codeine, Talwin and meprobamate. I filled the prescriptions at three different pharmacies, and kept track of the doctors, prescriptions and pharmacies in a notebook. That way I always had plenty of drugs, and when the Valium was running out on one script, I could refill a prescription for meprobamate at another drugstore.

Along with the drugs, I drank beer, gin, wine, vodka, whiskey, scotch, rum—anything I could get my hands on. Somewhere during those six years, probably in the first few months of those years, I crossed over into alcoholism and drug addiction.

It wasn't something I planned, of course. Nobody that I know or have ever heard of, for that matter, sets out to become addicted to alcohol or drugs.

There were lots of wonderful moments in those years. Reading Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Chekov, and sitting up with friends, talking, drinking, smoking cigarettes, popping pills until three or four in the morning, then going out for breakfast at some diner in Cambridge or Brighton or Watertown Square. Or sitting in a room somewhere, drinking two or three strong coffees in quick succession, until my hands shook, and then taking two ten-milligram Valiums, one or two Fiorinal, and then feeling that

amazing slide into painlessness, like a warm, slow-motion ride on a roller-coaster—with Miles Davis or John Coltrane on the stereo.

But most of it was dangerous, lonely, scary, painful. I didn't know I was an addict, not for most of that time, and when I would wake up in strange apartments, with people I didn't know, with no memory of the night before, I thought I was some kind of crazy. Sometimes I woke up with my glasses broken, my face and hands and knees crusted with blood, and no idea how any of this had happened. One time I woke up under some bushes, in front of an apartment building near Central Square in Cambridge.

That part of my life ended in July 1978, when the police brought me to a hospital emergency room in Newton. I was emaciated, hallucinating constantly, and was far from sane.

In the emergency room I punched an orderly, and was taken in a straitjacket to a locked ward of Medfield State Hospital, about fifteen miles southwest of Boston. I was there on a "pink paper," a 30-day commitment signed by a judge.

"Hit someone here," a hospital aide said to me, "and you'll be in Bridgewater within an hour." Bridgewater was the state hospital for the criminally insane. It was where Albert DiSalvo, the Boston Strangler, had been kept.

Ward R2 at Medfield had locked doors and heavy steel mesh on all the windows. The television in the dayroom was bolted to a sturdy table, and it wasn't hard to tell why most of the patients were there. One young man had stabbed his father, and several others were on their tenth or twentieth stay in the hospital. There were people with tattoos and people with missing teeth, and people so depressed they would sit in chairs in the dayroom for hour after hour, without saying anything, without

seeming to blink or breathe. There were manic people who raved all day and night about God, about ungrateful children, about unfaithful spouses, about the cocksucking staff and the motherfucking shrinks, about people who tried to poison their food, pee in their drinks, sneak into their beds at night to violate them in satanic ways.

I spent a good deal of time with a man named Peter Kiley, a fellow patient who had grown up in South Boston, had been in the Navy, and was then in his mid-40s. He was on his fifteenth or twentieth visit to a state mental hospital. He had been in Boston State, Metropolitan State in Waltham, Danvers State, and twice, after drunkenly attacking police and hospital personnel, Bridgewater.

Kiley had no front teeth on top, and only two on the bottom. He had long thin scars up and down his arms and on his chest, where he had cut himself up when drunk. He lived mostly on the streets of Boston, sold blood for money, panhandled, slept in shelters or "in the weeds," on the streets or in woods or fields.

But sober, Kiley was admired by the staff and patients. He was always helping a patient tie a shoe or find a seat in the cafeteria. He gave out cigarettes freely, told jokes and stories from life on the streets, and was an amazing bridge player. He made no pretense of even hoping to stay sober out in the world.

Most of it, for me, was hazy, especially the first week or ten days. I had so much alcohol and drugs in my system that I was given dilantin to prevent seizures. But day by day my head cleared and my hands began to shake. I kept thinking that there I was, at 24 years old, on the locked ward of a state mental hospital, and I didn't really wonder how I got there. By then I knew it was because of booze and drugs, and I felt fairly certain that if I left the hospital and didn't stay straight and sober, that I would almost surely come back, if I was lucky. And if I wasn't lucky, I might go to a place like Bridgewater, or to

prison at Walpole, or I might, as they said in Alcoholics Anonymous, go to "an early grave."

So four months later, a few weeks after turning 25, I began college at the University of Massachusetts at Boston.

U. Mass./Boston is made up of four enormous brick buildings on Columbia Point, in the Dorchester section of Boston. Dorchester is largely working class and working poor. Half black, half white, it's a series of neighborhoods made up of three-decker houses, bars, churches, VFW halls. Columbia Point is a spit of land on Boston Harbor, just below South Boston, cut off from the rest of Dorchester by the Southeast Expressway, the main highway into the city from the south. There is a huge housing project on the point, one of those public housing disasters built after World War II, a series of 20-story buildings, miles from shopping and downtown Boston, that by the early 1980s was more than half vacant and extremely dangerous.

The other part of the point had been an enormous dump, and in the 1970s, one of the last university campuses built in America was constructed on the former dump.

U. Mass. is a commuter school, a distinctly blue-collar school. To get there you took a Red Line train from Cambridge or downtown Boston, or from the other direction, from Quincy, to Columbia Station, then took one of the buses that ran continuously between the station and the university, about a mile away.

Seventy percent of the students at U. Mass. were the first in their families to go to college, and virtually all the students held at least half-time jobs. Many had full-time jobs and were supporting families. The average undergraduate was 27 years

Schools

old.

Newly straight and sober, a recent product of a state mental hospital, and in the world on a daily basis for the first time in years, I became an English major. I read books in the trains and trolleys, on buses, standing on underground platforms in South Station, Park Street Under, in Harvard Square.

I remember reading the heath scene in King Lear on the Ashmont train, as it crashed through the dark tunnels on its way to Columbia Station, and the whole time, through Cambridge, over the Charles River, through downtown Boston, through the financial district, through South Boston, a bag lady sang "Summertime" in a high, shaky voice.

And I remember, too, taking my last final exam as an undergraduate in December 1982, three days before Christmas, then taking the Red Line train to downtown Boston to do some Christmas shopping. In Park Street Under, two levels below the streets of Downtown Crossing, on a concrete platform, a woman with long dark hair played the cello—the autumnal strains mixing with the screech and roar and rattle of trains.

After college I continued to read and write, and for reasons I didn't understand at the time, I got a job at the Perkins School for the Blind in Watertown. I was a child-care worker in the school's Deaf-Blind program, working with adolescents, most of whom had been rubella babies in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The students were all legally deaf and legally blind, were profoundly retarded, and nearly all of them had behavior problems as well. They had some sign language, usually sign vocabularies of little more than a few hundred words. They understood "eat," "play," "shoes," "shower," "work," "stop," "sad," and "happy." But it was often difficult for the students to perform even the routine tasks of daily life, things like getting dressed, tying shoes, clearing the table after meals. So when the things in life became frustrating, as they became nearly every day, many of the students lashed out.

They bit, scratched, punched, kicked, headbutted, threw chairs or toys or shoes. And then, needless to say, they had to be restrained, not with drugs or mechanical restraints, but by staff using the least restrictive means possible. Three or four staff members would hold a student on a mat, until he or she calmed down. After the student was able to sit quietly on the mat for a minute or two, the "time out" was over.

Perkins was one of the oldest schools of its kind in the country. It was founded in the first half of the 19th century, and its campus, which overlooked the Charles River, looked like an old English boarding school. There were brick cottages, closes, a bell tower that was modeled on the tower of an English cathedral.

Anne Sullivan had been a student at Perkins, and she was sent by the school's director to Alabama in 1887, to take on the seemingly hopeless task of educating a six-year-old deaf-blind girl, a girl who, in the absence of language, had severe behavior problems. The girl, of course, was Helen Keller, who later became the first deaf-blind person to graduate from Radcliffe College.

Nearly a century later, the students at Perkins had far greater handicaps; the "merely" deaf or blind were being "mainstreamed." But the basic principle was the same—to have language replace "acting out," to have "signed" communication in place of communication through violence.

Isolation and the inability to speak and to express oneself were the greatest potential handicaps of the students at Perkins—even more serious, in their way, than being deaf and blind. In one way or another, nearly everything we, as staff, did with the students was focused on helping them become more expressive with language. Instead of their hit-

ting or throwing something to draw attention to their discomfort when they were hungry or needed to pee, and increasingly uncomfortable with a growling stomach or a swollen bladder, we tried to teach the students to tap someone's arm and sign "bathroom," or "food." It seemed so simple as to defy basic sense, but without language little was possible.

In late winter, 1985, during my third year in the Deaf-Blind program at Perkins, I was accepted into Cornell University's MFA program in fiction writing.

Cornell's graduate writing program is tiny. Only four students in poetry and four in fiction are admitted each year. Most have been out of college at least a few years, and nearly all the MFA students are given free tuition and a small stipend to live on.

The campus is spectacularly beautiful. There are deep gorges on the north and south edges of campus, and from the front steps of Goldwin Smith Hall, where English and the writing programs are housed, there is a view across the Arts Quad, between several buildings, of miles of valleys and hills, and farms dotting the hills. That fall, as the leaves seemed to catch fire on the Arts Quad and on the hills in the distance, for the first time in my life I spent nearly all my time reading and writing.

I'd sit now and then on the steps, and look off at the hills and fields and silos, and think of the trains clattering into Columbia Station in Dorchester. And late that fall, listening to the radio in my tiny basement apartment in Ithaca, I heard a Bach cello suite and realized that that's what I had heard in the Park Street subway station on my last day as an undergraduate.

During winter break I went back to Boston to visit, and to work fill-in for several weeks at Perkins. In the first week of January the temperatures stayed well below freezing, then dipped below zero for several nights in a row.

The *Boston Globe* sent a reporter to the local shelters to see how the homeless were faring in the freezing temperatures. There on the front page of the *Globe's* Metro section was a photograph of Peter Kiley, in a watch cap, wearing an overcoat that was stuffed with newspapers for insulation, huddled on a bench in front of one of the city's shelters, waiting for a bed.

He looked more or less the way he had looked at Medfield, only older, his face more deeply lined. In the accompanying article he was identified as a longtime alcoholic and "street person."

The cold was very bad, Peter Kiley said, as bad as any cold he'd ever experienced. But the shelters were staying open longer hours, setting up extra cots, and as far as one shelter worker could tell, the street people were surviving.

A week or two later I returned to Ithaca, a clipping of the article in my bag. For several days, before classes resumed, I read and reread the article, and a number of times, with the pipes hissing and clanking in my apartment, I opened a notebook and tried to write something about Peter Kiley.

But to do that, I had to explain other things that had happened to me, things from way before. And sitting there in Ithaca, hundreds of miles from Boston and years and years later, I felt as though I couldn't understand or explain much of anything. Because Peter Kiley was me and I was Peter Kiley, and one of us could easily have been the other. The space between us was nothing and everything.

And all these years since, miles and miles from there, that space has been the place where I breathe, it has been the borders of my life.

Paul Cody's third novel, *So Far Gone*, is out from Picador USA this month.



RECONFIGURING MODERNISM

Explorations in the Relationship between Modern Art and Modern Literature

Daniel R. Schwarz

Suggests diverse directions for studying the relationship between modern art and modern literature. Daniel Schwarz, proposes inter-relationships between such artists as Gauguin and Joseph Conrad, Manet and Henry James, Cézanne and T.S. Eliot, as well as a triptych consisting of Picasso, Stevens and Joyce drawing upon specific texts and paintings.

1997 / 244 pp.
0-312-12660-3 \$18.95 pb.



St. Martin's Press

Scholarly & Reference Division
175 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10010
1-800-221-7945

One person tells another...



SOLA' ART GALLERY

original prints
japanese woodblocks
museum grade framing

Imported rugs
Jewelry

DeWitt Mall
Downtown Ithaca
Mon-Sat. 10:30-5:30 607 272 6552

NATURAL FOODS

and a large selection of
alternative health books



GreenStar

COOPERATIVE MARKET

701 West Buffalo Street
607-273-9392
NEW HOURS: M-Sat 9-9, Sun 10-7

CASCATA



woodworking
fine furniture

anthony mcgrath
p.o. box 171
ithaca, ny 14851
tel: 607.272.2146

What Do You Think...

The Bookpress
is interested in
hearing from readers.

Letters must be signed
and a daytime phone
number included.

Send letters to:

The Bookpress
DeWitt Building,
215 N. Cayuga St.
Ithaca, NY 14850

The Book of Love



Edited by Dianne Ackerman and Jeanne Mackin

Culled from love letters, poetry, fiction, personal essays, and memories, this lavish and fascinating anthology celebrates humankind's grandest pastime and obsession: love. A panorama of fine writing about love's many moods and majesties, from all the veils of flirtation, seduction, and marriage to the tempests of suspicions, jealousy and heartache.

\$29.95 • 827 pages • W.W. Norton

The Writer Next Door

Kelly Carragee

In today's genre driven book-selling market, Jo Ann Beard's *The Boys of My Youth* would seem to be unmarketable. Defying easy categorization—*ni prose ni vers*—at first no one knew what to make of the book.

Recent interviewers have made much of the fact that Beard insists her book is neither autobiography—which it obviously is not, eschewing both chronology and linear narrative—nor memoir. According to the author, what she has written is simply a collection of loosely connected essays and, from this point of view, the book makes perfect sense. Each essay is a discrete entity, and the self (whether "actual" or fictive) is used as a lens—"a way of illuminating certain points," Beard says.

In the beginning this seemed a hard concept to sell. What is the market value of the filter of personal experience? And, even within the memoir genre, why read the reminiscences of someone who is not only not famous - and has not spent time hanging around with (and, more importantly, having sex with) other famous people - but whose main characteristic is her normalcy and lack of extreme qualities? She's just a gal from Illinois, your best girlfriend, a normal working person, who just happens to write flawless prose.

Beard's agent told her that no one would buy the book, "no one is interested in discrete essays by an unknown."

"Publishers seemed to like *The Boy's of My Youth*, but didn't want to take it," Beard told me in a recent interview. "They said I needed to rewrite it as one long narrative." But since she was neither willing nor able to do that, the book was eventually accepted in its present and proper form, because—well, because it's really good.

Beard moved to Ithaca from Iowa three-and-a-half years ago to continue her work as an academic editor. "I still think Ithaca is a really, really lonely place," she says. In the time she has been living and writing in Ithaca Beard has been unable to find support from writers in the community. "There was a time last summer when I was sitting on my porch with my phone and all these names of women writers. I just tried to plug into some sort of network, and I sat for an evening and called all these people and I got nowhere. Somebody actually told me 'you don't just join a writer's group by calling people on the phone—you have to be invited.' That's not the spirit. I wanted real people—people who are like me, who have a job and

who write and try to fit it into their lives, and try to figure out how it can make their lives better instead of making their lives worse."

The topics or events which drive each essay in *The Boys of My Youth* are themselves unremarkable (except for the slaughter of her colleagues at a physics journal at the University of Iowa)—her mother dying, the dissolution of her marriage, the loss of her first love, Hal the doll. What is remarkable is the style, which is deceptively simple, and her ability, without a lot of hoopla or apparent effort, or even a single superfluous adjective, to nail things: the point of view of a child (very difficult to do without sounding forced), the tribal quality of girls'

"I could understand how someone could look at my book and think it's a memoir, but if it is, it's full of lies."

adolescence; psychotropic drug-induced states (also very hard to pull off); love for an old, moribund dog.

"I started out as a fiction writer and kept the style, and just simply started telling my own stories because it was easier than dreaming up other people's stories," says Beard. "So I could understand how someone could look at that book and think it's memoir, but if it is, it's full of lies." (The story behind this transition is both funny and instructive; Beard was rejected from the University of Iowa's prestigious fiction-writing program three times—the last time, firmly and somewhat brutally. She took the same pieces and applied to the non-fiction-writing program, and was accepted.)

In reading and evaluating memoir, the reader generally participates in the pretense that the narrator is rational and that memory has some grounding in actuality (though the reliability of the "I" may be suspect). Yet works that deal with memory are all essentially historical fiction; and for each of us, the telling of our stories is a highly stylized re-presentation of our past. With the recent upswelling of memoirs, romances, a clef and other assorted revelatory meanderings, one might even argue that consensual reality is merely the tangential point at which these various and conflicting tales converge. Memoir? Short story? Who cares? The most important factor, it seems to me, is tone: is the protagonist a braggart, seeking to establish his/her position on the world stage? A self-aggravated whiner, seeking redress for life's slights? Or does s/he have something to offer in

the way of providing the reader with that moment of complete recognition and identification which is the true joy of reading?

Another factor that might hinder the marketing of *The Boys of My Youth* is the author herself, for she is not concerned about it.

"I'm not interested in being packaged as anything. I just want my book to be out there, and see if anyone wants to buy it. And if they do, great."

In *Commodify Your Dissent*, a recent volume of biting cultural criticism by the authors of the journal *The Baffler*, one of the pieces describes the marketing of a young female author, a Bennington College writer, in the

pages of one of those glossy magazines. They make her out to be a Bright Young Thing, a clever, bohemian Holly Golightly. There seems to be the impulse to insist that young (or youngish) female authors be glamorous, and linked to some sort of literary tradition which is also glamorous but intellectually non-threatening. With Beard, however, there was really nothing they could make of her along those lines; she herself feels that she is a regular person and therefore immune to the workings of the star-making machine. The experience of being interviewed - and photographed - by fashion magazines was, she says, surreal, because they are compelled to make authors look as attractive as possible. Why is that? Beard points out that most of the people reading the magazines look like her and not like the models (she is, by the way, perfectly presentable, but definitely normal, and not brilliantly witty, but clever and low-key). But marketing agents seem to think that the only way to sell books is to make writers appear more glamorous than the rest of us.

This notion apparently underlies her publisher's last-ditch attempt to make something of Beard's book. The title is drawn from the longest piece, a spiraling narrative looping around the pre-adolescent world of girlfriends and crushes, the story of her marriage, and the process of reconstructing all these events as a writer. It is not about sexual or romantic awakening per se; in fact, that aspect seems incidental. The "boys" are really shades populating the emotional landscape of the narrator; even the

husband, who stuck around for quite a while, and caused considerable anguish with his feckless behavior, is ultimately valuable as a source for material, and as a factor in the development of the narrator as a writer. Finally, she concludes, "The boys of my youth gives me the malaise. [...] It's either so boring that I'd rather hang around with my girlfriends, or it's like gunfire to the chest."

Alas, what the marketing geniuses distill from this extended meditation on friendships, the writing process, and dead mothers is the conjunction of title and cover photo: a giant rumped bed. It's a spare image, which manages to convey both longing and disillusionment. It's a morning-after bed, the night before. Unfortunately, it has nothing to do with what the book is about (especially as many of the essays don't even have boys in them), and seems to be an attempt to hitch a ride on the currently hot "sexual expose memoir" bandwagon (a la Naomi Wolf, Katharine Harrison, et al.). Beard fought the publisher vehemently, but the bed stayed. She says, "I'm not sure that sells books to women, and any man who picks up the book expecting it to be full of beds is going to be disappointed."

I, for one, am glad, for I think the current hype about obsessively self-degrading personal revelation is ultimately damaging to women writers. I also hate reading about sex, especially in memoirs: I'd really rather not know. (One recent exception is Gore Vidal's memorable description of his lone sexual encounter with Jack Kerouac in his 1996 *Palimpsest*; a good story is, after all, a good story.) A talented writer really doesn't need to go there; and Beard can convey more longing in one tiny detail than another writer could in pages of embarrassingly torrid prose. In the title story, "The Boys of My Youth," describing her first meeting with her future husband, she writes, "At some point, while one of us is talking, he presses his hand against the small of my back and doesn't move it. It stays there for more than a decade." Beard's writing is full of such moments of perfect clarity; her voice, sometimes wry, sometimes ingenuous, has the authority that comes from long hours of mulling over experience.

"There are women out there telling their war stories now," Beard says. "But my war stories are pretty mild. My war stories are that there was no war. Women are telling their stories and they're taking it on the chin for it."

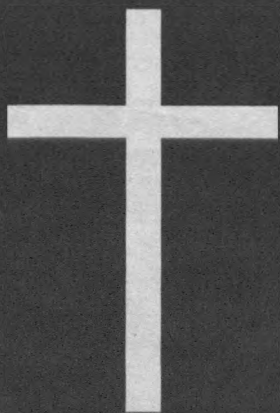
Kelly Carragee works in international development. She lives in Ithaca.

God and the Gun

The Church and Irish Terrorism

By Martin Dillon

Martin Dillon examines for the first time the true role of religion in the conflict in Northern Ireland. Dillon interviews those directly involved—terrorists and churchmen—finding that the terrorists were more forthcoming than the priests and ministers.



Martin Dillon worked for the BBC in Northern Ireland for eighteen years and has won international acclaim for his non-fiction books about Ireland, including *The Shankill Butchers*.

"Martin Dillon is the greatest living authority on Irish Terrorism."
—Connor O'Brien

• Forthcoming in March •

• 256 pages • \$25.00 • ROUTLEDGE •

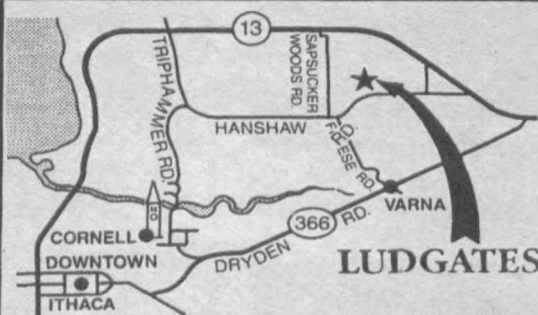
KING ARTHUR

IN LEGEND AND HISTORY

EDITED BY
RICHARD WHITE

Presenting selections from medieval Latin, Welsh, English, French and German literature, Richard White traces the Arthurian legend from the earliest mentions of Arthur in Latin chronicals, to Geoffrey of Monmouth's first major contribution to Arthurian legend, to Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Many of these selections have previously been available only to scholars and are translated here for the first time in English.

• Forthcoming in March • 604 pages • 5 maps • 18 b/w photos • \$27.99 • ROUTLEDGE •



THE GOURMET FARM STORE

the most unique farm market
in the county

OPEN 365 DAYS A YEAR

9 A.M. - 9 P.M.

1552 HANSHAW ROAD • 257-1765

Fresh Cut Flowers
Gourmet Specialty Foods
Coffee Beans
Local Baked Goods
Beans, Rice, Grains, Nuts
Dried Fruit & Specialty Flours
Fresh, Organic Fruits & Vegetables
Nutritional Supplements



How Pinker's Mind Works

continued from page 7

our mental life.

Anyone who has seen an earthworm bury itself or a dog sniff his way up the trunk of a tree knows olfactory dependence is not synonymous with living in a "two-dimensional flatland." Nor does Pinker take note of other 3-D modalities, such as echolocation in bats and cetaceans, which likewise represent a world of "solid objects in 3-D spatial and mechanical relationships." Faced with such a poverty of imagination with respect to terrestrial creatures, it's hard to take Pinker's musings over the unlikelihood of extraterrestrial intelligence very seriously. What about an alien creature living in liquid methane that uses short-wave radar? Or one that lives underground and finds petrocarbon "food" by using seismic "thumps"? What's wrong with 2-D intelligence anyway? Would a creature able to reason in 4-, 8-, or 1,000-dimensions be justified in denying the significance of our 3-D intelligence? Perhaps we shouldn't give up on SETI just yet.

Pinker's discussion falls prey to the Panglossian paradigm because he thinks a sufficient condition for human intelligence is a necessary one for all intelligence—the particular way we evolved, in other words, is established as "optimal" for invading the cognitive niche. He plays Pangloss again elsewhere, in his criticism of idea of "meme evolution." This is the notion, notably suggested by Richard Dawkins, that ideas, like organisms, might reproduce and evolve in the "habitat" of human brains. Sensing an opening for the cultural constructivists, Pinker tries to slam the door by asserting "When ideas are passed around, they aren't merely copied with occasional typographical errors; they are evaluated, discussed, improved on, or rejected. Indeed, a mind that passively accepted ambient memes would be a sitting duck for exploitation by others and would have quickly been selected against."

Try telling that to a Scientologist. Unlike in Pinker's cognitive symposium, real people are actually very good at "passively accepting ambient memes." It might even be adaptive to do so: Pinker himself suggests the survival benefit of not standing out, of hanging with the herd. In fact, Pinker is telling a variation on a "just so" story here, using an argument for adaptation to justify a point he asserts to be true. This is precisely what Gould and Lewontin warned against when they observed how, wrongly applied, tales of adaptation could be concocted to justify virtually any position. They note

"...Since the range of adaptive stories is as wide as our minds are fertile, new stories can always be postulated." Though Pinker professes an understanding of non-adaptationist factors in evolution, his work clearly falls into that category where, as Gould and Lewontin lament, "Constraints upon the pervasive power of natural selection are recognized...But...are usually dismissed as unimportant or else, more frustratingly, simply acknowledged and then not taken to heart and invoked."

All of these problems might be traced to the consequences of Pinker's primary methodology. This is the idea that we can figure out the mind/brain by "reverse engineering" it:

...psychology is engineering in reverse. Reverse engineering is what the boffins at Sony do when a new product is announced by Panasonic, or vice versa. They buy one, bring it back to the lab, take a screwdriver to it, and try to figure out what all the parts are for and how they combine to make the device work.

Up to a point, this seems like a reasonable analogy. Bodies and brains are, after all, kinds of organo-chemical mechanisms, and as Dawkins has notably observed, natural selection is "the blind watchmaker." Why not pry the back off the timepiece of the mind and take a look?

Trouble is, human engineers and natural selection work in quite different ways. Following C.G. Langton, Daniel Dennett explains in *Consciousness Explained*:

...human engineers, being farsighted but blinkered, tend to find their designs thwarted by unforeseen side effects and interactions, so they try to guard against them by giving each element in the system a single function, and insulating it from all the other elements. In contrast, Mother Nature...is famously myopic and lacking in goals. Since she doesn't foresee at all, she has no way of worrying about unforeseen side effects. Not "trying" to avoid them, she tries out designs in which many side effects occur...[and] every now and then there is a serendipitous side effect: two or more unrelated functional systems interact to produce a bonus: multiple functions for single elements.

The difference in how human engineers and the natural one build mechanisms entails more than the obvious fact that organisms self-organize (they grow) and machines *get built*. It affects every stage of the "design" process. When some capacity evolves in nature (say, flight), Darwinian selection doesn't start out with

a dream and a blank piece of paper—it starts out with an existing, functional organism. If the Wright Brothers had worked this way, they wouldn't have designed a new machine from scratch. Instead, they would have gradually "retrofitted" some existing vehicle, like a horseless carriage. The resulting "flying flivver" might have taken much longer to realize than a purpose-built flyer; it might have suffered many more failed test flights until it achieved a sustained glide, then powered flight; it might have taken longer to get the heavy weight of the car down and the wingspan just right. In any case, aeronautical history would have been quite different.

All of which goes to show the problem with "reverse engineering" natural mechanisms: you can never be sure a widget was designed for some function, only that it presently serves that function. In the case of the "flying flivver," it would be useless to wonder how the fenders and the bumper help the car fly better. Those features have to do with the history of structure, not its present function.

Of course, Pinker and every informed adaptationist knows all this. Furthermore, they would argue that certain essential features (like the wings) are so directly necessary in the evolved function that we must invoke adaptation. All true enough. But this is not the same as saying the human mind is "like the Apollo spacecraft...packed with high tech systems, each contrived to overcome its own obstacles." As Langton argues, each system may well overcome several obstacles, and it pays not to be too categorical in assigning roles to each widget. If I were asked whether the brain is more like the Apollo spacecraft or a more like a petunia, I'd have to confess I'm not sure.

The Nature of Nature

Pinker is a master rhetorician. When he is on firm ground, he's a superbly articulate popularizer. When he isn't, he spins beautifully, exploits what he can, and knows when to beat a tactical retreat. His wit can disarm criticism.

All of which makes it surprising when his sense of humor deserts him and he reverts to dull partisanship. The ceaseless drumbeat of distortion and belittlement of social scientists is one such puzzling element of his book. These people, we learn, are too dense to understand the problem with Lamarckianism; they're wrong, wrong, wrong about associationism; they insist on believing in "folklore" about the mind because they're either bent on "feel good" politics or distracted by moral straw-men like genetic determinism.

If cultural anthropologists agree on

any human universal, it is the tendency of all cultures to justify their own cultural constructions by "naturalizing" them. As Cosmides and Tooby argue and Pinker agrees, this has led many anthropologists either to deny any "human nature" exists, or to declare the search for universals as unavoidably an exercise in Western ethnocentrism.

Yet human beings did have an origin, and do have some sort of nature. Dread or misunderstanding of these facts have too often resulted in an incurious particularism that prefers to celebrate, not to explain, difference. If anthropology is traditionally a boat powered by two oars—the study of difference and the study of commonality amongst peoples—then the modern discipline has an empty oarlock and is rowing in circles.

But none of this is to say that "naturalization" doesn't happen, especially among thinkers who profess totalizing theories. When Pinker is spinning his synthesis with respect to stereoscopic vision and incest avoidance, he talks a good game. But when we are expected to believe that, for instance, most peoples' taste in landscapes is a feature of Cosmides and Tooby's Swiss Army Knife, he strays into the full-blown ridiculous. He argues, for instance, that we exhibit a "default habitat preference" for savannas—according to certain cross-cultural surveys, everybody likes "semi-open space...even ground cover, views to the horizon, large trees, changes in elevation, and multiple paths leading out..." Though the very idea that we evolved in savannas is fiercely debated, Pinker conclusively declares "No one likes the deserts and the rainforests." (Color me weird, then.) Nor does Pinker shy from drawing the logical aesthetic conclusions from this bit of human standard equipment—"...we are designed to be dissatisfied by bleak, featureless scenes and attracted to colorful, patterned ones." There, I knew there was a reason I prefer Henri Rousseau to Georgia O'Keeffe.

This is naturalizing. Based on such arguments, and observations of the range of human variation, anthropologists et al. may still have quite defensible reservations about importing whole disciplinary paradigms like that of cognitive science into anthropology, history, linguistics, etc. As Pinker himself suggests, it is quite reasonable for people—and that does include social scientists—not to "passively accept ambient memes."

Nick Nicastro is a writer who lives in Ithaca. His first novel, *The Eighteenth Captain*, will be published this year.

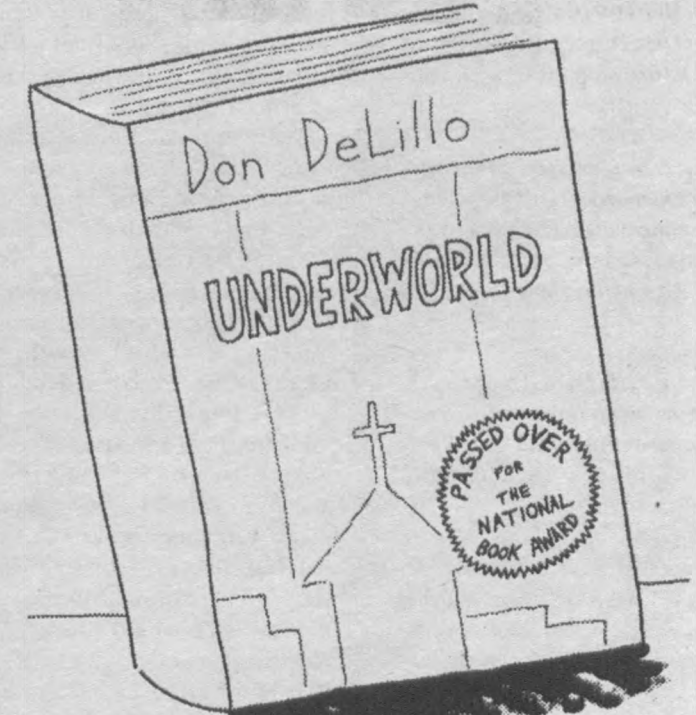
BRUNCH **Café DeWitt**
SUNDAY 10-2
 Crispy Corn Fritters
 Lemon Soufflé Pancakes
 Farmhouse Breakfast
 Eggs Benedict
 Waffles & Compote
 Omelettes with Breadbasket
 Roasted Garlic Potatoes
 Chicken-Apple Sausages
 Specials Change Daily
DEWITT MALL, ITHACA
273-3473

PIANOS

- Rebuilt
- Reconstructed
- Bought
- Sold
- Moved
- Tuned
- Rented



Ithaca Piano Rebuilders
(607) 272-6547
 310 4th St., Ithaca (Off Hancock St. 2 blocks from Rt. 13)
 Complete rebuilding services.
 No job too big or too small. Call us.



Don DeLillo
UNDERWORLD
 PASSED OVER FOR THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD

Gary Kass

Being and Happiness

The Happiness Project: Transforming the Three Poisons That Cause the Suffering We Inflict on Ourselves and Others
 Ron Leifer, M.D.
 Snow Lion Publications Ithaca, New York
 \$14.95, 313 pages, paper

Peter Fortunato

Readers who seek books on spirituality for easy assurances and exotic experiences of vicarious "enlightenment," will not find much of either in Ron Leifer's *The Happiness Project*. But for those interested in doing true spiritual work on themselves, and for psychotherapists working from the perspective of various paradigms, *The Happiness Project* will provide much that is informative, thought provoking, and of potential use in the consulting room.

Leifer, an Ithaca psychiatrist states his intention to present an

"interpretation of the Buddhist paradigm... designed to convey the orthodox Buddhist view in a form which is acceptable to scientifically minded Westerners."

Making no secret of anything, Leifer tells us early on that the source of our problems is simple, though generally difficult to accept: it is our own desire to be happy that causes our unhappiness.

For Leifer,

the shocking central insight that Buddhism gives us ..., the secret of happiness we hide from ourselves, is that our selfish strivings for happiness are, paradoxically, the greatest cause of the suffering and pain we inflict on ourselves and others. From this point of view, the secrets of genuine happiness involve a self-transformation, including a reconfiguration of our idea of happiness itself, based on a deeper awareness of the nature of reality and a sense of values derived from this realization.

Leifer presents Buddhism as a model for how a religion, unencumbered by dogma and superstition, can serve to reconcile religion and science "so we can more freely and intelligently use the best of both to help us to see the truths we hide from ourselves."

Leifer insists that we need both religion and science in order to find peace of mind, but our dilemma as a modern society is that we conceive of the truths of science as being incompatible with religious truths.

On the one hand, we respect, even worship science as a valid source of knowledge because science has tangibly improved the quality of our lives. On the other hand, we long for lost religious meanings and guidance.

By virtue of its empirical approach, Buddhism can be regarded as a "science of the mind" compatible with the Western scientific world-view. According to Leifer, Buddhism is

unique amongst religions in that the practitioner is free to reject or suspend belief in any idea... which is contradicted by established scientific facts, or which cannot be known and checked through one's own experience and observation.

Indeed, the Buddha Dharma urges practitioners to seek within for the proof of its teachings, testing them, including the words of Sakyamuni Buddha himself, as a refiner tests gold in a fire in order to determine

how he moves clients beyond the disempowering limitations of "the official Western view."

The generally accepted wisdom of modern psychology and



mine its purity.

This is a very different conception of religion than what "revealed" theologies such as Judaism, Christianity, and Islam exoterically purport, and the author acknowledges this, while astutely avoiding religious debate by squarely presenting himself as man of science. For him, the term "spirituality" has to do with the nature of the human mind rather than the content of particular belief systems.

Following Buddhist principles, Leifer seeks to demonstrate that our dualistic thinking is what separates us from what we seek. The antidote to this mistaken thinking—which is compounded of the "three poisons," ignorance, desire and aversion—is to accept life for what it is and relax with that. The Middle Way of Buddhism does not require the complete renunciation of our desires any more than it encourages us to grasp foolishly after their fulfillment. Leifer does not advise us to put suffering out of our minds; rather he urges us to see it clearly for what it is.

"The repression of suffering renders us incapable of working with it," Leifer says, sounding one of many brilliant notes that harmonize Buddhist thinking with the best of Freud—a discussion I recommend highly to anyone who has forgotten that Freud was a scientist and clinician as well as a myth-maker. As Leifer shows, Freudian depth psychology is compatible with the Buddhist view, for both are based on the accurate observation of how "desire turns the Wheel of Life." I agree with Dr. Leifer that psychotherapy has much to offer in helping clients discover to what degree they are "responsible for their own mental suffering." Since facilitating such responsibility can be a challenge, it would have been nice to have some more specific case studies illustrating

psychia-

try is that psychological suffering is caused by specific, external, traumatic factors such as loss, abuse, neglect, unjust or inhumane social conditions, failure, misfortune, or by biochemical imbalances, such as neurotransmitter deficiencies.

Leifer goes beyond these considerations by demonstrating that desire itself is a root cause of human suffering. His wide-ranging discussion is filled with illuminating examples from the Old Testament story of Job, Jesus' story and teachings, the myth of Oedipus Rex, and Marxist mythology, to name but a few of his references. Leifer insists that ultimately, people judge ideologies, saviors, governments and other social institutions "by how well they serve our personal strivings for happiness, and how well they ameliorate the problems which cause our pain."

The Happiness Project presents Buddhism primarily as a system of ethics grounded in compassion and common sense: "an intelligent, practical guideline for avoiding suffering and achieving happiness here and now on earth." While this seems indisputable to me as a Buddhist practitioner, still I have some differences with the inflection of Dr. Leifer's characterization. The book visits the central Buddhist idea of "emptiness" several times and is admirable in its user-friendly interpretation of this slippery concept. Leifer shows how emptiness should not be construed in any way as nihilism, but rather as referring

to the fact that the world is not 'solid,' as it appears to our senses. This view is compatible with modern science... Nothing is solid, enduring, or transcendent. Everything is apparent, transient, and immanent.

Furthermore:

Emptiness is like a dance. The 'dancer' has no independent identity. The dancer's identity derives from the dance. When the dance stops, the dancer ceases to exist. At the same time, the dance has no solid, independent existence. Yet it is not a complete illusion or fabrication... It is energy in motion which, in its continuous flux and change, defines the reality of the dancer... Buddhists call this dance of emptiness *samsara*. The word *samsara* means something like 'perpetual wandering.'

That this "perpetual wandering" and seeking after happiness is identical with nirvana—liberation from the birth and death of our passions—is the open secret of Buddhism. For this reason, strictly speaking, enlightenment is not dependent on effort, nor can nirvana's realization be construed as attainment. Leifer's book does not offer instructions on meditation, but it does emphasize that the cultivation of calmness and clarity as a result of meditation practice are essential if the Buddhist view is to be clearly apprehended.

As the Dzogchen teachings say, all things are "self-liberated."

According to Mahayana Buddhism, to truly perceive the fundamental emptiness and identification of all things comprises a blissful "turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness" and results in the great compassion of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. The Dharma teaches that like these "awakened ones," we too have the seed of Buddhahood within us: it is our own capacity to wake up. Our intuition of this is a function of *bodhicitta*, a term which suggests both our potentiality and our completeness. Despite the many paradoxes of our wanderings in *samsara*, I would maintain that *bodhicitta* is the source of faith in ourselves, in our own and in others' "basic human sanity."

I don't think Dr. Leifer and I are in disagreement about this, though perhaps from his perspective, my emphasis on the role of *bodhicitta* might seem to be an example of unscientific faith. However, I don't believe a discussion of the Dharma is complete without including some mention of faith, intuition, and knowledge that is other than logical, though it takes a master to present such issues fully. Similarly, it takes a master to persuasively challenge the complacency that can result in students who assume that a taste of emptiness comprises true awakening: as one of my teachers once said to me, "If you believe you're already enlightened then why do you suffer?"

Facing the fact that our suffering is rooted in wrong views and stubborn habits and in the secrets we keep from ourselves requires courage, perseverance, and a degree of self-responsibility not generally promoted by our society and the scientific establishment in service to it. Here is a clue as to why Buddhism is presently of such wide interest in the West, and Dr. Leifer's wise book makes a unique contribution to the cross-pollination of ideas already underway. It is an act of compassion in response to the personal and public pain from which we moderns suffer and work furiously to deny.

Peter Fortunato, a long-time student of the Buddha Dharma, has a private counseling practice in Ithaca.