

*Hobbit* and was well into *The Fellowship of the Ring*. That film, however, terrified him, and he stopped reading the trilogy. Now, he is 10, but he doesn't want to see the new movie. ■

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[*Confessions of a Dangerous Mind*]

## The Father of Reality TV

IT IS REMARKABLY HARD to make a good movie. As evidence, consider that Charlie Kaufman, author and main character of the delightful "Adaptation," is today's hottest screenwriter—yet, two out of his three films this year misfired.

Do you remember Kaufman's "Human Nature" from last spring? I don't. According to the invaluable Internet Movie Database (imdb.com), it earned tepid reviews and a mere million box-office bucks. And Kaufman's new "Confessions of a Dangerous Mind"—a quasi-biopic about TV game show pioneer Chuck Barris that opened New Year's Eve in Los Angeles and New York and Jan. 10 nationwide—is strangely forgettable.

"Confessions" isn't bad. It packs plenty of star power as George Clooney, Julia Roberts, and Drew Barrymore contribute major supporting roles. Indie film actor Sam Rockwell competently plays Barris as an archetypal backstage hustler.

Clooney directs the actors ably and, for a first time director, delivers a lot of visual panache. For example, Clooney shoots Barris's early years to look like the hand-colored photos from very old *National Geographic*s.

The only problem with "Confessions" is that Kaufman failed to give the movie a reason to exist.

Barris was an energetic Jewish kid from Philadelphia with shallow but broad talents. He wrote the 1962 hit song "Palisades Park" and a best-selling novel as he erratically worked his way

up the ladder in daytime television.

Barris's history-changing insight, the E=MC-squared underlying half of what is on TV these days, is that enormous numbers of salt-of-the-earth Americans desperately want to be on television. Any kind of television. Even Barris's shows: "The Dating Game," "The Newlywed Game," or—why not?"—"The Gong Show."

This must drive the privacy advocates at the American Civil Liberties Union to despair. They slave away to help us keep the tiniest details of our lives secret from prying eyes. Yet, what half of America really wants—privacy be damned!—is to be recognized by strangers on the street as the reality TV contestant who vomited while trying to eat a slug or who punched his Mom on a talk show for toilet training him badly.

I watched "The Dating Game" regularly in the 1960s. Granted, I was a particularly naïve child, but I didn't realize until now just how off-color the jokes were. (Still, that surprise was nothing compared to the one I received recently when, for the first time since I was a 10, I saw an episode of "Gomer Pyle, USMC." Don't ask and hopefully Gomer won't tell.)

While hosting "The Gong Show" in the late 1970s, Barris became increasingly jittery, sweaty, red-eyed, and paranoid. In 1981, he suffered a breakdown and holed up naked in a New York hotel room for several months.

All this was fairly close to standard operating procedure for entertainment industry weasels during the Great Hollywood Snowstorm. Barris, though, came up with a creative explanation for his career-ruining behavior.

While locked in his room growing a Howard Hughes beard, he typed his "Confessions." In them, he alleged that the reason he had grown so, uh, nervous was that he had a second career as a CIA assassin in which he had patriotically murdered 33 people. But now, elements within the Agency were after him.

Well ... sure, Chuck, anything you say! So, what does Hollywood's cleverest

screenwriter do with this material? Zip. He just plays it straight, as if Barris really was a game show host/hitman who would run into some understandable career difficulties combining his day job and night job.

Unfortunately, Kaufman—whose main interests appear to be show biz and pseudo-intellectualizing (in "Adaptation" he gave Charles Darwin a cameo to propound a laughably wrong version of what biologists mean by "adaptation")—cannot think of anything interesting to say about the CIA or the Cold War.

The spy scenes are so rote that they look like Kaufman's research consisted of watching a couple of John Le Carré spy movies. As Barris' spookmaster, Clooney delivers another imposing movie star performance, but as the Mata Hari spy, even Julia Roberts cannot create any excitement.

What could Kaufman have done instead? Lots. He could, for example, have made a culture clash comedy about Barris rotating between the highly Protestant CIA and the highly Jewish television business. (By the way, the FBI, as exemplified by Tom Hanks' Agent Hanratty in "Catch Me If You Can," was always quite Catholic.)

The CIA then believed Skull & Bones Yale men with trust funds were less of a

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security risk than Jews, who might have family or friends on the other side of the Iron Curtain. In return, countless Hollywood films stereotyped CIA higher-ups as thin-lipped, soulless, and incompetent WASPs. ■

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## BOOKS

[*The Survival of Culture: Permanent Values in a Virtual Age*, ed. Hilton Kramer and Roger Kimball, Ivan R. Dee, 256 pages]

### Treason of the Intellectuals

By Roger Scruton

NAMED AFTER THE London-based journal founded and edited by T.S. Eliot, the *New Criterion* has for twenty years carried on a brave and much needed defense of our cultural and artistic inheritance. The journal was founded by Hilton Kramer and has been home to many of the most brilliant conservative intellects of our time, some of whom are represented in this latest collection of meditations. The battle over culture is the most important that we now have to fight and cannot be engaged in without serious analysis of what is actually happening in the worlds of art, literature, and scholarship. This analysis is what the *New Criterion* provides.

*The Survival of Culture*, edited by Kramer and his right-hand man, the indomitable Roger Kimball, consists of chapters taken from their journal. The theme is the fate of our cultural inheritance at the hands of those whose duty it is, on the conservative view, to transmit it. Thanks to political correctness, thanks to the rampant individualism that infects the educational system, and

thanks also to the "multicultural curriculum," which instills a universal vagueness and relativism, young people may be brought up knowing nothing of their culture. If you believe, as conservatives tend to believe, that a shared culture is a necessary ingredient in social harmony, you cannot welcome this.

American conservatives have reacted strongly to the liberal counterculture that has infected schools, universities, and the media. But we should recognize that political correctness and the multicultural curriculum are not confined to America. Half the contributors to this book are British or British colonials, and all of them have the same grim story to tell—the story, in a nutshell, of *le trahison des clercs*. Wherever you look among opinion-forming elites in the West, you find a "down with us" mentality, a desire to blame the evils of the modern world on the only political systems that have tried to rectify them, and a determination to undermine the institutions, habits, and laws that have made the Western world so dominant. Our universities are infected by a "culture of repudiation" by which the Western inheritance is systematically debunked, negated, or ridiculed in order to withhold it from the next generation—whose only reason for being at a university is to acquire it.

Writers in this book give many trenchant examples, and I suspect that few of our readers will need to be reminded of the worst of them. The prodigiously witty Mark Steyn brilliantly exposes the contradictions and self-refutations of the "down with us" mentality in a chapter that ought to be on every young person's reading list. As Steyn points out, the constant stirring up of guilt about the Western past—which is the dominant theme of the modern humanities—is really a kind of flight from the present, a way of proving your morality without the trouble of adopting it. And this habit of denigrating one's own culture has political consequences: "Bill Clinton has for years been too busy apologizing for the sins of his predecessors to apologize for any of his

own: 'I cannot tell a lie. My slave-owning predecessor George Washington did cut down that cherry tree.'"

The political scientist Ken Minogue tries more soberly to understand contemporary nihilism. According to Minogue, we live among the "new Epicureans," for whom individual choice is everything. People prove their worth by rejecting every role, custom, or authority whose credentials come from outside the self:

Each person seeks to detach himself from his particular character and situation in order to find a preferred location at the level of universal humanity. Particularity—being a schoolgirl and subject to rules, being pregnant and subject to restrictions, being homosexual and subject to suspicion when engaged in certain tasks—are all seen as forms of imprisonment incompatible with an open society. And the warders of this prison are the institutions that constitute society.

Minogue believes that we are experiencing a deep crisis of Western civilization, which is not to be cured by some legislative project, still less by any national or spiritual revival of the kind for which—I suspect—the majority of decent Americans are yearning. To this I would simply add that we are living through the current phase of the Enlightenment, unembellished by high culture or the memory of Christian virtue.

Other writers in *The Survival of Culture* focus on the tenured professors, who enjoy all the privileges of the academy in return for relentless debunking of the civilization that made this possible. Prominent among such establishment radicals is Edward Said, whose "cultural war on Western civilization" is exposed to withering criticism by Keith Windschuttle. Said's analysis of "orientalism"—the supposed disposition of the West to caricature other civilizations as "static," "exotic," and mired in ritual—has been a mainstay of cultural