

movement (the neocons favoring a relatively open-borders stance), and the claim that neoconservatism was “over” was bit of a tactical ploy: if neoconservatives had largely succeeded in making over the mainstream of American conservatism in their own image, they no longer needed to exist as a distinct faction.

But the neocons received (and may have needed) a major financial transfusion from Rupert Murdoch’s decision to back the creation of the *Weekly Standard* as a neoconservative journal, and Murdoch’s Fox News gave a range of neocon pundits a media platform that their rivals couldn’t match. Without Murdoch, neoconservatism would not have been so well positioned to make its way into the Bush administration—which affirms, perhaps, that neoconservatism really is not entirely Jewish in its important pillars. The role of the Australian-born magnate is a worthy subject for a great novel, for he is given to saying things in private that no neocon is likely to say. The important thing, however, is that he has unambiguously chosen neoconservatism as the ideological horse to back in the United States.

Halper and Clarke remind us that the first generation of neoconservative eminences was a brilliant lot—top scholars or extremely well-rounded intellectuals (Irving Kristol, Daniel Bell, Norman Podhoretz, Daniel P. Moynihan, Nathan Glazer). Their successors (Bill Kristol, John Podhoretz, Douglas Feith) are by contrast facile polemicists or skilled bureaucrats. This is not necessarily to say that the older generation was more moderate (though some, like Nathan Glazer clearly were) but they were certainly more interesting.

And yet the younger generation has achieved a kind of power of which their parents could hardly dream. This is in great part due to the rise of conservative mass media: in a time of national crisis, it is more important to be able to lay out talking points that will be repeated over and over by various “experts” on Fox News than it is to compose an essay laced with elegant aphorisms for *Partisan Review* or the *Public Interest*.

America Alone has a strong chapter on the role of mass media after 9/11, explaining how much of the conservative press was turned into an echo chamber of neocon arguments asserting that Iraq was inextricably bound up in the War on Terror—though there was no real evidence for it. It is not surprising to learn that Fox News was particularly effective in disseminating information that simply wasn’t true: regular viewers of Fox were far more likely than fans of other networks to believe that evidence of links between Iraq and al-Qaeda had been found, that weapons of mass destruction had been discovered in Iraq, or that world public opinion supported the Bush invasion. Fox viewers were three times more likely than viewers of other networks to believe all three of these things. Yet Fox was hardly uniquely culpable—there was, by 2001, an entire web of conservative media outlets devoted to priming their audiences to support a war plan built on a longstanding neocon target list. After 9/11, the country seemed in thrall to an entire discourse. “Seemingly out of nowhere,” Clarke and Halper write, “Iraq was represented as an immediate danger to America The neoconservatives linked their preexisting agenda (an attack on Iraq) to a separate event (9/11) and thus created an entirely new reality. It was like attaching a line of railroad cars to a locomotive of which they were the secret drivers.”

Clarke and Halper have written an extremely useful book. One can quibble with some of their points or smile at the caution of some of their formulations. They make at least one odd factual error, asserting that “Straussian” Werner Dannhauser became editor of *Commentary* after Norman Podhoretz’s retirement—the sort of mistake that old-fashioned “pre-Internet” historians would never make. But the authors have quite rapidly digested and made sense of a huge amount of material on neoconservatives and reached bold conclusions. Anyone seeking to understand the turn American foreign policy has taken in the past three years will need to come to terms with their arguments. ■

[*Bergdorf Blondes*, Plum Sykes, Miramax, 320 pages]

Heroine Chick

By Dana Vachon

PEOPLE KEEP SAYING the nastiest things about Plum Sykes’s debut novel, *Bergdorf Blondes*. They say that the work lacks winning characters and plot. A cruel few have even taken it upon themselves to point out that there is no character development. This seems hardly worth mentioning in a book already noted for its lack of plot and characters; there is really nothing here to develop, and still less of nothing to develop that nothing with. One by one the critics have damned *Bergdorf Blondes* to the lowest cantos of literary hell, that moth-ridden steppe where the Dewey Decimal system means nothing and J.D. Salinger rolls forever in a tub of Ben-Gay with Joyce Maynard.

If the many writers of chick literature were all Amish (which is just the case in at least one far-off parallel universe) this book would be an eleven-fingered child incapable of farm work. *Bergdorf Blondes* is cursed with the worst traits of its genre and blessed with no finer attributes. Still, it sells. Across the country chiseled Johnnies and willing Janes place it on beach towels as they rub coconut oil into one another’s firm skin, then sit down to let Ms. Sykes’s prose pass through their minds as effortlessly as the sand sifts between their toes. This is because, without knowing it, Plum Sykes has created a work that speaks to people. This is no ordinary beach read but an entirely unintended bourgeois *Odyssey*.

The book is most damnable and notable for its protagonist, a nameless non-character. No one in her world addresses her by name. She is similarly a stranger to herself, and goes only by “Moi.” It is easy to take Moi to task for her lack of motivation, conflict, background, and growth. Yet in a delicious sense it is these very shortcomings that make her an improbable modern heroine.

Modern Manhattan has a conflicted relationship with individuals. The island creates cults of personality around an exalted few while enforcing strict codes of dress and behavior on the many who flock about them, dreaming of the day when they will rise above the mob and have their own cults. Then all will be made right. This is why investment bankers wear suspenders when they make managing director, and Ivy League graduates willingly fetch coffee for publicists and designers during the most taut hours of their youth.

Moi and her socialite friends move through this world in a bid to find fulfillment through marriage. They all want to find a PH (Prospective Husband). The very most desirable form of PH zooms about the troposphere in a PJ (Private Jet). The ideal goal is to find an MIT (Mogul In Training). MITs often have PJs and therefore make for perfect PHs. The frightening part is that it is all logically quite sound. Indeed, if the reduction of status symbols and social phenomena to pleasant acronyms were the stuff of great literature, Plum Sykes would be Thomas Mann and this book would be *The Magic Mountain*. Only nothing would ever happen because Hans Castorp would spend each moment of his seven-year stay at the sanitarium appraising the designer labels on his fellow convalescents' bathrobes. Yet these are dyslexic times. We have Islamists in the subways and Bill Clinton on every talk show imaginable. This is why Moi is such an appropriate character, and a success despite her flaws. In an age where nothing makes sense, sauntering through life with a closet full of Marc Jacobs and a head full of tau-tologies isn't banal in the slightest; it is a manifestation of the survival instinct.

Perhaps this is why the book takes on epic overtones as Moi sets out to find her Prospective Husband. Ms. Sykes received a classical education at Oxford, and so it is worth noting that the non-plot of her book contains the first example of ring-structures in modern chick-literature. Moi moves through five suitors in her search for the perfect

Prospective Husband. Though it will hardly please the feminist lit-crit community, these five men dictate the narrative arc of the story and the different phases of Moi's own laughable character development. Each man offers Moi so much of what she wants but, perhaps as commentary on the fallen state of all humanity (though probably not), is incapable of making her truly happy. The brilliant artist is manic-depressive! The powerful mogul is married! The European noble is, the horror, a playboy! One by one Moi turns to them to make her dreams come true. Sweet, giving Moi offers so freely all the trust and love available to a character with absolutely no depth. One by one, they break her heart. Sometimes Moi cries.

But by far the best part is when she tries to kill herself. Moi's failed Advil-suicide is satisfying on many levels. There is of course the hope that the book might end early with her demise. There is also the lofty promise that the first half of the work might exist simply as prelude to a high-concept second half. This might take place in heaven or hell, perhaps both, and could be written in the style of the magical realists. But *La Mort De Moi* is most satisfying as a katabasis placed perfectly in the middle of the plot structure that defines the thoughtless journey of this vague woman through her own reasonless world.

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It is a suicide so bourgeois that it may well guarantee *Bergdorf Blondes* a place on every school reading list when the Communists finally get their act together and make good on that whole revolution thing. They will teach it alongside Dickens as an example of just how depleted the human spirit can become in late-stage capitalism. The episode is of course an attempt at black humor, but it fails because Moi is so shallow that there is nothing about her that is really worth

satirizing. What we are left with is a striking portrait of what happens to modern man when he places all of his faith in communal society (fashion) and science. No other work of chick literature has achieved so much by setting out to do so little, and for this incredibly economical use of the language Ms. Sykes must be applauded. As Moi prepares her final check-out, it is difficult to imagine that the world might not be better off without her. "Obviously the Ritz robe was compulsory ... my rhinestone-trimmed silver Manolos would go brilliantly with it. I drew the curtains and took off all my clothes. I put on the Manolos. I have to say, they looked awesome with nothing else on. I washed down eight Advil with the mimosa and lay down." Soon all is darkness.

There is no question about what happens to Moi as she lies in Ritz suite, hovering between life and death. Although Sykes doesn't address the issue, the reader knows that she heads straight to her own Satresque hell. It is a never-ending Chanel sample sale where the clothes come only in plus-sizes. Poor Moi, who gets knocked about by women who live their lives unafraid of carbohydrates and cannot beat her way to anything worth buying. When she does, it doesn't fit because this is hell, where Chanel designs only for the obese. Oh, the horror! Spirit, take me back! And so

it goes; the suicide is a failure, and Moi wakes up in her suite at the Ritz to find the mysterious movie director Charlie Dunlain by her side. He dates her best friend Julie Bergdorf but has always been curiously concerned for Moi's well being. He thinks that her life is spinning out of control. He wants her to stop drinking so much booze and sleeping with so many married men.

Fresh from her katabasis, Moi is a changed woman. She is ready to listen.

It isn't much in the way of character development but given that so much of the rest of the novel is sacrificed to the autistic regurgitation of designer labels, we can hardly take umbrage. Could Charlie Dunlain be the man for Moi? Might he have been the one for her all along? Could he reunite her with her Anglo roots and complete her American life by secretly being an English Earl who shed his peerage for the pursuit of success as an ultra-hip indie film director in Hollywood? Is such an absurd ending even possible? It would take a literary radical with no regard for the fundamentals of sound writing even to attempt such a thing.

But sleep well, good reader. In Manhattan there lives such a woman. Squint across the horizon on a clear day and you can see Plum Sykes standing in a big window on a high floor of a grand apartment building in Manhattan. She is watching her book climb the bestseller lists, unaffected by shortcomings. Chick literature works because it feigns realism even as it offers something far more simple: a skewed, solipsistic vision of American life. How else could Carrie Bradshaw have afforded all of those expensive shoes on a *New York Observer* salary?

The genre now finds its fullest form in *Bergdorf Blondes*, which feigns plot and

characters while offering something far more simple: a brief, delicious break from reality. That is why this novel won't leave the bestseller list, where it spends weeks alongside the latest from Danielle Steele. America has had enough of reality. The world has more compelling characters than it ever wanted. You know their names: Bush, Ridge, Bremer, bin Laden, Ashcroft, Arafat, and Sharon. They have motives galore, and with machine-guntoting National Guardsmen patrolling Grand Central Station, who can rightly complain about lack of plot development? This is why Americans love *Bergdorf Blondes*. Moi only looks like an ill-formed protagonist. In truth, she is a new breed of superhero whose greatest power is going through life with a gorgeous fake tan and no concern for any of the things that put other people on couches: government, terrorists, cancer, careers. She suicides, but does not die. She does not work, but is not fired. This is why Americans consume her, as they lay beneath the sun on a low UV-index day or barrel to work on a subway where cameras are prohibited. Moi may not be a great literary heroine. But until things get better, she'll do just fine. ■

Dana B. Vachon writes from New York City.

[*Eugene McCarthy: The Rise And Fall Of Postwar American Liberalism*, Dominic Sandbrook, Alfred A. Knopf, 397+xiii pages]

McCarthy Was Right (Sometimes)

By Clark Stooksbury

IT SHOULD BE no surprise that Eugene McCarthy, who figured prominently in one of the ugliest political years in American history, elicits strong opinions from Americans of a certain age. But that does not explain why the former Minnesota senator provokes such antipathy from his biographer. Dominic Sandbrook is an Englishman born six years after the critical 1968 election. His page at the University of Sheffield website reveals that the book was funded in part by the Lyndon Baines Johnson Foundation. LBJ was a crafty and devilous politician, but I find it hard to believe that he made plans to fund literary hit jobs on his political opponents 30 years after his death.

Whatever the reason, in any discussion of McCarthy's conflicts with other politicians Sandbrook takes the other guy's side. His account finds Eugene McCarthy wanting as a congressman and senator, a friend, a husband and father, a presidential candidate, and an ex-politician. Just when you think Sandbrook cannot pile on any more, he dredges up a negative review of McCarthy's poetry from the *Los Angeles Times*.

McCarthy gave his enemies plenty of ammunition. He could be vain and arrogant, and he frequently mocked his fellow solons, all of which ill-suited him for a legislative career. His personal ambitions might have been better served had he forgone running for the Senate in 1958 and waited for a chance to become governor. But that was not to be. McCarthy first won election to the



"I feel so guilty doc, I'm not really allowed on the couch."