

me alone — Delmore Schwartz said even paranoids have enemies — that only one of these things is ever printed. Even if a teacher tries one of them once, the odds are that he will not do it again. These readers are the Superbowls of the industry. They have as much to do with the teaching of writing as Fords have to do with national pride. Why, then, do the books keep coming?

The books keep coming because nobody tells them to stop. The permanent condition of American freshman English programs is chaos, and always has been, not because the subject cannot be taught, or because there are no people who are able to help someone learn to write effectively and with style, but because the frameworks of such instruction are continually shifting. When a composition program tires of using a text book on rhetoric, it abandons it, at least until things get out of hand. When it tires of using a massive anthology covering every theme and form in literature, it tries anthologies on special topics, or none at all. These choices run in cycles. Ten years ago the criterion was practical usefulness. Today the idea is write what you care about. The publishers hear "relevance," and out comes Jerry Rubin.

What ought to be made clear is that Jerry Rubin is not going to teach anybody how to write well, that indeed, unless verve is your only standard, Jerry Rubin does not know how to write well himself. There was a time not long ago when anthologies were reserved for second rate poets. Now it may be that their places have been taken by second rate essayists, which would only be fair, but the difference is that the second rate poets were not deliberately held up by their editors (who were often the second rate poets themselves) as models of how to write poetry. It seems silly to have to say that the fact that a man may be brimming with indignation does not mean that he knows how to write, or to think, for that matter. It seems silly, too, to have to tell someone that relevance does not mean topicality. It is silly. Either the publishers know these things already, in which case their violation of them is callous, or they do not know them, in which case, like other peddlars, they ought to be kept away from the school grounds.

Rubin notwithstanding, the trouble with these books, it bears repeating, lies squarely with the publishers and editors, and not with the authors inside. Each of the anthologies contains at least some first rate pieces by first rate writers: Irving Howe, Baldwin, Pauline Kael and Tom Wolfe, as well as Cleaver and Mailer. I would be happy to read essays by Irving Howe one after the other without a break, but not in these readers. I would be happy to watch Carol Channing do number after number, but not on a football field. The set-up is the thing. When a student is told that what he is about to get is "uncompromisingly relevant" (*The American Experience*) he should know that all he is really going to get is a carnival sense

of American culture, with footnotes for his sighs.

Equipped with this sense, he may become, in terms of the publishers' expectations, an ideal reader, a man like the editors themselves, forever eager to jump to anybody's conclusions, and from conclusion to conclusion, and from anthology to anthology. Of course, he will not know how to persuade people with the force of his learning and personality, or to use words generally either to his or anyone else's advantage, but he will be able to say things like "each writer creates out of the ashes of his criticism a unique phoenix" (*The Radical Vision*) without smiling, which is no small feat. In a country where every action is labeled a national tendency, every product is bound to be conceived of as an answer to national desires. These books are gaudy and loud because they take it for granted that what we seek is glitter and noise.

Wilde once said of a performance of *Hamlet* that it was funny without being vulgar. I suppose one winds up saying

## Before the Trip

### Sometimes a Great Notion

"SOMETIMES A GREAT NOTION" is a stunning masterpiece of a film. It captures the spirit of Ken Kesey's massive novel without bogging down in the novel's numerous subplots and psychological ruminations. The viewer will not grasp the significance of the title, however, which I assume is derived from Leadbelly's "Goodnight, Irene": "Sometimes I have a great notion to jump into the river and drown." The suicidal impulses of Lee Stamper, one of the main characters, as he grows from immaturity to manhood are barely emphasized.

Kesey, before he went on his LSD trips, bought his flowerchild bus (not a VW, but a bus), assembled the "merry pranksters," and roamed through the west like an encumbered Bronson, was a fine novelist. He seeks to capture what life is like in an Oregon lumber town, what the incessant rain means to men living in it and what kind of people survive against the elements. The kind of rugged individualist who can survive is a Stamper, whose family motto is straightforward: "Never give an inch." The movie, like the book, centers around this overriding theme: Will the Stampers finally yield that crucial inch?

The family fights more than the Oregon landscape. It fights the lumber union. The town is suffering from a crippling strike, but the Stampers are breaking it. "We got a contract," says old Henry Stamper, the family patriarch (played superbly by Henry Fonda — perhaps his finest role in a long career), and as Henry sees it, a contract is sacred. A man's honor is bound up in

the same thing here, because even in the places where these readers are vulgar, how long can one steam over such patent nonsense? Still, as Melville and others have demonstrated, there is something scary about anything or anyone who is out to con you. You know you are not a fool, yet there are those who would like to prove that you are, who will wave flags or burn them if they think that is what you want, or hold a parade, or cry "alienation," or display a pretty girl or mourn a dead one. A clever showman usually knows what it is we care about, but he rarely knows why or how we care. It is that secret alone which keeps us safe from him, who, if we were to lower our defenses, would never give us an even break.

Roger Rosenblatt

Roger Rosenblatt is an assistant professor of English and the Director of the Expository Writing Program at Harvard University.

it. The union will have to wait. The union members who make up most of the town's working population are in no mood to wait.

How much is a man's word worth to him? How much is he willing to sacrifice to keep it? Everyone in town wants to see the Stampers break. Social ostracism, violence, threats: nothing that can be used as a weapon is avoided. But the Stampers are not the introspective existentialists of the modern film; they are one tough bunch of S.O.B.s. In the immortal words of Ricky Nelson, they don't mess around, boy.

Paul Newman, who directed the film, is very good as Hank Stamper, the second in command. He allows himself to be overshadowed by the performances of Fonda and Richard Jaeckel, who plays his cousin Joe Ben (Jobie). Michael Sarazin, who portrays young Lee Stamper, shows some capacity for subtlety something that he did not show in "The Flim Flam Man," when he served as George C. Scott's companion in "economic education." There simply is not a weak performance in the movie; as a director, Newman apparently doesn't give an inch either.

Newman has made a business of playing the rugged individualist. "Hud," "Harper" and "Hombre" are obvious examples. But this time his individualism has something substantial as its opposition: a labor union. This is what makes the film unique. The union is not run by a corrupt boss; it is made up of local folks who are very much like the fellow next door. But you find yourself cheering for the Stampers

against the organized coercers. The movie is a defense of a century-old creed, unapologetic, hardnosed. It presents the case for the productive contract as against the contract to restrict production by violence. It says, in short, that collective coercion is not preferable to family solidarity and hard work.

The language is earthy in places, in the same way that the language in "Patton" is earthy. It is not forced; it is part of the culture of the lumber town in Oregon. It fits in as well as the magnificent scenery does. And the final scene is the most delightfully obscene film footage in recent years.

## Prejudices, First Series

### The Machiavellian Novelists

IF THE AMERICAN novel is in immediate danger of extinction it may be a result of overproliferation. Perhaps the population explosion applies as much to fictional characters as it does to human beings.

Although it is fashionable to proclaim that the novel is in terrible straits, the observant critic cannot be so sure. The novel as an art form, the novel as literature in the Aristotelian sense, is in trouble, but it always has been. In the last thirty years we have seen only a few good novels emerge from the clutter of the best-seller lists, among them Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, and, perhaps, Saul Bellow's *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. But we have also seen a considerable increase in the publication of novels of all types, mostly designed to appeal to the mass market and produce a goodly income for the author (is there no doubt that Jacqueline Suzann and Erich Segal are the dirty and clean sides of the same sheet?). Yet new forms of fictional treatment are in constant development, regardless of their literary merit. Some, such as the contemporary naturalism displayed so beautifully in Joyce Carol Oates's *Them*, have been critically noted and acclaimed. Others, operating under the imperative of Gresham's Law, have not been worth seriously bothering about.

Of the latter group, one relatively recent arrival on the fictional scene has been the political novel. Personally, I am a fanatical follower of the political novel. This might be an awkward confession, to admit allegiance to a school of writing which one critically dismisses. However, I recently read Jacques Barzun's excellent study of the detective novel and decided to cast pretension aside.

The political novel is not even a poor cousin to the novel-as-art-form, but it is a direct and profitable heir to the novel-as-popular-amusement. It is a

When it finally comes, don't be surprised if the demure little grandmother seated behind you shouts, "Lay in on them, Hankus!"

What amuses me most, however, is the genuine, authentic, rustic cabin which serves as the Stammers' dwelling. It cost well over \$100,000 to build. You just can't get cheap rusticity these days. It makes you wonder how the rustics ever could afford it.

Gary North

Gary North is on the staff of the Foundation for Economic Education.

distinct genre within the general classification of the entertain-and-sell species. Ever since *Advise and Consent* hit the top of the charts, the political novel has become a familiar addition to the obligatory offerings of our larger publishing houses. *Seven Days In May* showed that the political novel was here to stay. Both of these novels sold so well, received such publicity and were so original in concept that they may be considered, respectively, as archetypes of the two different kinds of political novels. *Advise and Consent* represents the conflict class, in which the struggles and machinations involved in attaining higher public office are minutely described. Other examples: *The Last Hurrah* (which discloses the machinations involved in holding on to public office), *The Election*, *The 480*, *The Image Makers*, and the other Aller Drury novels in the A&C series.

The second group, which intrigues me more, is the Machiavellian novel, in which a conspiracy is uncovered or unravelled or revealed, shocking us with the final revelation. The founding father of this particular subspecies was *Seven Days in May*. In recent years it has been followed by such attempts as *Night at Camp David*, *Vanished*, *The President's Plane is Missing*, *The Jesus Factor*, and recently, *Their Man in The White House*. (I'll also throw in *Fail-Safe*, although in that case the evil genius was a machine whose malfunction led to the accidental elimination of Moscow.) The Machiavellian novels have common characteristics, which is a euphemistic way of saying that they share common flaws.

To start with, the conspiracy novels are on the whole pretty bad books. That is, they all rate high on the entertainment scale and at the very bottom of every other scale. Publishers and reviewers sometimes describe them as suspenseful but this is an opinion

which is open to doubt. (I stayed up all night reading *The Jesus Factor* — Mario Puzo, author of *The Godfather*." Q.E.D., Mario Puzo is an incurable insomniac.)

An English teacher of my acquaintance regards them generously as "heavily plot-oriented." That is their virtue and their sin. While the plots are often mildly interesting, they are just as often idiotic. First, the story line is usually based on an improbable hypothesis. When the entire book is based on a silly notion, the author must work hard to make it turn out to the reader's satisfaction. Most of these writers don't have that much energy. *The Jesus Factor*, for example, is based on the idea that the atom bomb really doesn't work. When it is set off automatically it will explode, but when dropped from an aircraft or delivered on a missile it won't, a phenomenon which Edwin Corley's fictional scientists blame on an unknown attribute of the atom bomb, hence the title of the book. Neat, huh? Likewise, *Vanished* asks the reader to believe that a presidential adviser can disappear on the ninth hole of the Burning Tree Golf Course without the President, the FBI or the CIA knowing or being able to discover what happened to him. Perhaps I value the President, the FBI and the CIA too highly.

Second, the authors, having committed themselves to an absurd idea, depend

#### Introduce Your Friends to The Alternative

We have found that the best way to get subscribers is to give someone a sample copy of **The Alternative**, allow them to read it and then urge them to subscribe.

You can help us to increase our readership and at the same time introduce your friends to one of the liveliest and most provocative journals in America. Just fill out the following coupon to order as many June Alternatives as you can use.

Enclosed is \$.....for .....copies of the June, 1972 Alternative.

Single Copy .....	\$2.25
Ten copies .....	\$2.00
Twenty-five copies .....	\$4.00
Fifty copies .....	\$7.00

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_  
State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

Mail to: The Alternative, Bulk Subscription Dept., Room 473, R.R. 11, Box 360, Bloomington, Indiana 47401