

honesty. Finally, to appreciate fully the range and depth of this warm-hearted man who was, in my mind, the best historian of his times, read his autobiography, which about ruined his reputation because of its candor, especially its revelation that he was a professional who wrote for money.

R. EMMETT TYRRELL, JR.

RN: The Memoirs of Richard Nixon. The best presidential autobiography since Grant's. Abundant with information and revelations of error. Only an idiot or a lout would read it and fail to note its historical importance. John Kenneth Galbraith did so.

The U.S. and the Origins of the Cold War, by John Lewis Gaddis. The very best book on a historic question that became a question only because large numbers of profs believed that that which is obvious must be an illusion.

The Liberal Mind, by Kenneth Minogue. A useful explanation of the fevers of the so-called liberals.

Under Western Eyes, by Joseph Conrad. A work of art, and an insight into some of today's most brutal mischief-makers.

PETER VIERECK

Poet and historian; author of Unadjusted Man, Conservatism Revisited, Conservatism from John Adams to Churchill, and Shame & Glory of the Intellectuals, as well as a Pulitzer Prize-winning book of poetry, Terror & Decorum.

Historical Consciousness, by John Lukacs. Endlessly challenging because Lukacs tells it not like it is but (less modish) as it is. He is one of the world's profoundest psychologists of history (read also his *Last European War*), which is not the same as a psycho-historian (again: less modish).

Stained Glass, by William F. Buckley, Jr. I still can't see why economic Manchester liberalism (rootless, materialistic, atomizing) should ever be deemed "conservative" (which means a rooted, organic continuity) by Mr. Buckley, but it's his novel I'm here to praise; I find it intelligent, well written, and a "good read." Even better, it raises unanswerable moral questions of ends and means; so read it to ponder as well as enjoy. I can't help wondering whether his fictional hero Wintergrin is partly based on someone I admire in real life: Erik von Kuehnelt-Leddihn.

And now three older books having this in common: They miraculously make their fantasies more convincingly real than reality. *The Man Who Was Thursday,* by G.K. Chesterton. Beautiful, wise, and without preaching, it shows how *les extrêmes* (far left, far right) *se touchent*. *The Third Policeman,* by Flann O'Brien. A colleague says Hugh Kenner has already once listed this as a Christmas book; if so, I am

honored to have my O'Brien cult confirmed by an authority whom I so much respect. O'Brien's section on bicycles seems the funniest as well as the most fantastic spoof ever written. *The Man in the High Castle,* by Philip K. Dick. The most imaginative of all science-fiction writers, Dick is quoted as such in my forthcoming new poetry book, *Applewood*, and specializes in alternative universes.

EDWARD O. WILSON

Professor of zoology and curator of entomology at Harvard University; author of The Insect Societies, Sociobiology: The New Synthesis, and On Human Nature.

Science since Babylon, enlarged edition, by Derek de Solla Price. In this brief and stimulating exposition of the scientific study of science, the author explains why knowledge has expanded too fast for the scientific academy to keep up with it. Population growth must fall behind the growth of knowledge, with consequences still only dimly foreseen. As a bonus, de



Solla Price presents his own research on the history of celestial clocks with a liveliness that gives this arcane topic momentary parity with molecular biology and astrophysics.

Beyond Economic Man, by Harvey Leibenstein. Economics is just a gigantic accounting scheme, the predictive power of which depends on the comprehensiveness of its mathematical models. Leibenstein reminds us that nonrational human behavior is a major neglected element; he suggests how human nature might be incorporated into the main body of the theory. I suspect that if Leibenstein and his colleagues succeed, economics will become a far more precise—and interesting—subject.

The First Three Minutes, by Steven Weinberg. Not easy going but worth the effort, because Weinberg, one of our foremost physicists, is here talking about the beginning of the universe according to the Big Bang theory, and therefore in a sense about everything. And given his own creativeness and the magnitude of his subject, he cannot help capturing a special quality of the scientific spirit: "The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy."

The Killer Angels, by Michael Shaara. I

include this novelization of the Battle of Gettysburg as simply the piece of fiction that has given me the greatest pleasure during the past ten years. I am not sure I could explain why if I tried.

TOM WOLFE

Journalist; author of Radical Chic, The Painted Word, Mauve Gloves & Madmen, Clutter & Vine, and The Right Stuff (forthcoming).

Nothing that I have read this year has given me more pleasure than three novels by Zola: *La Bête Humaine*, *Nana*, and *L'Assommoir*. I don't remember reading a line of Zola until last year, when I read *Therese Raquin* (and promptly advertised the fact in these pages in December). In my school years I had somehow formed the impression that Zola was the earnest hard-slogging naturalist of the lower depths, "the French Dreiser," and I had had about enough of the American one. Zola helped create such simple-minded notions among the bystanders, incidentally, by continually theorizing about his own work. (I can tell you: It doesn't help a bit.) Now, after reading four of his novels, I regard him as one of the great virtuosi of the medium.

L'Assommoir. A novel of the lower depths, all right, but extremely funny and written throughout in the rhetoric of prole slang. This was fifty years before Celine. *L'Assommoir* was denounced by the French intellectual left for presenting the Paris working class not merely as poor but honest victims of the industrial economy but also as fools and slovens happily demolishing or corrupting their own best opportunities.

Nana. Here Zola pulls off what I regard as an absolutely dazzling technical feat. He presents both a detailed portrait of a woman and a tableau of *le beau monde* of the Second Empire in fourteen consecutive crowd scenes. It's great stuff.

La Bête Humaine. Written in 1890, this will strike most readers as a very modern novel, I think, in its use of suspense, which dangles murder and lust from the outset, and in the author's portrayal of terrible faults in even his most sympathetic characters. It is hard for me to believe that James M. Cain did not read *La Bête Humaine* (and *Therese Raquin*) before writing *The Postman Always Rings Twice* and *Double Indemnity*, even though Cain's biographer, Roy Hoopes, tells me he has found no evidence of it in Cain's notes and letters. *La Bête Humaine* must also be one of the first novels, if not the first, to use moving trains as the locus of the major action. It's riveting!—a point not lost on the moviemakers: there's never been a bad train movie.

I have listed the three books in the order I wish I had read them. *Nana's* childhood is depicted in *L'Assommoir*, as is the family taint of madness—Zola believed in *the taint*—that shows up in *Nana's* brother Jacques in *La Bête Humaine*. □

THE TALKIES

by
Ben Yagoda



A Wedding

Robert Altman, the most consistently interesting contemporary American filmmaker, has once more declined to repeat himself. *A Wedding*, his new movie, is a world apart from the hazy dreamscape of *3 Women*—which in turn had virtually nothing in common with its predecessor, the antimythic *Buffalo Bill and the Indians*. Indeed, *A Wedding* may represent a new kind of film altogether—epic social comedy. It is something like a cross between *Rules of the Game*, *Grand Hotel*, and *Father of the Bride*, with a cast of (almost) thousands.

To be sure, *A Wedding* is unmistakably an Altman work. We recognize the casual, almost improvisational, attitude toward plot and structure; the strict attention, on the other hand, to nuances of character and atmosphere; the undercurrent of iconoclasm; the importance of words barely heard and images barely glimpsed. And the subject is hardly unconventional. True to its title, the film takes place entirely at the ceremony and reception celebrating the marriage of Dino Corelli (Desi Arnaz, Jr.), the product of a union between an aristocratic WASP mother and an Italian father, and Muffin Brenner (Amy Stryker), whose father is a trucker-turned-tycoon from Louisville. *A Wedding*'s uniqueness may be appreciated by comparing it with *Nashville* (1975), the Altman work it most resembles. Both films present a group of people who, placed more or less in proximity for a brief period, interact in various combinations. But *A Wedding* gives us more characters (48 instead of 24), a collapsed time-frame (barely longer than the film itself instead of five days), and a much smaller setting (the grounds of the Corelli mansion instead of a city).

The extreme density of the film—Altman deserves considerable credit, at the very least, for his choreography—contributes both to its virtues and its flaws. To begin with the latter, which are many, *A*

Wedding is simply too cluttered. Only after two viewings could I sort out all the wedding guests and participants, and even then the nature of all their relationships wasn't completely clear. It could be argued that the general air of confusion imitates the atmosphere of a real wedding—where we are always wondering, Who *was* that fellow in the maroon leisure suit?—but this is supposed to be art, not life.

The problem is ecological at root. Arithmetic reveals that *A Wedding* allots less time per capita to its characters even than *Nashville*, and some of them just don't have the time to become much more than bodies moving on the screen. Lauren Hutton, for example, as the wedding photographer, never manages to establish a personality of any kind, and the film drags during her scenes. (By contrast, her counterpart in *Nashville*—the BBC journalist played by Geraldine Chaplin—was as neat an authorial self-parody as Chaucer's narrator in *Canterbury Tales*.) Similarly, since Dina Merrill and Virginia Vestoff have been given nothing to work with, the aunts they play emerge as ciphers.

In other cases, Altman's sin of overpopulation leads him to force his hand, to come up with characters who sound just one note or are revealed (in the end) to be propelled by a single dark secret. This is one of the most tiresome conventions of the American theater, and it plays no better here. Upon learning that the wedding coordinator (Geraldine Chaplin) is unhappy because she is a lesbian, or that Dino's mother (Nina Van Pallandt) is so tense because she is a heroin addict, we feel like groaning out loud. And predictably, when Altman goes for humor it often comes too easy: the bride with braces, the senile bishop, and the people in desperate need of bathrooms all provide the laughs, but they're cheap.

Predictably, too, the exigencies of Altman's method can work against him when he tries for a deeper look into characters—as one of the prominent sub-

plots amply demonstrates. The bride's mother (Carol Burnett) is dancing with Merrill's husband (Pat McCormack) when he suddenly stops and announces that he is madly in love with her. Startled at first, she comes to accept the idea as the day wears on and even agrees to a tryst, but at the end of the reception changes her mind. Like the Lily Tomlin character in *Nashville* she has an unattractive husband (indeed, he's positively boorish), and the affair awakens long-dormant feelings in her. Burnett does a good job with the role, but she is working at a crippling disadvantage: McCormack has proclaimed his ardor so suddenly, in such a comically ludicrous fashion, that any poignance or tenderness is drastically undercut. As we see it, Burnett is wasting all her emotion (and fine acting) on a buffoon.

Finally, Altman's technique limits the kinds of meaning he can offer. Some critics have complained that *A Wedding* has nothing to "say"; if by this they mean that it offers no pronouncements on the role of marriage, class, or family in American society, they are right. Altman's films—*A Wedding* most of all—concentrate on the particular; any wider truths must be supplied by us. (Note the indefinite article in the title.)

Yet Altman can give us what no other filmmaker can. By rejecting, for the most part, Hollywood conventions of plot and characterization—most of them sentimental and simplistic—he may limn persons and situations in whatever scale he chooses, at times with dazzling results. And if the sheer volume of humanity present at *A Wedding* on occasion either forces Altman into too-easy equations or prevents him from providing enough information, it also gives him room for what he does best. Glancing off people and interchanges like a bumper car at a fair, he can catch just this or that glance or remark, never making too big a point of it, and then move on.

One comes away from *A Wedding* with epiphanies of the rarest kind in films—ones that words cannot do justice to:

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