

It is only three months  
before the First Congress  
of the Communist Party of Cuba.  
The Boniato garrison  
greeted this great occasion  
with red flags of tortured blood.

They tore apart testicles:

they did it to Roberto Martin Perez.  
The invalids were pulled out of  
their wheel chairs  
and dragged by the legs  
their heads bloodied, banged against  
the steps:  
they did it to Liuva del Toro and to  
Pascasio.

## WASHINGTON IN PIECES

John Nollson / Doubleday / \$11.95

Theo Lippman, Jr.

I write a humor column for the *Baltimore Sun*. Many times an incident like this occurs: I write a piece of pure nonsense. An acquaintance then says to me, "So Ronald Reagan played a gorilla in the 1932 version of *Tarzan*? I never knew that before." Or, "I think you're right about making it a capital offense for a black to murder another black, but only probation-before-verdict for a black to murder a white." How can this be? I always wonder. The answer, which is obvious once you see it, only came to me when I was reading John Nollson's essay, "The Art of the Possible." It tells of a "Georgetown Gallery of Political Commentary" in which the works of pundits are sold. Now, I knew there was no such gallery. I'm not that dumb. But I at first believed that Nollson was using real excerpts from the works of real pundits to satirize political commentary. His "Old Master" wrote "There is in the Nation's Capitol, as seen from here in the nearby countryside . . . a mood of cautious optimism tempered by an air of prudent pessimism." And so on in perfect Restonesque brush strokes. And so on in excerpts from "Fauves," "surrealists," "pointillists," "abstract expressionists," "cubists," and "pop artists."

I fell for it in the first three instances, but saw through it when I got to this excerpt from the pointillist-columnist: "Pointillist commentary is distinguished by frequent use of the word 'point,' as in the following example":

Politicians who make this point overlook several other points. The first of these points is point one, which is to say, the basic point, from which all other points follow: Politics is not pointless, but depends ultimately on one's point of view. This is a point worth pointing out.

And then I saw the light. The line

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between satire and reality has vanished in Washington (and thus in America). One cannot tell the difference between real Reston and Nollson-Reston (or between Reagan and Lippman-Reagan). As a matter of fact, so interchangeable are reality and whimsy that after I read the pointillist excerpt and moved on to the other more subtle "excerpts," I resumed believing these were the real thing.

And so, naturally, I have to say of Nollson's work in this and the 44 other essays that appear in this book (most first appeared in this magazine), that while they are often very funny, you can always be sure. I mean, the biggest joke of all would be to sneak serious stuff in, right? To make you laugh at reality? So you have to be on your guard. This is an awkward posture for reading humor. That sounds like a criticism, and it is. Life is tough enough in a democracy without not knowing whether some bit of lunacy is lunacy. When I sit down to be amused, I don't want to be accompanied by an imp of alertness. I'm going right out and apologize to my own readers for subtleties.

Therefore for me, the best Nollson is the fiction that is obvious in every detail—the burlesques, such as his wicked broadside on participatory democracy called "Propositions." In this he traces the referendum back beyond the Progressives of turn-of-the-century America to the Greeks of the Golden Age "when the first Proposition, Proposition Alpha, was submitted to the voters. It had to do with how landholdings should be surveyed for the purpose of computing the local property tax. The Proposition on the ballot read as follows: 'In any right triangle, shall the square of the hypotenuse be equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides?'"

Some of the more obvious and

# Who reads The American Spectator?



Donald H. Rumsfeld.

ALSO: Ronald Reagan, Malcolm Muggeridge, Ben Wattenberg, Peregrine Worsthorne, S.I. Hayakawa, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Henry Kissinger, Clayton Fritchey, Milton Friedman, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Midge Decter, James Q. Wilson, Woody Allen, Joseph Coors, Irving Kristol, Henry Fairlie, Alan Abelson, Charlton Heston, Senator Jake Garn, Gertrude Himmelfarb, James Hitchcock, Gen. Alexander Haig, Tom Wolfe, James Jackson Kilpatrick, George Gilder, Jack Paar, Donald P. Buchanan, George Will, J. Peter Grace, Maj. Gen. George S. Patton, III, Fred Iklé, Philip Crane, George W. Ball, Tom Stoppard, William F. Buckley, Jr., Patrick Buchanan, Albert Shanker, Lewis Lapham, Rowland Evans, Robert Novak, Jude Wanniski, Jack Kemp, William Rusher, Richard M. Nixon, William E. Simon, Malcolm S. Forbes, Jr., Frank Shakespeare, Norman Mailer, Clare Boothe Luce, Gerald R. Ford, Melvin Lasky, Nelson Polsby, Roger Milliken, Randolph Richardson, Thomas Sowell, Sidney Hook, Jim Fallows, Edith Efron, Gen. A.C. Wedemeyer, James L. Buckley, Elliott Abrams, Lewis Lehrman, William Randolph Hearst, Jr., Shmuel Moyal, Huntington Cairns, Eric Hoffer, Anne Armstrong, Norman Podhoretz, Jeff MacNelly, Doris Grumbach, Ernest van den Haag, Paul McCracken, Brock Yates, Ray Price, James Wechsler, John Roche, John Chamberlain, William Safire, Neal Kozodoy, Henry Salvatori, David Meiselman, Martin Peretz, Charles Horner, Edward Banfield, Victor Lasky, Raymond Aron, Roy Cohn, Joseph Hazan, Eugene V. Rostow, Michael Novak, Richard Perle, Hugh Kenner, George W. Ball, William Proxmire, Patrick Cosgrave, Jean-François Revel, Luigi Barzini, Tom Charles Huston, Clay La Force, Fred Silverman, John Lofton, Larry Flynt, M. Stanton Evans, Dana Andrews, Richard Whalen, Richard Lugar, Henry Regnery, Charles Peters, John Lukacs, Leonard Garment, Michael Kinsley, Tom Winter, Nathan Glazer, Alan Reynolds, Antonio Martino, Colin Welch, Robert Bleiberg, Herb Stein, Roger Starr, Walter Goodman, Harry Jaffa, Jeffrey Hart, David Packard, Robert Nisbet, James R. Schlesinger, Thomas Murphy, Suzanne Garment, Roger Rosenblatt, Anthony Harrigan, Robert L. Bartley, Dave Stockman, Richard Allen, Ernest Lefever, Sen. Paul Laxalt, Joseph A. Califano, and many others.

THE AMERICAN SPECTATOR, P.O. Box 1969, Bloomington, Indiana 47402

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amusing pieces in this collection have to do with Senator Larethan Jerome Wimbol who served 114 years as senator, ran for president every four years, took every position "including all . . . in the Kamasutra," was arrested for hiring wetbacks as legislative assistants, and so on. I suspected it was Henry Jackson he was parodying, but as an investigative humorist (a rare thing), I leave nothing to mere suspicion. I decided to find out which senator Nollson had worked for. (The dust jacket says he had.) Not an easy assignment. Nollson is a pseudonym. But I finally learned his real name. I called the senatorial office where he worked

(not Jackson's). "Is ----- in?" I said.

"He's no longer here," a person with a trace of Hispanic accent said.

"Do you know where he can be reached?"

"The Department of Defense."

*Jeee-sussss!* A humorist in the Pentagon! Not even the William P. Clark nomination prepared me for this. The ultimate erasure of the line between nonsense and sense. Herbert Hoover said we should laugh at the Depression, but at Doomsday? I never called him. I don't want to know what he's doing there. He may only be writing speeches and handouts. But he may be making policy. □

### LIEBLING ABROAD

A.J. Liebling / Wideview Books / \$11.95

Mitchell S. Ross

I hereby propose that the bones of the late A.J. Liebling be transferred to the Pantheon in Paris. There the guides regularly note the names and glories of the dead Frenchmen who lie beneath the Left Bank dome, and there they could give our man his due: Here lies A.J. Liebling, *gourmand, écrivain*.

Liebling was a great eater and swell writer, but he was at his absolute best when writing about what he had eaten. Four books are collected in this volume, which is itself Lieblingesque in its girth. *The Road Back to Paris* is superbly idiosyncratic war reporting; likewise the briefer sketches collected in *Mollie and Other War Pieces*. Liebling covered World War II for the *New Yorker* and did it well, but he did it in the spirit of one who wished that the enemy be vanquished and the fighting cease in order that tables might once again fill with *haute cuisine*. His was a distinctive point of view.

After venturing into Spain he recalled, "I had had a fairly adequate lunch, soup and veal, at the hotel in the railroad terminus; the fact that it was possible to get such a meal even at a price far beyond people who lived on Spanish wages appeared to me to mark some kind of advance." Even better is the memory recorded in *Normandy Revisited*: "We decided, therefore, to attend the battle, but

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not until after lunch, when we would be in a better frame of mind for it. The Spartans on the sea-wet rock sat down and combed their hair before Thermopylae, and Casey, Boyle, and I ate sole *bonne femme*."

To his credit as a writer Liebling was politically naive. "When I arrived in London . . . I wanted to see General De Gaulle as soon as possible and write a whacking profile about a modern Bertrand du Guesclin. Du Guesclin was the great fourteenth-century guerilla knight who, anxious only to rid France of the invader (in that war the English), fought tirelessly until he had righted what appeared to be a hopeless military situation. Like most of my preconceptions, this one was on the romantic side."

His mind being free of conventional categories, Liebling was able to surrender himself to the excitements and disappointments of experience. He could render trenchant judgments—consider this one, on the condition of Portugal: "The regime of Senhor Salazar, the university professor of political economy turned plainclothes dictator, had kept Portugal solvent, with one of the lowest living standards and highest venereal-disease rates in Europe, but virtually without armament."

At the same time, in the worthy tradition of Stendhal, he was open to flights of fancy, subject to the ironic wisdom of hindsight. *Normandy Revisited* is, accordingly, the most harmonious of the four books here.

Written in the mid-fifties it recalls the war years in the light of a later day. Liebling remembers the summer of liberation, 1944. "All the previous spring, in London, I had been reading clandestine newspapers smuggled out of France. I had cried over them. I do not regret my sentimentality; I wish I had something now that I could be as sentimental about."

Admirable as *Normandy Revisited* is, however, it does not epitomize Liebling as does the last of the four books: *Between Meals: An Appetite for Paris*. I wish Liebling had given it a more heroic title, as this is truly a heroic book. "Each day," writes the author early in his second paragraph, "brings only two opportunities for field work, and they are not to be wasted minimizing the intake of cholesterol." We are introduced to Liebling's friend, Mirande, with whom, naturally, he shares a meal. "We had three bottles between us—one to our loves, one to our countries, and one for symmetry, the last being on the house."

In Chapter Two we learn more of Mirande:

M. Mirande had an equally rich life between meals. He had pleasure of women. Currently pleasure and women are held matters incompatible, antithetical, and mutually exclusive, like quinine water and Scotch. Mirande also gave women pleasure; many women had pleasure of him. This is no longer considered a fair or honorable exchange. Women resent being thought of as enjoyables; they consider such an attitude as evidence of

male chauvinism. They want to be taken seriously, like fallout.

*Between Meals* was published in 1962, Betty Friedan was as yet unknown. Our gourmand was a prophet.

*Between Meals* is filled with other insights, for instance, this one, on the popularity of vodka: "The standard of perfection for vodka (no color, no taste, no smell) was expounded to me long ago by the then Estonian consul-general in New York, and it accounts perfectly for the drink's rising popularity with those who like their alcohol in combination with the reassuring tastes of infancy—tomato juice, orange juice, chicken broth. It is the ideal intoxicant for the drinker who wants no reminder of how hurt Mother would be if she knew what he was doing."

But above all *Between Meals* is a celebration of life at the table. "Bread is a good medium for carrying gravy as far as the face, but it is a diluent, not an added magnificence; it stands to the sauce of lobster à l'américaine in the same relationship as a soda to Scotch. But a good pilaf—each grain of rice developed separately in broth to the size of a pistachio kernel—is a fine thing in its own right. Heaped on the plate and receiving the sauce à l'américaine as the waitress serves the lobster, the grains drink it up as avidly as nymphs quenching their thirst."

A year after publishing these lines Liebling died, fat and, in his way, fulfilled, at the age of fifty-nine. *Voilà un homme!* □

### DAD

William Wharton / Knopf / \$12.95

Eric Goldstein

You've got to give William Wharton credit: He explores rough terrain in his novels. *Birdy*, which won the 1979 American Book Awards prize for best first novel, concerns a bird-obsessed teenager who is a canary in his fantasy life. Like other tales of obsession, *Birdy* demands a leap of faith into the mania of the hero.

For the leaden-spirited readers whom *Birdy* left on the ground, the novel is a trite celebration of madness-as-coping à la R. D. Laing, soaring with the wing-power of a

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chicken and hailing individualism with J. L. Seagullian profundity. It is something other than prudery that makes you squirm when a novel's hero mates with a curvaceous canary named Perta, squats on the eggs, and warbles "Become now,/Tap through the shell/Of being and taste the/Soft air of your beginning."

With *Dad*, the pseudonymous Wharton moves from flying to dying and once again confronts his subject with graphic intensity. But beneath the gritty veneer—"the smell of age: old sweat, constipation and dried urine"—*Dad* is a clumsy, half-baked novel that exploits the same fantasy-