

REFLECTIONS IN A JAUNDICED EYE

Florence King/St. Martin's Press/198 pp. \$15.95

Andrew Ferguson

I'm not sure that women can be curmudgeons, technically, but if they can, then Miss Florence King of Stafford County, Virginia, is a 14-carat, top-of-the-chop, fully developed, salted-in-the-shell curmudgeon. She is, moreover, a right-wing bisexual, an America-hating Confederate flag-waver, and a spinsterish enemy of modern feminism. That's by her own description. She is also one of the most exhilarating essayists alive: occasionally raunchy but always full of high humor, casually erudite, animated by an original and constantly surprising turn of mind given shape in a prose style as clean and fresh as mountain air. That's my description.

Reflections in a Jaundiced Eye is a more loosely constructed book than Miss King's *Confessions of a Failed Southern Lady*, published in 1985; it's less ambitious, too. *Confessions* was a memoir, an alternately hilarious and affecting account of her youth in the District of Columbia during the 1940s and '50s. Peopled with bizarre and indelible characters, touching on grander themes like family and loyalty and love and the life of the mind, it allowed Miss King's literary gifts full play. The newer book features Miss King as satirist and polemicist, and the tone is less varying. This is hardly a complaint, however, for as a satirist and polemicist Florence King has few equals.

I say that Miss King claims to hate America: "I'd die for the South but I wouldn't die for America," she recently told Charlotte Hays of the *Washington Times*. And, discussing Phyllis Schlafly in the introduction to *Reflections*, she writes: "Like all members of the God 'n' Country club, Schlafly thinks that only leftwing teeth are set on edge by America. She's wrong. I'm slightly to the right of Baby Doc, but life in America has the same effect on me as 'The Morton Downey, Jr. Show.'" But on closer examination, the aspects of American life that she specifically despises turn out to be the fairly recent accretions deposited by the dominant culture of dimestore liberalism: the cult of the kid, the ascendancy of profes-

sional do-gooders, the obsession with self-esteem, the decline of intellectual standards, feminism, and lots, lots more.

A confirmed spinster—it's a term, along with "old maid," that she uses with pride—Miss King considers herself a feminist, even though she admits (not unhappily) that "my name is mud at *Ms.* magazine."

When feminism awoke from its long sleep in the sixties, I assumed it would be a movement for careerist spinsters who chose to renounce marriage and motherhood for a life of the mind lived with spartan simplicity and dedicated to professional achievement. What else, after all, could "women's liberation" mean?

I soon found out. In no time, the movement split along two pseudo-feminist fault lines, the Lunatic Fringe and the Lunatic Warp and Woof. The former consisted of Ti-Grace Atkinson, Lesbian separatists, and guerrilla theaters like WITCH and SCUM. The latter consisted of frustrated suburban housewives roused by the melancholy seal barks of Betty Friedan.

The effect of these debased forms of feminism has been to confuse traditional sex roles to the point where "American men have very few masculine stances left." They are expected, instead, to be vulnerable, sensitive, weepy even. But it is women, she says, who will be the final losers in the creation of the New Age Man.

I wish Shere Hite or some other feminist would explain to me what is so wonderful

about "vulnerable" men. Too rich a diet of male vulnerability does things to women, and if you don't believe it, look at Rosalynn Carter's mean mouth. Better yet, reflect on Gen. George S. Patton's maxim, "Men who won't fight won't f—k."

The culmination of the sensitive guy is the Family Man. At last year's political conventions, she notes, "there were children all over the place, making speeches about Daddy, nominating Daddy, hugging Daddy, while the television cameras panned over the smoke-free room picking out mother-delegates with babes in arms. At the end . . . the candidate rounds up every relative he can lay hands on and drags them up on the platform to play with balloons." The feminization is by now almost complete. "For men who want to flee Family Man America and never come back, there is a guaranteed solution: homosexuality is the new French Foreign Legion."

As her comments on the conventions show, Miss King's attitude toward children is unambiguous. She quotes with approval her fellow misanthrope Ambrose Bierce, who, when asked by a woman for advice on raising children, replied: "Study Herod, madame, study Herod." But you get the idea that it's not children themselves who get on Miss King's permanently frayed nerves so much as the institutional fawning and doting that have elevated the brat to the status of cultural exemplar. "America is not a democracy," she writes, "it's an absolute monarchy ruled by King Kid." No wonder, then, that adults do their best to be like children. "Television weather reporters affect guess-what tones and breathless gasps while pointing at cartoons of sad-faced clouds. . . . Liberals take up mess-making politics while conservatives trade McGuffey's readers like baseball cards. . . . In telethons that go on for twenty hours

we get tributes to kids, songs about kids, stories about kids, and of course, kids—in person!"

Worse, to attend to the needs of "the little wartlings," a new professional class has arisen: that of the "Helpists." A high school student's sudden death is instantly transformed, nowadays, into the occasion for commando raids by "school crisis teams," bands of busy-body social workers, counselors, and psychologists who flog the deceased's classmates until they "show their emotions" in a satisfyingly lugubrious manner. "The school crisis team," Miss King writes, "with its counseling tables set up in the hall like a morbid version of Career Day, encourages kids to make a career out of falling apart. Inviting adolescents to emote is bound to be crowned with success."

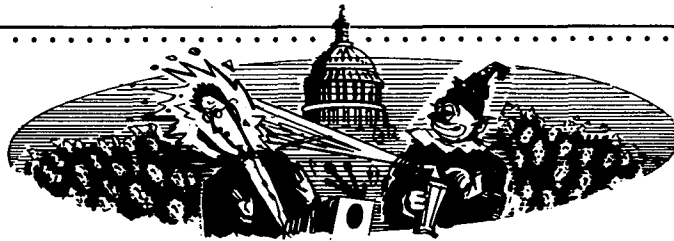
The essay on "Helpism" (titled "Does Your Child Taste Salty?" after a question asked in a Cystic Fibrosis advertisement) may be the best in the book, for it displays in concentrated form many of Miss King's great strengths as a cultural critic—which is, of course, the true identity of a successful satirist. Helpism, she says, was first popularized by Dale Carnegie in *How to Win Friends and Influence People*—"the opening wedge in the promotion of personality over character. Today's Helpists have gone much further. By their insidious pandering to hypochondria and the fear of death, they have destroyed the old virtues and replaced them with mere good habits. Honor, duty, and steadfastness are now called diet, exercise, and non-smoking." And lurking behind the Helpist enterprise? "I daresay they do it for love—love of money. . . . Today's burgeoning supply of ostensibly compassionate counselors of drug addicts, unmarried mothers, battered wives, and abused children . . . would be out of work if the supply of drug addicts, unmarried mothers, battered wives, and abused children were to dry up."

Miss King has much more to say in this book—about the corrosive effects of egalitarianism, the sham of democratic snobbery, the blight of compulsive nicknaming—and she invariably says it with wit and nerve. She even dares to note the salubrious effects of censorship: "The popularity of old black-and-white movies may be due less to the chi-chi interest in 'film history' than to the reason that dare not speak its name: the relief in knowing that the movie we are about to see was strictly censored." These days, I suppose, such an observation is rightly considered "anti-American," but it is an anti-Americanism of a distinctly American kind. After all, any country that can produce a critic like Florence King can't be half bad. □



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THE WASHINGTON SPECTATOR



FAREWELL TO ALL THIS

by Dave Shiflett

I first came to Washington in the summer of 1978, setting myself up as a house painter—interiors and exteriors, five dollars an hour, gratuities accepted. My boss was the live-in boyfriend of a Republican man about town, and there was a homosexual houseboy in the basement to boot.

Live and let live was my motto, yet it was still unpleasant to look down from the ladder and see a herd of poofs looking back up with that evil glint in their eyes. How can a man work in such circumstances? Would Molly Yard have filed sexual harassment charges on my behalf? I tend to doubt it, though I never thought to ask.

The houseboy told of various goings on in the big house, especially the butyl nitrite parties in the jacuzzi room. The celebrants would pop the poppers, crank up the stereo, turn on the mirror ball that hung from the ceiling, and go at it. Zounds! The Horror! Eventually the houseboy departed, citing his inability to honor some of his superior's carnal requests.

Perhaps the oddest presence in the household was an autographed picture of Ronald and Nancy Reagan. It sat right outside the jacuzzi room, and one day the boss explained that the country was about to undergo a big change. "We're going hard right," he promised. The moral crusade was marching toward Washington. When fall came I fled South, vowing never to return.

In 1983 I came back to Washington as a journalist for the *Washington Times*, locking arms with the Reverend Sun Myung Moon to drive Communism from the face of the earth and bring traditional values back to America. This was before the Rev. Moon's organization began squiring around infanticide commissars from the People's Republic of China, and then there were the corpse marriages, reincarnated children, and other variations on the

Judeo-Christian theme. The live and let live philosophy came in very handy those days.

And there really was a Conservative Opportunity Society, of which my job as a commentator on public policy was overwhelming proof. Even if you knew nothing, the opportunity was there. The extent of my own ignorance was exposed when a friend, hearing I was Washington bound, asked how many justices were on the Supreme Court. "A dozen," I said, with authority. My starting salary in Washington was twice that of my former job.

Soon there was a visit to the Roosevelt Room, where the guests found themselves sitting face-to-face with Ronald Reagan himself. The purpose of the visit was to discuss education policy with Terrel Bell, but the great man dropped in and told anecdotes about Nanette Fabray in China. The warmth radiating from his rosy cheeks was unforgettable. What's more, he didn't seem to know much either. It was

easy to feel at home with Uncle Ron.

Despite my admiration, I later wrote an editorial very critical of his terrorism policies. The *Achille Lauro* had been hijacked and his response had been confined to harsh rhetoric. I spent the usual twenty minutes on the piece, heaping a skyscraper of condemnation atop a foundation of two or three very thin facts. A typo was added as garnish. Then an odd thing happened. The President read it—and took it seriously!

"The editorial in the *Washington Times* hit him hard on that Thursday morning," Hugh Sidey wrote in *Time* magazine. "FISH OR CUT BAIT, MR. REAGAN read the headline. These were his conservative friends talking." According to Sidey, the President "brooded" about the editorial. The editorial "rankled" as he boarded his helicopter for a trip to Chicago. "As the chopper lifted off, Reagan looked over at his staff and recalled the writer's barbs. He protested to his aides."

Then he sent the Navy after the hi-

jackers. The Italian government fell because of the incident. My colleagues gave me credit for launching a military operation. The boss coughed up a hefty bonus. And ever since then, I've had an unshakable suspicion that the world really does fly by the seat of its pants.

My last job in Washington has been as a bureaucrat, a minor member, in fact, of Ronald Reagan's Administration. One of the more interesting aspects of the job has been watching the steady evolution of the Reagan Revolution's storm troopers.

As has now become apparent, all that stuff about the evils of government ended soon after the Republicans dropped their trunks in the public trough. They've been sucking so hard the sides are caving in. Their increasing love of the federal life can be charted by their expanding waistlines. They might have come to town wearing a 34-inch belt. Look in their closet now. Hanging there like dead snakes are belts of 36, 38, and perhaps 40 inches. Trophies from the war on government!

At no time has the corruption been more obvious than after the defeat of the 50 percent pay hike for Senior Executive Service personnel. Sitting in their offices beneath portraits of Ron (who backed the raise), Reaganauts whined like children. What about my sacrifice? Is public service worth nothing? How are we going to get good conservatives to cut federal spending if we can't even pay them a lousy \$100,000 a year? My guess is that many of the outraged will continue their sacrifice until one day, stuffed with prime-cut pork chops, they drop dead at their desks. No doubt, their families will petition the government to allow burial at Arlington National Cemetery.

Perversion, cults, the abandonment of ideals: these are memories to carry from Washington—a strange stop on life's journey. Which is not to complain. The yellow brick road winds through many dark forests on its way to the Land of Oz. □



Dave Shiflett is moving 1,700 miles beyond the Beltway to take a job at the Rocky Mountain News in Denver.