

which is the assumption that modernist artists are unimpeachable cultural heroes. Second, even among those convinced of the movement's accomplishments, there is a growing weariness with the endless din of ever subtler commentaries and ever more prurient biographies that continue to follow in its train. The production of texts about texts has become all too industrial, tireless, and mechanical.

But not for Kenner, apparently. He remains bewitched by modernist difficulty, an acolyte serving the willed mysteries of a few early twentieth-century authors.

And this is a shame because when Kenner gets off his modernist high horse, he's rarely less than fascinating. His discussion of H. G. Wells's *The Time Machine* (1895) in *A Sinking Island* is a case in point. He's able to show how Wells's first novel cut across both social and aesthetic class lines.

After tracing its origins in pulp fiction, Kenner speculates tellingly on its parallels with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, published four years later. We learn of Henry James bicycling over to Wells's home. (Yes, the master of fine consciences on a bike!) James was so taken with Wells's science fiction that he suggested collaboration. ("I hope you are thinking of doing Mars. . . . Let me in there.") Kenner even supplies a lively parody of what this might have led to. ("It was not altogether disagreeably unfitting, rather, given the case, all too unbeguilingly not to be evaded, that his lot, as it presented itself to Camshaft, was to be, at the final tick of the dread clock, to close fingers precisely *his* and to close them precisely on the trigger of the afterburner.")

It's moments like this that keep me waiting for Kenner's next constellation. □

HOLLYWOOD DAYS, HOLLYWOOD NIGHTS: THE DIARY OF A MAD SCREENWRITER

Ben Stein/Bantam Books/\$7.95 paper

J. Anthony Daniel

With first person narrative—especially diaries—you cannot always trust the writer. Sure, Ben Stein tells us in the first sentence of *Hollywood Days, Hollywood Nights*: "This diary is authentic. It is not a novel disguised as a diary." But that is rather like the Crete telling St. Paul that all Cretans were liars. Like the movies that are Stein's business (just called "the industry" by those who are in it), his diary is full of glittering surfaces, seductive looks, and sentiment galore. The movies are about illusion. Stein's diary, however, is about reality. Parts of the book we just can't buy; the sentiment doesn't ring true, the boom mike protrudes, and we realize Stein is playing a role, delivering lines. Yet despite it all, the diary hangs together, moves briskly, and entertains. And that is why, in the end, we trust that what Stein is saying is true: the diary is just imperfect enough not to be illusion; it feels real.

Much of the book, though, is made up of nicely realized moments. It takes us from the fall of 1985 to early summer, 1986. Stein has not lost his eye for that old Hollywood shtick, nor his ability to characterize—and complete—

ly debunk—with one deft stroke. In one well-turned passage, a studio head has called Stein to tell him how much he loves a script, only to discover that he has made a mistake and called the wrong writer. Stein corrects the studio man, outlining the script Stein had actually sent, then records the executive's reaction and the ensuing discussion:

"You mean that thing about the congressman having the affair with the college girl? That was sick. That was really a sick idea. Who would ever want to go with something like that?"

"Well, it worked out pretty well for Stanley Kubrick," I said.

"In what? In 2001? I don't remember any of that older man-younger woman stuff."

"No, in *Lolita*."

"What's that?"

"It's a movie. It made a lot of money. About Humbert H. Humbert and Lolita. His little girlfriend."

"Who?" T. asked sharply.

"Humbert H. Humbert and Lolita," I said.

"Who are they?" T. asked. "People in some book, or what?"

Sometimes Stein makes his point not by terseness, but by excess. He piles detail on detail for horrifying effect, as when an old acquaintance (now a talent agent) graphically describes fellatio in a closet. Stein faithfully records his friend's words and his own amazed and fascinated replies to the

man (who, California style, ends every description with a question).

There are other, pleasanter moments in the diary—particularly when Stein talks about children or animals. He loves dogs—perhaps a bit too much (Stein's relation with his German short-haired pointer Trixie is, well, a trifle lurid and unseemly). He spends

time at nursing homes, taking abused dogs to visit neglected old folks. Stein shows us the wonderful transformation that comes over these people who live "in a linoleum and vinyl waiting room preparing for eternity":

A flood of animation washes over them. Their torpor vanishes. Their eyes snap in to focus. They reach out their hands for the fur. Their hands stop shaking. Suddenly,

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Syria and the Middle East Can it be a force for peace in the area?

Syria has been much in the news lately. Still, most Americans don't quite know what to make of it. We hear about Syrian involvement in terrorism and know of its hostility to Israel. But we are not sure just what role it plays in the Middle East. Syria doesn't clearly come into focus. It deserves a closer look.

What are the facts?

■ Syria is a "client" of the Soviet Union. It's their most trusted ally in the region. It is the Cuba of the Middle East. The principal enemies of the USSR and Syria are the United States and Israel. Ironically, Syria has great understanding of Israel's role as defender of Western interests. Because Syria realizes that it's only Israel that stymies Soviet hegemony in the Middle East and insures U.S. influence in the area and in the Gulf region.

■ Syria is the most destabilizing influence in the Middle East. It is in war-like conflict with every one of its five neighbors. Syria claims large areas of Turkey. Over the years, Syria has launched many armed incursions against Jordan and it is only the threat of being confronted by Israeli military force that has prevented Syria from attempting a full-fledged takeover of that country. There is mortal enmity with Iraq and its leaders, which has caused Syria to make common cause with non-Arab Iran in the destructive Gulf War. Syrians consider Lebanon to be part of their own country and have now virtually occupied and annexed it. But their main fury is directed against Israel, because it represents an intolerable "non-Arab presence" in the area, because it has wrested the Golan Heights from Syria, but mostly because it is (rightly) perceived as a bulwark of Western influence and civilization, both of which Syria totally rejects.

■ Elimination of U.S. influence in the Middle East is where Syrian and Soviet wishes intersect. The interests of the Soviet Union are global and those of Syria regional, but their aims coincide. The Soviet Union is, of course, desirous to see the U.S. retreat from the Middle East, enabling the Soviet Union to extend its dominion over the entire region, which is close to their own strategic "soft underbelly". It would also give them

control over the oil reserves of the Persian Gulf, the lifeblood of the Western world. Syria enthusiastically cooperates in the effort to dislodge the U.S., because the U.S. and its ally Israel stand in the way of the dream of "Greater Syria".

■ Syria's immediate military aim is to build to "strategic parity" with Israel. This would enable Syria to wage war with Israel, if necessary without the assistance of any of the other Arab States. To that end, it has so far acquired over \$19 billion worth of the most advanced and sophisticated Soviet armament. This includes the most advanced Soviet fighters, the most advanced missiles, and major capability in chemical weapons, the most formidable and sophisticated air defense system, a tank force greater than that of France and England combined, and a promise by the Soviet Union of atomic weapons for "when the need arises". "We Syrians are not afraid to push the button", says Defense Minister Mustafa Talas.

■ Terror is the most pervasive aspect of the Syrian regime. Syria perceives of terror as a legitimate tool for furthering its national objectives. That terror is conducted by Syrian organizations sponsored by or affiliated with the government, or indirectly through "clients", primarily the Palestinian, Iranian and Libyan terror factions to whom Syria extends warm hospitality and support. Syria uses terror against Israeli and Western targets, or against Arab elements that do not conform to the Syrian policy line. But they reserve their most brutal terror against those suspected of internal opposition. In 1982, President Assad put down a rebellion in the town of Hama. Over 25,000 people were ruthlessly killed. *The New York Times* said President Assad "... turned half the town into a parking lot".

Syria is the leading ally of the Soviet Union and the outstanding enemy of the U.S. in the Middle East. The Syrian regime is one of unmitigated terror, of human rights violations, of ruthless persecution of political and religious minorities — especially, of course, the pitiful remnants of the Jewish population, who are not allowed to emigrate and are kept as hostages in the country. Syria is in conflict with every one of its five neighbors. Its political and military aim is the destruction of Israel, the establishment of "Greater Syria", and the elimination of any influence of the United States in the immediate area and in the Persian Gulf.

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the old woman who was in a trance is alive, alert, connected with the warm affection of the moment.

Stein is by turns confused, saddened, and titillated by the California children with whom he loves to hang out. Mostly, these are teenage girls. Doing research on modern education, Stein sits in on classes at an L.A. high school and gets invited to the prom. Over and over, he meets students who have sharp minds, but who wouldn't know Rasputin from an orangutan—children who “went to schools that babysat but did not teach, watched TV instead of reading books, and planned only on the future being better than the past.” On two separate occasions, Stein meets girls who don't know the difference between Washington State and Washington, D.C. Here is a conversation between Stein and his youthful assistant, Sara, who claims to be “good in history”:

“Do you know what great national event Abraham Lincoln presided over?”

“I sure do,” Sara said. “The Gettysburg Address.”

“No, I mean what great national catastrophe.”

“The Gettysburg Address.”

“No, I mean more like what was the event of which the Gettysburg Address was a small incident?”

Sara looked bewildered. “Give me a hint.”

“It was a war.”

“The Vietnam war.”

“No, not the Vietnam war.”

“Then I don't know.”

“The Civil War. Abraham Lincoln was president during the Civil War. His election precipitated the Civil War.”

“When was that?” Sara asked suspiciously, as if I might be making it up.

“Well, it was about eighty-seven years after the founding of this country. How old is the United States of America?”

“Thirty years?”

The girl-children don't seem to have any difficulty with Sexual Attraction 101, however. If Stein gets a bit carried away with his gaggle of groupie-

ingenues, it is because there is so much to get carried away with. No wonder the man takes on *Lolita*.

For all the enticing side attractions, the diary is principally concerned—sometimes desperately concerned—with life under the Hollywood big top. Stein, like all good cultural critics, is a moralist. His is a plea to Hollywood and for Hollywood—not to lose the dream, the essential promise, that anything is possible and everything will work out in the end. He has a vision of what he is trying to do with his life, which he tenaciously and passionately holds dear, even flaunts. Stein's ability to capture this vision in words is not entirely trustworthy. Like an early D. W. Griffith short, sometimes he is very long on pathos and a bit contrived. One entry in particular, in which Stein walks alone up a hill in Santa Cruz, delivers a heavy-handed sermon on the mount that draws an extended analogy between religion and “the established church of American life, the Cinematic Faith.” Stein rolls on and on with it like a poorly edited rush, until we realize the man is not kidding; he believes “this is not foolishness. This is my birthright as an American.”

Bullfeathers. American movies are precisely “foolishness.” They are an escape, and as J.R.R. Tolkien noted, there is nothing wrong with escaping from a poorer to a better world for a while. We come back refreshed, happier. But we come back. Ben Stein wants to stay.

When Stein is more specific, he is more convincing. Perhaps the best entry in the book concerns his day on the set of *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*. He played a (now somewhat famous) monotoned social studies teacher. John Hughes, the teen-film director, was impressed with Stein's plain, nasal voice and asked him to do a ten-minute monologue on the most boring subject Stein could think of. Stein delivered a hilariously tedious lecture on the Smoot-Hawley tariff act. At the end of his performance, the cast and crew gave him a standing ovation. Stein captures his response concisely and with power:

I have no idea whether my scene will stay in the movie. I have no realistic hope that the afternoon on Stage 16 will change my life. This is what I do know: on most days I wonder what I'm doing in Los Angeles, why classmates from college who cannot add and subtract are making ten million dollars a year in junk bonds, why I have never even been invited to be a *member* of P.E.N. . . . how I am going to pay the pool man, and why I have wasted my one and only life. Today was different.

Stein, unmistakably, is telling the truth here. Much of the diary is a roller coaster ride from the poised, emotional

heights of such moments to the stomach-wrenching twisting and turning of trying to make a living in Hollywood while avoiding disillusionment. Stein calls this low-down feeling the “L.A. flu.” “It comes and it goes,” he says, “depending on what you have to do that day or whether you are just going to be spending another day wishing you were Michael Eisner.”

A Porsche 928 is the mechanical embodiment of Stein's turmoil. He curses and worships the thing. Most of the time, the damned car is broken, but when it runs . . . “Can't beat it with a stick. A boy with a blue leather jacket and his girlfriend with orange hair and orange tights called out to me, ‘Hey, buddy, buff car.’” Stein so unaffectedly *loves* the feeling of driving a great car and being noticed in it that we are carried along with him, charging through Beverly Hills in a red Porsche, drawing looks from beautiful girls. Unfortunately, his blues are, for the most part, convincingly blue, too.

Stein's most successful attempt to say, in general terms, why—in the end—working in Hollywood is so grand, is a little manifesto in which he pronounces filmmaking the last American frontier. The idea of America, of the vast frontiers, freed those who came, and those who imagined themselves coming, from hopeless mediocrity. The pioneers could dream of and attempt to make real a better, happier life. In the same way, the movies allow us to imagine and prod us to act. Stein, as a maker of dreams, is delighted with his calling:

I am only a tiny player in the game. I have been beating my brains out against a cement wall here for ten years when I had lifetime job security in the East. But that was a job. My work here, sporadic as it is, is pioneering on the frontier. In a small way, but still in a way, I am part of the enterprise which builds commensurate with man's imagination.

So, we believe him. Despite the glister that is not gold, despite the occasional solipsistic rapture, we believe him. Stein has connected with something real, and he shows it to us. Through the nasty, brutish greed and meeting-lust of Hollywood, Stein makes out the wispy, luminous edges that are faint but sure evidence of the hidden power of the movies—and of the town that makes them: “The point is that the dream is always there, mixing seamlessly with the real, so that no one truly in the business knows where the fact ends and the fantasy begins. That is the glory of Los Angeles life—the ineluctable mingling of what is and what could be if life were a dream.” □

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CORRESPONDENCE
(continued from page 9)

As someone who at least takes the time to read, Mr. Queenan should know, at minimum, that a character's unemployment, social status, failure, or loneliness serves most often as metaphor for some greater spiritual emptiness. We're not reading stories about job descriptions, but stories that speak to the danger looming behind displaced, beaten, or forgotten values.

Conservatives, in their relentless quest for a return to traditional values, also recognize this danger, or why go on as they do about moral decay? Serious writers are doing with fiction what conservatives are doing with lecterns and editorials: What's happened to human values? Will they ever be recovered? I find no place in the stories of Raymond Carver in which unemployment or drinking is glorified or celebrated. They are bare-boned predicaments with oftentimes harsh consequences. The "morbid charm" Mr. Queenan concedes in Carver is actually the attempt by Carver's characters to salvage some bit of hope, value, in the world despite the fact that they are not (to the puzzlement of Mr. Queenan) "go-getters." Unblessed with corporate savvy, Carver's characters do not blame the infrastructure or the White House; it's much more personal than that. And that they try to endure while resigned to being financial/social have-nots is both a noble and conservative notion. Feel-good tales about "knights and knaves" are born of an unconstrained vision and are better left to the escapist cartoons Hollywood produces.

If Mr. Queenan puts a character's occupation at the top of his literary checklist, let's take a quick look at two American masters typically lionized by the right: Flannery O'Connor and William Faulkner. Perhaps Mr. Queenan would like to talk investments over drinks with The Misfit. Better not give him a bogus stock tip! Or maybe Mr. Queenan is having the hard-working Bundren family out to the house this weekend for finger sandwiches. He might suggest they wear shoes and dispose of that rotting corpse, lest they soil his pristine floors. And how about that future executive Quentin Compson and his downright good taste to have chosen the Charles River in which to drown himself. And after reading *Wise Blood*, how could Mr. Queenan not consider making a career move to preaching?

The fact is that American fiction has, since its beginnings (what did Young Goodman Brown do for income?), dealt with these types because

they are the kinds of characters that hit readers where they live—the gut, the heart. And their conditions may indeed signify an aspect of our own lives that needs re-evaluation.

Even one lucky enough to have such a dynamic job as a "writer for *Baron's*" may sometimes need to be reminded of his own spiritual apathy, of the common suffering that connects us all. The only way a story about some-

one "who ran the IBM System 360" will be of any significance to the majority of readers is if this bundle of excitement realizes that a career with computers does not a spiritual life make. That revelation will make him human, make We The People care about him.

If Mr. Queenan is still unsatisfied, he can find his favorite characters living their oh-so successful

lives in Wang commercials. I've seen them, and the question is: Who cares?

—Stan Sousa
North Bellmore, New York

I commend Mr. Queenan on his timely and important article, "Character Assassins." It's about time a writer for *Baron's* lowered the boom on the effete literary establishment of this country

Are Catholics STUPID ?



There is a tenacious myth in America that says Catholics are stupid, ignorant, and superstitious. Moreover, there is a prejudice among modernist Catholics that those Catholics who really believe in the Bible, the creeds, tradition, and the Church are intellectually feeble. After all, it's said, **there aren't even enough intelligent orthodox Catholics to support a decent journal of opinion.**

Well, the NEW OXFORD REVIEW has arrived on the scene to dispel those falsehoods. You see, we believe that orthodox Catholics need a high-grade magazine that really speaks to the mind as well as the heart, that speaks Truth with clarity, verve, and style. The liberal Protestants have their *Christian Century*, the Evangelicals have their *Christianity Today*, the liberal Catholics have their *Commonweal*, and the Jews have their *Commentary*. But **orthodox Catholics have nothing comparable in the field.** The above-mentioned magazines are distinguished and influential trend-setters, and the time has come to give them some serious competition!

Orthodox Catholics have newspapers, quarterly journals, family magazines, and clergy magazines, but they have no "literary"

magazine that can speak with the same authority and "weight" as a *Commonweal* or a *Commentary*. That is why the NEW OXFORD REVIEW has made its appearance. Born in 1977 and published 10 times a year, we've already made a mark. *National Review* calls us "first-rate" and *Newsweek* has conceded that we are "thoughtful," even praising our "childlike exuberance." The *National Catholic Register* has said that "for sheer feistiness and guts, it's hard to top the NEW OXFORD REVIEW." Even the "magisterial" *New York Times* has had to take notice.

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and pumped a little fresh air into the fetid world of contemporary fiction. Here I've been reading short stories, novels, and poems all these years for their literary merit alone. To think of the time and emotional energy I've wasted in relating humanly to fictional characters, experiencing their catharses, appreciating the drama inherent in their suffering. Why wasn't I ever taught that all

I needed to do in order to judge good fiction was to take a simple job profile of an author's characters? (Did it really take Mr. Queenan only two weeks to do a vocational survey of all the characters in Beattie, Carver, Paley, and Michaels?) Is there some conspiracy going on in American schools? I now know there is at Iowa, where I happened to spend a few years in the MFA pro-

gram as a poet—I always did wonder about those weirdos out there writing all the time—but what about my high school and college teachers who never said one word about those real “losers” in Dostoevsky, Dante, Dickens, and Hawthorne, to name just a few? I have forgotten them already. Thank you, Mr. Queenan, for at last providing a clear profile of “the right kind of people.” I wonder if you would now mind compiling a reading list. I have read all of Louis Auchincloss and Ayn Rand and find Bret Easton Ellis, Jay McInerney, and Tom Wolfe exciting, but not quite savvy enough. May your sharp wit continue to grace these pages with more American caveats against the dreck of subversive crapehangers.

—Chard deNiord
Washington, Connecticut

grains. They listened to him. They ate what they could. They swallowed the dark bread. It was like daylight under the fluorescent trays of light. They talked on into the early morning, the high, pale cast of light in the windows, and they did not think of leaving.

These *are* the “right kind of people,” Mr. Queenan. They work. They love. They grieve. Perhaps you should spend another few weeks doing a humanity profile in the stories of the authors you've mentioned. Not all people are human, and those who aren't are definitely the wrong kind.

—Jim Westcott
New Haven, Connecticut

Joe Queenan replies:

Mr. Sousa: Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor were hilarious rustics who wrote about other hilarious rustics. I don't see the connection with Beattie, Inc. I have never been hit where I live. That's one of the reasons I live in the suburbs. Besides, this is a Sammy Davis Juniorism and does not belong in a serious letter to the editor. The idea that a crummy job is a “metaphor for some greater spiritual emptiness” reminds me of a friend who kept referring to his wife's abortion as “my Vietnam.” One day I told him, “Ed, your wife's abortion isn't your Vietnam; it's her abortion. Not everything bad can be a metaphor for something else. Some things are bad all by themselves.” In other words, a terrible Leonard Michaels story isn't a metaphor for a terrible Grace Paley story. It's a free-standing, self-contained terrible story.

Chard deNiord admits to having a Master of Fine Arts in poetry, yet I detect no signs of remorse in his/her/Chard's letter. As for Mr. Westcott, people who live in New Haven, Ct., and who think you should sit around eating brown bread the day after your kid dies, should be very careful about how they use the words “tragic” and “stupid.”

Kudos

I always suspected that Jimmy Carter was a small man, a sort of wart on the end of the nose of born-again Christianity. Joseph Rodota's “Eminento” to our littlest ex-President (TAS, December 1988) has not only justified my suspicion but enlarged the wart.

—Irene Prater Dell
Carl Junction, Missouri

It all really comes down to this: if a nation doesn't want its laws despised, it has to take at least some trouble to see that they aren't despicable. Had America discharged that duty, Operation Rescue would not have been necessary.

Thanks to Tom Bethell for a fine piece (“Operation Rescue,” TAS, December 1988)—and to God for not leaving us without a remnant.

—C. H. Ross
Nashville, Tennessee

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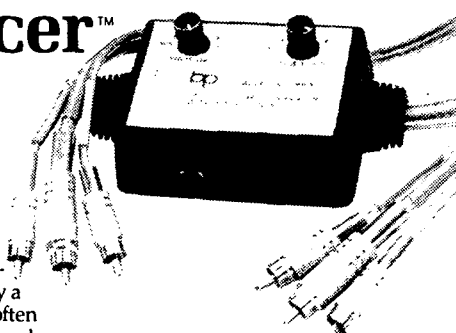
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TOM WOLFE MEETS THE WASHINGTON CLUB

As an opinion magazine whose influence extends far beyond its subscriber rolls, *The American Spectator* has over the years counted on the moral and financial support of its many friends and readers. Through their continuing generosity, these donors—foundations, corporations, and (perhaps most gratifying for us) concerned individuals—have shown a far-sighted dedication to the development of conservative ideas in the political and cultural debates essential to a free society.

Their commitment serves as an inspiration to those of us who are involved in the day-to-day task of publishing *The American Spectator*. In gratitude, and as a means of drawing

more immediately on the guidance and advice of our supporters, we have established an annual dinner at which members of The American Spectator Advisory Group (donors of \$10,000 or more) and The American Spectator Washington Club (donors of \$1,000 or more) can meet with *TAS* writers and editors (and one another) to discuss the magazine's editorial direction.

Nineteen eighty-eight's dinner was held November 10 at the Yale Club in New York City with more than 150 guests in attendance, including several *TAS* writers attracted not only by the opportunity to meet our donors but also by the promise of a free hot meal and a three-hour open bar. Among

those attending were Chief Saloon Correspondent Joe Mysak (of course), New York Correspondent William Tucker, John Simon, Lionel Abel, Micah Morrison, Terry Teachout, Richard Brookhiser, and Joe Queenan. A full list of Advisory Group and Washington Club members appears on page 49.

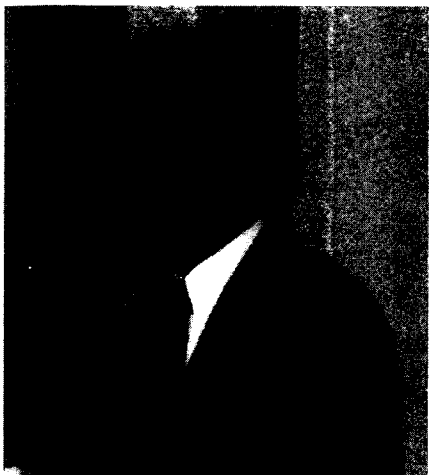
Following dinner, guests were welcomed by Ronald Burr, the *Spectator's* publisher, who cited the continuing success of the programs sponsored by The American Spectator Educational Foundation. In his remarks, R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr., discussed America's crucial need for a "two-party media" that disseminates information and ideas other than those resounding in

the echo chamber of Washington journalism. Robert Shafer of Pfizer, Inc., then introduced the evening's main speaker, Tom Wolfe, who stressed the *Spectator's* willingness over the last twenty-one years to challenge the reigning liberal orthodoxy of America's cultural elite.

We extend special thanks to Richard Gilder, Jr., of Gilder, Gazendon & Company and to Pfizer, Inc., for sponsoring the dinner. If you are interested in joining either the Advisory Group or the Washington Club, or would simply like to learn more about The American Spectator Educational Foundation, simply clip and return the coupon on page 49, or call Ron Burr at *TAS*.



Tom Wolfe.



Ronald Burr welcomes the guests.



Katherine Somers, Alan Somers, Jerry Gerde, and Teri Gerde.



James Cheney.



Diana Greve, William C. Bodie, and Lorelei Bodie.



Richard M. Larry and Nancy Greene.