

the first thing he sees there is "an obviously well-educated black man in a three-piece suit carrying a *Wall Street Journal*." Similarly, Selma, Alabama, meets with his approval because it now appears that blacks and whites are getting along there. On the other hand, in the college town of Auburn, Bryson reflects that students' concerns today "seem to be sex and keeping their clothes looking nice. I don't think learning comes into it very much."

This kind of generalizing banality occurs often enough to be irritating. "Macon was nice," the author comments; "all the towns in the South seemed to be nice." Colonial Williamsburg, for all its fakery, is "relentlessly attractive. And for that reason I liked it." Bryson so much as confesses that he thinks all rich, pretty towns in America are good, while all poor towns are beyond redemption. The ski resort of Sun Valley, Idaho, is "most agreeable," while Wells, Nevada, where "almost everything in town appeared to exist on the edge of dereliction," is "the sorriest, seediest, most raggedy-assed town I've ever seen." These snap judgments are in direct contradiction to Bryson's conviction that cars, suburbs, and "indiscriminate wealth" have "spoiled American life." Nor do they explain why, when he sees an expensive car driven by a blonde coed, he offers this sentiment: "If I could have run fast enough to keep up, I would happily have urinated all down the side of it."

The America Bryson shows us is a curiously unpopulated one. He appears to go out of his way to avoid talking to anyone, except for a few laconic interchanges, when necessary, with waitresses and gas-station attendants. In the past, most "on the road" books have included their authors' discussions with characters in two-bit towns; but Bryson can't be bothered with anything so mundane as actually talking to Americans. The only people with whom he spends any time at all are his brother's family in Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania, a couple of journalist friends outside Philadelphia, another college friend in Iowa City, and a bemused niece in a small college in Santa Fe. Otherwise, people are seen from a distance only, and usually with some degree of scorn: tourists in the Smoky Mountains are "always fat and dress like morons"; K-Marts across the country are "always full of the sort of people who give their children names that rhyme . . . the sort of people who would stay in to watch 'The Munsters.'" RV drivers are "strange and dangerous people and on no account should be approached."

But I suppose you can't, in the end, make too much of Bryson's superficialities and contradictions. It doesn't really matter that a book with the sub-

title "Travels in Small-Town America" includes among its small towns Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and New York City. What counts, for Bryson, is that he be entertaining at all costs—and, for the most part, he is. After driving through all but ten of the lower forty-eight states, over a distance of 13,798 miles, Bryson proudly sums up: "I saw pretty much everything I wanted

to see and a good deal that I didn't . . . I didn't get shot or mugged. The car didn't break down. I wasn't once approached by a Jehovah's Witness. I still had sixty-eight dollars and a clean pair of underpants. Trips don't come much better than that." But what has Bryson managed to discover in America? Outside his own capacity for drive-through comedy, virtually nothing. □

PICTURING WILL

Ann Beattie/Random House/230 pp. \$18.95

James Bowman

What Hugh Kenner calls "the Jane chord"—the first and last words of a book as a gnomic commentary on what goes on between them—is At/ball. That provides as good a way as any to look at *Picturing Will*. On one level the novel is, for most of its length, a particularly dreary and pointless ball game in which the title character, a five-year-old boy, is bounced back and forth between various parents and surrogate parents to no very obvious purpose. Then, at the end, all but one of them drop him, and the one who is left holding the ball is deemed the winner.

This is the boy's stepfather, Mel. It turns out that he cares more for Will, as a new human being in the world, than either of his natural parents does. Very contemporary. The journal that he keeps for Will puts in a couple of early appearances, set off by italics, but it is only at the end that we realize it is his. If a ball is also a festive occasion, we may say that there is something of the celebratory about this part of the book: it is a frigid cotillion, a huddled ovation in honor of the way in which children manage to grow up both because of and in spite of the tutelary figures assigned to them by chance.

The slang sense of "ball" is also appropriate when we get to Wayne, Will's randy daddy. Wayne is even more a leftover sixties person than the rest of the adult characters, even more than Miss Beattie herself. And "balling" was something that sixties people did more out of a sense of self-affirmation than eroticism—something almost shockingly joyless and sterile. Will, both novel and character, is the product of such people, and it/he never quite recovers from the fact.

James Bowman is American correspondent of the *Spectator* of London.

If this seems a rather whimsical way in which to attempt serious comment upon what purports to be a serious book, it is appropriate when the book itself is as disjointed as *Picturing Will*. Architecturally the novel is quite tightly constructed, but it is an architecture of cotton candy: at the textural level it seems to have almost no substance. Jody, Will's mother, is in the habit of stuffing little bits of the detritus of her life—cash register receipts, children's drawings, junk mail, candy wrappers—into an envelope and mailing them to her ex-husband without comment, and it is not long before the reader is beginning to feel like poor Wayne—bombaraded with triviality.

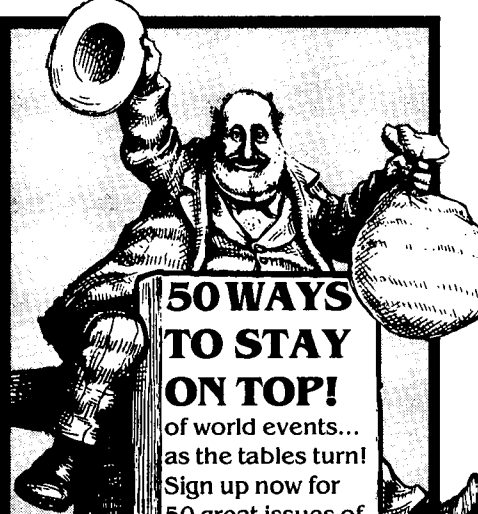
Ann Beattie is sometimes spoken of as a "minimalist" author, and I confess that I am unable quite to make out what the word can mean in this context. On the contrary, she seems to me if anything *maximalist* in the way she piles up meaningless and unnecessary details:

The fan above the cash register was blowing. Dalt was slightly cross-eyed. He was wearing one of his many baseball caps studded with fishing lures. Some of the caps had buttons with funny sayings on them, and one—a gift from his daughter, which the customers sensed wasn't to be laughed at—had a small heart-shaped frame above the brim that contained a picture of Dalt's fat-cheeked granddaughter, Melanie Rae. Customers found out the child's name even if they drank at the bar only one time. Large photos could be pointed out on the bulletin board above the cash register if he didn't have her silver-framed image riding high above his forehead.

As this is the only appearance of both Dalt and Melanie Rae in the novel, Miss Beattie's readers must feel rather like Dalt's customers: admitted to an unsought intimacy for no apparent reason. Perhaps Dalt is there as an authorial self-portrait?

The cumulative effect of such stuff is a state of more or less permanent dislocation, which is not altogether without interest. When, for instance, she identifies *Those are pearls that were his eyes* as "a line from 'The Waste Land,'" the effect is of a deliberate foreshortening of historical perspective. Neither these late twentieth-century characters nor their creator can see as far back as Shakespeare, whose words here are only known as one of the "fragments" Eliot shored against his ruin. Natural enough, for such a dealer in fragments as Ann Beattie. Or consider her character D. B. Haverford. For some reason, after his introduction he is referred to by everybody throughout the rest of the book as "Havea-bud." Is this a feeble joke—Have-a-Ford/Have-a-Bud—that she just never got tired of? Maybe. But it is both a constant irritant and the means by which we are prevented from ever bringing the man quite into focus.

Photography is Jody's occupation and as near as we get to an organizing *leitmotif* in the novel, so it is also dislocating to notice the author's poor eye for scene-snapping, her poor ear for dialogue. It may be that, if you look hard enough, you can find both rhododendrons and maple trees in Florida, but to make a feature of them in a Florida landscape is like writing of the glaciers of the rain forest or the jungle of the Sahara. Can this unearthly—or rather half-earthly—topography be deliberate? Or consider this bit of dialogue:



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"You know what heaven would be?" Zeke said, looking over at Wayne from the diving board, where he was sitting. "Surf 'n' Turf," he said. "Heavy on the butter with the Turf, too. And a side of steamers with broth to dunk 'em in to clean out the sand."

"I think heaven for you would be the certainty of your convictions," Wayne said. "Not having to check with anyone to see whether they'd bear you out. Not caring if other people felt the way you did. Not caring jack shit, unless you felt like considering their opinion."

Buttered steak? "The certainty of your convictions"? The excrement of the Florida fish commonly referred to as the jack? Do Florida landscaping operatives really talk like this? Perhaps they do in the dream-setting where they also spend their time planting out rhododendrons.

Somehow, however, we can't summon up the energy to care very much. Like Zeke himself, the world in which he lives seems to matter hardly at all to our perspective on Will. Or perhaps to Will's own childish perspective on an adult world where everything is still as strange as Florida rhododendrons are to us. Much of the novel, that is, is kept at a distance from anything recognizable as actuality, even within the limited terms established by its half-hearted attempts at verisimilitude. If this is the author's way of making it new, so that rather than picturing Will we can picture as he does, it is more bewildering than exhilarating. The fact remains that it's not *true*, and one is left with the horrible suspicion that Miss Beattie would reply with sixties profundity: "Like, man, what is truth?" □

FROM BEIRUT TO JERUSALEM

Thomas L. Friedman/Farrar, Straus & Giroux/525 pp. \$22.95

Steven C. Munson

In 1983, Thomas L. Friedman won a Pulitzer Prize for his reporting from Lebanon. In 1988, he won another Pulitzer, this time for his reporting from Israel. Over the past ten years, he has been the recipient of numerous other honors, including an Overseas Press Club Award, a George Polk Award, a Livingston Award for Young Journalists, a New York Newspaper Guild Page One Award, and a New Israel Fund Award for Outstanding Reporting from Israel.

In addition to being a celebrated journalist, Friedman has recently become a celebrated author. *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, a memoir of his experiences as a *New York Times* reporter in the Middle East, was published last summer to glowing reviews. It quickly became a bestseller and ended the year by garnering a National Book Award.

Like the reporting that won him his two Pulitzer Prizes, the book revolves around what Friedman heard, saw, and felt in the midst of two large events: the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982, and the Israeli effort to quell the Palestinian uprising in the West Bank and Gaza that began in 1987. His portrait of Lebanon is highly personal and atmospheric. It suffers from an accumulation of trivial, pointless, or irrelevant information, and more than a few of the stories he tells about life in Beirut sound forced, or out of place. To some extent, this disconnectedness—incoherence, really—probably reflects the reporter's difficulty in making sense of his circumstances; the situation in Lebanon is, after all, neither clear-cut nor easy to come to grips with. Primarily, however, Friedman's literary failure appears to be the result of certain inhibitions he feels when writing about Lebanon.

He himself admits that as a reporter in Beirut he fell far short of giving his readers a complete picture of what was going on. Like other journalists, he worked under conditions of constant fear and uncertainty, and had no illusions that the various Lebanese factions—Christian, Muslim, PLO, Syrian

—would tolerate much seriously critical reporting of their activities. He tells how he and his colleagues devised all manner of ingenious tricks in order to write stories that would not get them into trouble and would be more than just fluff. But it is clear, despite his best efforts to minimize the implications of what he is saying, that the factions in Lebanon that posed the greatest danger were also the ones that received the most deferential treatment.

Perhaps no group benefited more from this state of affairs than the PLO. As Friedman writes, "How many serious stories were written from Beirut about the well-known corruption in the PLO leadership, the misuse of funds, and the way in which the organization had become as much a corporation full of bureaucratic hacks as a guerrilla outfit? . . . The truth is, the Western press coddled the PLO and never judged it with anywhere near the scrutiny that it judged Israeli, Phalangist, or American behavior. . . . The overfocusing by reporters on the PLO and its perception of events also led them to ignore the Lebanese Shiites and their simmering wrath at the Palestinians for turning their villages in south Lebanon into battlefields."

That Friedman himself was quite prepared to coddle the PLO is clear from his account of a meeting he and his assistant Mohammed had with Mahmoud Labadi, Arafat's personal spokesman in Beirut, in July 1982:

"Mahmoud," I said, "let's get everything out in the open. I'm Jewish and you know I'm Jewish. When my editors asked me how they could send a Jew to Beirut, I told them it was no problem. I told them I had never encountered any difficulties with the PLO because of my religion. If the rules of the game have changed, then let me know and I'll go back to the Commodore and pack my bags."

"No, no," said Labadi, waving his hand. "That is not necessary. We have nothing against Jews. We just want you to do a little better in the future."

"Fine," I said. "I will try to be fair. I have been trying up to now."

After the meeting, Labadi took Mohammed aside and told him, "We know he's not bad. We just need more from him."

But the "overfocusing by reporters

on the PLO and its perception of events" cannot simply have been the result of their fear of retaliation. Otherwise, there would have been plenty of stories about the PLO's depredations in southern Lebanon once the cause of the journalists' fear had been removed. As it was, even after the Israeli invasion liberated southern Lebanon from PLO control, there was hardly more than a handful of stories about the ten years of PLO occupation, the crimes committed against the Lebanese, or the nature of the PLO state-within-a-state.

What there was, instead, was a torrent of misreporting of the Israeli invasion and the attribution to Israel of crimes that existed only in the minds of those who invented them and the journalists who publicized them. Day in and day out, week after week, the Israelis were depicted in the newspapers and on television as ruthless aggressors raining death and destruction on the helpless civilians of Beirut and, like modern-day Nazis, committing genocide against the Palestinians. It may be hard for many people to remember what it was like reading the papers or watching TV in the summer of 1982, but surely Friedman remembers. Yet he makes no reference to the journalistic rampage against Israel other than to note that "some of the news reporting out of Beirut that summer left something to be desired."

Nor does he take the opportunity afforded him by his book to set the record straight concerning the PLO. Out of five hundred pages there are no more than a few paragraphs in which he refers—as though the whole episode were so well known that the details were not worth bothering about—to what the PLO was up to during its years in southern Lebanon. Instead of examining the PLO conquest and how it destabilized the country, he devotes an entire chapter to the life and times of the man he calls the "symbol" of Palestinian "resistance," Yasir Arafat. In other words, Friedman is guilty in his book of precisely the same kind of "overfocusing on the PLO and its perception of events"—that is, precisely the same kind of self-censorship—that he and his colleagues were guilty of in their reporting from Beirut.

How is it possible, one cannot help wondering, that he has ended up committing the same journalistic sin twice? Can it be that, although he is now safely ensconced in Washington, D.C. as his newspaper's chief diplomatic correspondent, he is still afraid of what the PLO might do to him if he dares to tell the truth? Is he, indeed, so terrified that he feels compelled to continue writing the kind of public-relations fluff that can be found in his chapter

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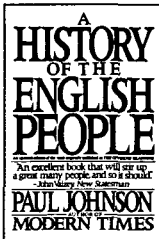
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