

The gags come thick and fast, all right, but somehow you get the feeling that you've heard them before. If your dream is to put the world to rights by using a private fortune to accomplish

what democracy stubbornly refuses to attempt, that won't matter to you. But if your dream is to be rich and happy, you would do better to feed your fantasy life on *Jane Eyre*. □

## LIFE ON THE RIM: A YEAR IN THE CONTINENTAL BASKETBALL ASSOCIATION

David Levine/Macmillan/271 pp. \$17.95

Joe Queenan

Midway through the 1989-90 National Basketball Association season, I watched a televised broadcast of a game between the Philadelphia 76ers, a very good basketball team, and the New Jersey Nets, a very bad basketball team. By the end of the third period, the 76ers had built up a 33-point lead over the lowly visitors. At this point, the Nets decided to empty their bench. Unfortunately, no garbage cans were available, so they emptied it onto the court.

Seeing this, I asked my wife and two small children to leave the room. I did so out of a very strong conviction that only persons who have seen active military service or attended high school in the inner city possess constitutions suf-

ficiently strong to gaze at what lurks at the end of the New Jersey Nets' bench. What the Nets sent out were five Creatures from Beyond the Bottom of the Abyss, players so bad that even their names sounded bad: Jack Haley, Leon Wood, Peter Myers.

The Nets, it must be recalled, are one of the worst teams in the history of the NBA. Losers of twenty-four consecutive road games in 1989-90, during which they also compiled an overall record of 3-30 at one point, the Nets are the apotheosis of awfulness. They are so awful, and have been so awful for so long, that I once wrote a story for *Spy* magazine advancing the theory that the team did not even exist, that the entire franchise was a huge hoax dreamed up by players and colluding sportswriters who wanted to trick their wives into thinking they were

playing at the Meadowlands in New Jersey when they were actually over in New York, boogeying until they—and the unmarried women they were with—dropped. The linchpin of my argument was that I had never, ever, ever met anyone who had seen the Nets play. People who have *played* for the Nets have never seen the Nets play.

Let us be very clear about this, then: The players at the end of the Nets' bench are the dregs of dunk, the jet-sam of jam, the rubbish of roundball, the slime of slam. They are human Hefty bags who only get to play when their teammates—the worst players in the league—are already down by 33 points. This is what is meant by the expression "bad dudes."

But I want to make a larger point: That as bad as these benchwarming would-be has-beens are, they are veritable Magic Johnsons and Larry Birds and Dr. J's and Oscar Robertsons compared to the poltroons they left behind in the Continental Basketball Association. And it is the players in the Continental Basketball Association—the very worst professional basketball players in existence, the guys who aren't even good enough to *not* play for the Nets—that author David Levine decided to spend a full season traveling with, as research for a not entirely unexpensible book. Clearly, his parents have a lot to answer for.

The clumsily titled *Life on the Rim: A Year in the Continental Basketball Association* is one hell of a strange offering, sort of a *101 Recipes for a Dead Bulimic*. The CBA, after all, is the cesspool of professional basketball, a sort of gunners' gulag where bad players go to get worse. Although the CBA has produced fifty-four players who are actually in the NBA today, the majority of these players are flat-out stiff: warm bodies who get garbage time at the end of meaningless games, or are sent in to hurt stars of greater magnitude. Almost none of these bozos would be in the NBA were it not for the league's preposterously aggressive expansion program of the past few years, a program that has brought us such authentically terrifying franchises as the Minnesota Timberwolves, the Orlando Magic, and the Miami Heat—New Jersey Nets without the Tradition. The CBA is a league loaded with bad jumpers, bad defense, bad playmaking, bad knees, and bad attitudes. It is thus only fitting that the league should have a bad book written about it.

Oh, all right, it's not really *that* bad a book. To give Levine his due, the former *Sport* magazine editor is a skilled reporter and a perfectly capable

writer. But where's his self-esteem? Did he really think that spending eight months following around the Albany Patroons, a caravan of aging camels and future horsemeat, was going to turn him into this year's John Feinstein? Writing a book about what a drag it is to play one night in Cedar Rapids and the next night in Wichita Falls is like spending a year in Afghanistan and then coming back with a book called *Hey! What Happened to the Nightlife? A Year in Downtown Kabul*.

In any case, that's pretty much the book that Levine has written. Yup, just as many of us suspected, life in the CBA ain't much fun. Down in Hell's Root Cellar the travel is merciless, the pay is low, the food is bad, the future is bleak, and the present is even bleaker. A ballplayer in the CBA—a guy who may once have been an All-American at Memphis State or Nevada-Las Vegas, pumping in forty points a night before sellout crowds of 20,000 in some spanking new sports center named after a corrupt athletic director—now spends his nights playing third-rate competition in fourth-rate towns that even the people who live there wouldn't want to visit. This isn't life on the rim; this is life in the toilet.

Needless to say, there are some amusing incidents in Levine's book, but unluckily for the author, most of them took place before he showed up with his laptop. The best anecdotes concern former Patroons coach Phil Jackson, who won one championship ring as a headbanger for the New York Knicks, then was sent to Purgatory in Albany, and has now been assumed into Paradise, coaching Michael Jordan and the rest of the Chicago Bulls.

One night, it seems, the highly Caucasoid Jackson was driving a van filled with nine black players into Toronto. When the border guard asked the tall, acerbic white man to state his business in Canada, Jackson replied, "Bringing in slaves."

The other good material in the book concerns Patroons coach George Karl, a respected former NBA ringmaster whose career went into reverse after he got hornsoggled into coaching both the Golden State Warriors and the Cleveland Cavaliers (pass the air freshener!) in the same decade. Karl, like most of his players, was serving time in the minors because it kept him within a stone's throw of the big time, should anyone in Dallas or Cleveland die or enter the federal witness relocation program, where the fans couldn't get at his family.

But Karl certainly had no illusions about the quality of the CBA product.

Joe Queenan is a frequent contributor to Barron's and other publications.

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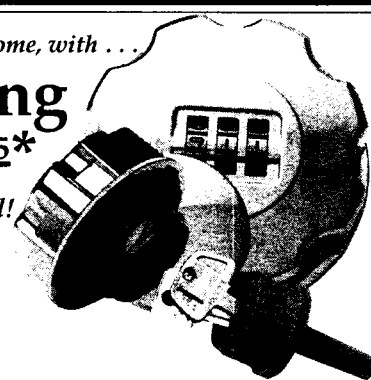
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Levine recalls an evening when the Patrooms were getting all excited because one of their games was going to be broadcast on ESPN. Levine says that the players all wanted to do well because they honestly believed that an NBA scout—or some other living organism—might be watching the game. But Karl wasn't getting too worked up about it. As Levine reports:

Karl had done a good job of downplaying the significance of a televised game. "When I was at Golden State," he says at court-side before the game, "I can distinctly remember being on the stationary bike in our training room one afternoon, and I had the option of watching a CBA game or 'General Hospital.' I watched 'General Hospital.'"

With *Life on the Rim*, Levine has really boxed himself into a corner. He wants to convey a sense of how dreary life in the CBA can be, but he also wants to break new ground by portraying it as being awful in a way different from what most people think. Thus, early in the book, he tries to correct certain lingering misimpressions about the abject condition of the league. He notes, for example, that CBA teams do not travel in buses to places like Quad Cities, Pensacola, and Rapid City, but actually fly. Wow! Flying into airports that double as Greyhound stations.

Levine also tries to make the league seem more important than it is by pointing out that the NBA pays the CBA \$600,000 a year as a development fee. Big deal: there are corpses in the NBA that make more than that in a couple of months. Jon Koncak of the Atlanta Hawks is one of them. Just ask the GM who gave him the money.

*Life on the Rim* is yet another fine example of what is wrong with the publishing industry: turning what would have been very good magazine articles into not very good books. Who wants to read 271 pages about an interminable season in a horrible league stocked with crummy players who make less money than your janitor? Especially when your janitor, unless you live in Idaho, probably has a better jump shot?

This book gave me a headache. It brought back bad memories of another bush-league outfit—the United States Basketball League—that tried to get off the ground a couple of years ago. The league was so bad that at its inaugural press conference, Knick Hall of Famer Walt "Clyde" Frazier couldn't even remember what team he was affiliated with. The league was so bad that the night I went to one of its games in White Plains, New York, the team held a special discount: anyone who was taller than the visiting Rhode Island Gulls' 7'7" Manute Bol or

shorter than the Gulls' 5'7" Spudd Webb got in free. The league was so bad that about three-quarters of the way through the season it canceled its playoffs. That's the way I felt about three-quarters of the way through this book: Couldn't we please get someone to come in and cancel the last seventy pages? And tell the author: Hey, get a life. Get a life on the rim, or off the rim. But get a life. □

#### CORRESPONDENCE (continued from page 7)

think begging an acceptable occupation that deserves their support, a legitimate alternative to "menial jobs" as Mr. Laskoe thinks. Rather they give because the beggar implies that he's in distress and has no reasonable alternative. In short, their motive is chari-

ty, not helping the beggar avoid work. They are deceived.

There is an old joke which has a beggar ask for one dollar for a cup of coffee. A passer-by tells him that he would get more by asking for a quarter. To which the beggar replies: "Give me a quarter or a buck, but don't tell me how to run my business." People laugh. Mr. Laskoe took the joke seriously. □

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# THE SOCIALIST SPECTATOR



## PEEP SHOW

by David Brock

You can tell a lot about a group by its enemies, and if this year's annual "Socialist Scholars" conference gave an award, it would have gone to Francis Fukuyama, the much-derided "philosopher from the RAND Corp." who last summer declared that democratic capitalism is the end point of history. Socialism's apologists are still reeling, all the more as Fukuyama's scenario plays out in Eastern Europe. And yet the Orwellian wet dream of the distinguished Daniel Singer of the distinguished *Nation* magazine still recurs. As he described it at the opening plenary session, "The people were getting rid of one form of tyranny, Stalinism, and exchanging it for the coercion of another, the dazzling tyranny of the market. But the people will bring down the wall of capitalist oppression, too, realizing that the Revolution of 1917 was a heroic step in mankind's struggle for control over his own fate."

Held at New York's City University the first weekend of April, this year's conference was entitled, "Democratic Upheavals and the End of the Cold War," not an inappropriate theme for the world's remaining socialists to ponder. Yet as Singer's contortions suggest, these same socialists are not quite ready to have their political obituaries written. Indeed, despite the "democratic upheavals" of recent months, signs of the socialist left's political relevance were abundant. Milling about were celebs like guerrilla-philosopher Ruben Zamora, an important player in Salvadoran politics, and frumpy feminoid Babs Ehrenreich. CUNY Chancellor Joseph Murphy was also present, a self-described "radical in the real sense of the word." He promised to bring more blacks! more Hispanics! more women! more gays! into the university. As the hallway chatter indicated, these are the sorts of people who still hold "health care" conferences in places like Mozambique. Closer to home, the socialist book fair's main feature was *Keep Hope Alive: Jesse Jackson's '88 Campaign* (a coffee table book). The chic cause for leafleters this year was "boycott Greyhound and Frank Lorenzo";

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in fact, at the opening session, a menacing representative of the Greyhound union promised "more violence" if Greyhound management didn't come to the negotiating table. The crowd roared its approval, while I looked around in vain for undercover G-men.

The impressive array of workshop offerings was another sign that the left's fingers remain stuck in many pies: Cross National Perspectives on Work, Welfare, and the Poverty of Women. *Do the Right Thing* Revisited. Pantheon: Publishing and Corporate Censorship. Eco-Feminism. Gay Men's Liberation. Cocaine, Covert Operations, and the Constitution (conducted by—who else?—the Christic Institute). Palestinian Women in the Struggle for Peace and Liberation. Roundtable on Ecology, Economy, and Equality: A Black, Red, and Green Perspective.

I skipped all these in favor of a Saturday morning session on Nicaragua: Whither the Revolution? where the fur flew over who is to blame for the Sandinista electoral catastrophe: Did the "moderate" comandantes "betray" the Revolution by not adhering to the Leninist line, or did the very "structure set by the market and U.S. foreign policy" preordain defeat? Some were still too shook to take sides. George Vickers of Brooklyn College weighed in, "Somehow, the Sandinistas are out of power." Panelist Pablo Gonzales Casanova, a Mexican intellectual, stood before the audience, announced his "emotional involvement with Cuba and Nicaragua," and began to cry. In the end, everyone seemed to agree with Jack Hammond of Hunter College: "We'll have a militant form of FSLN opposition, the politics of street battles."

After lunch, I stopped by the workshop on "Teaching Marxism: Activism in the Classroom," where a panel of clever professors explained how they propagate their malignant message to a wholly apathetic or even hostile student audience. Stephen Gold teaches a required business ethics course at the University of Connecticut, which means "students must take Marx." Gold hones in on "racism and sexism in business, the pernicious patriarchal sys-

tem." In his spare time, Gold organizes Gestapo-style sexual harassment committees on campus. "Race and sex are not God-given categories" but configurations of the "white, male, Christian, straight, European" hierarchy: thus the dreary news from Paula Rothenberg's "New Jersey Project on Integrating Scholarship on Gender." Rothenberg sends her students at the state's William Paterson College into the field to perform "class analysis of shopping malls." The methodology is path-breaking: "They go to a boutiquey mall and a mall for the masses. I have them count how many public toilets are in each, and bring back samples of the toilet paper. It makes class distinctions visible." At New Haven's Albertus Magnus College, 80 percent of Gail Presby's students have the appalling habit of voting Republican; so she takes it upon herself to get them to "question their allegiance to the rich." The choice, she tells them, "is rob or be robbed." This induces many of her more promising employed students to "steal from their employer." Professor Presby's integrity extends as well to the realm of intellect: "I give them a text of Marx and a text of an outlandish right-winger like Milton Friedman. I tell them those are their only two choices. Most pick Marx."

In keeping with the weekend's secular tone, I spent the better part of Palm Sunday at a workshop called Pornography with a Human Face: Toward a Sexual Glasnost. Last year, the pornography panel was dominated by febrile feminist censors; this year it was the socialist pornographers who got their say. The panel far outdrew the others, and with the exception of some nervous snickering, the audience proved quite pro-porn. This came as no surprise, given the limits to which the left is pushing the notions of artistic relativism and free expression these days, insisting that the production and exhibition of homoerotic and pedophilic images be not only constitutional but federally funded.

"Adult video consultant" Sheldon Ranz warmed up with a comparison of Gorbachev's economic reform program

to the masturbatory act: "What do you call a pair of Soviets watching porn under Gorbachev? A pair-of-strokers." Claiming to have viewed more than 10,000 flesh-baring films, the aesthete went on to delineate the "liberating" qualities of porn: "You see things Hollywood won't show, like the Lady Godiva position, which has the woman dominant. They show older women getting it. *The Devil and Miss Jones* stars a flat-chested woman. Men ejaculate outside the body, eroticizing birth control. Pornography undoes stereotypes. Bull-dykes look like the girl next door. Gay men are not punished for being gay; they're rewarded with orgasms. *Debbie Does Dishes* is about a Jewish housewife who does it with anybody who comes to the door, with no post-coital regrets." As "People's Libido Exhibit A," Ranz introduced *Shades of Ecstasy*, a "socialist film about a group of women factory workers who have orgies on their lunch break. They find out their boss is secretly taping them, and they take control of the factory in anger."

Sharing the dais with Ranz were "feminist-socialist" Vivian Forlander, a kind of bubbly, bosomy Susan Sontag, and Ame Gilbert, of the "Carnival Knowledge Collective." A writer of naughty novels, Forlander reveals the complex intellectual history behind her pen name, Katie Nipps. Apparently, it started as a high school nickname, owing to her ample chest size. One salutary result of this adolescent trauma is the ease with which she slips into the point of view of "a repressed man with a breast fetish." After reading a poem about the evils of the male sex organ, (by way of introduction, if you will), Ame Gilbert began to illuminate the world of "alternative porn." It seems that a group of about 100 "feminist artists" of the lesbian persuasion slink, when the urge moves them, into a Greenwich Village basement to produce and watch their own flagellating fantasies on film. Said the grisly Gilbert: "My own fantasy involves tying up two women and a man . . ." No, I better not go on. This is, after all, a family magazine. Besides, today it might ultimately be the decent thing to let the left wallow in its own depravity. □