

BOOM COMPANIONS

Men, H.L. Mencken once wrote, have a better time of it than women; for one thing, they marry later; for another, they die earlier. We are reminded every day just how much better a time of it we have. Feminism, while it may have given new options to women in regard to their careers, and earning money, and whether or not to have children, has also fired up their unrelenting, overarticulate self-fixation. As the redoubtable Mona Charen has written, "It's not just blinding careerism on the part of women that has so aggravated relationships between the sexes. It's the incessant carping that accompanies it." And the stridency has reached a level reminiscent of the days of the Women's Christian Temperance Union's assault on the saloon. How else to explain such things as women comics, or the recent issue of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* magazine that featured an article on "Why All Men Are Jerks" and yet another attack on cheerleading as dehumanizing.

The upscale newly married menfolk I know no longer expect to come home to dinner on the table—or anything else, for that matter. They come home and vacuum the house, clean the bathroom, do the laundry, go shopping, stop by the dry cleaner, and wash the floors, in addition to the fourteen-hour stint they put in at the office.

And still the carping that drove Rip Van Winkle underground continues. But the formerly swaggering young bucks of today do as men always have done, as they were taught by their fathers: they keep their heads down and suck it up. When you're hit by a line drive in the lip, you don't rub.

But let's cut right to the chase. Like many Americans, I work in an office with a computer system on which one can write messages to colleagues both in the office and in outlying bureaus. Someday our novelists will discover the profound impact that that system has had on social intercourse; among other things, one can conduct informal surveys on it.

So one day, after the paper had been put to bed, I sent the following list to a few male reporters between the ages of twenty-four and thirty-three, all married less than three years and without children. No commentary, just The List, which I entitled simply *The Horror*.

1. My life is miserable.
2. I have no money.
3. You're never here.
4. I don't like this a. apartment, b. house.
5. My boss is insane.
6. I hate my job.
7. You don't take me seriously.

8. You don't take my career seriously.
9. I have to lose weight.
10. You never do what I want to do.

The result: An outpouring, a cathartic gush, as to a man they pounded the keyboards with their collected wisdom, wisdom gained painfully and over the course of the first hard months of married life with their little muffins. Within ten minutes, my list had grown to 100 items; it could have grown to 1,000, although there was some repetition.

The responses fell neatly into a few categories, ranging from the generic "Woe is me"—what possible response is there to the Ibsenesque *My life is miserable* or *It's my mother's fault?*—to "Failure to Communicate," "My Career," and "Sex"—*We had sex last season*, for example, and the dark *Well, I'm not one of your old girlfriends*.

Consider, under social obligations, "Friends." The responses ranged from *You hate my friends*, to which one of the subjects appended (*True*), to *All my friends are insane*, *All my friends are stupid*, *Stop making fun of my friends*, and the all-inclusive *I have no friends*.

Or consider "My Career." We all, apparently, do not take our wives' careers seriously. At the same time, *I hate my job* and *I want another career* placed high on the list of complaints, along with the slight envy of *All you think about is your job*. And has anyone, anywhere, ever heard of a woman's boss who was not "insane"?

Then there was the old chestnut, "Communication." Complaints ran from *We don't talk* and *You never listen to me* to *You don't take me seriously* and, for the completely browbeaten, *You never say anything* and *You never say how you really feel*. Perhaps the best, however, was the response to the fellow who managed to call home around 11 p.m., after a hard night in a nearby saloon: *Where are YOU?*

Of course there are plenty of bad habits to beef about. We all either sleep, work, drink, or weigh too much; and some of us care about our cars more than our wives. We never do what they want to do, and *You always*...

As in all surveys of this sort, there was a "Miscellaneous" category, and it predictably carried the more unusual comments. How about the slightly kinky *You leave your beer bottles in bed?* And *Why are you always breaking things?* whose corollary was *We don't have any dishware anymore*. Or, *I do not talk on the telephone for 30 percent of my life*.

—Joe Mysak

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discussion of the contrasting roles of war and rhetoric is the most original work in the book. Returning from a year in Afghanistan, Schiffren contrasts the realism and maturity of the war-hardened mujahedeen with the slick and shallow rhetoric of her American intellectual contemporaries. Johnston offers a smooth critique of the Boomers' ambivalence about religion.

Of course, an uneasiness with religion is also the problem of Tom Wolfe, the Vile Body's patriarch and Pied Piper. In his masterpiece, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, Wolfe showed a clear comprehension of the critical role of religion in life and art. If he wants to achieve the pinnacles of a Tolstoy or Hugo, whose central theme was always the divine presence in the world, Wolfe will have to transcend the negative brilliance of his current art. He will have to come to a recognition that, beyond all his scintillating vanities, there is more to life than status-seeking.

B*eyond the Boom* is a worthy book that evokes vividly the concerns and aspirations of this generation of conservative intellectuals. But nearly all these writers shrink back from the threshold of real commitment and depth. To fulfill their great potential, they must regain some of the passion and fire of youth. The most profound moment in these essays is George Sim Johnston's reference to *The Magic Mountain*:

In the pivotal chapter, the bourgeois hero dreams of an Arcadian landscape . . . where "reasoned goodness conditions every act." Soon he is drawn to a solemn temple which somehow seems at the heart of the matter. [In the sanctuary,] he finds two gray old women "with hanging breasts and dugs of finger-length" dismembering a small child.

Many of the writers in *Beyond the Boom* worship at the temple of reason and have yet to make the sad but inevitable discovery that it is an empty sanctum and bears an incense of toxic fumes. As Andrew Ferguson shows, when a society commits itself to radical skepticism, it reaches not the cool passes of rationality but an almost fathomless gullibility. Perhaps the most telling sign of the failure of the Boomers' mostly secular rationalist culture is a society that today is reaching a level of belief in mumbo-jumbo unprecedented since the Dark Ages. In the opening essays, Richard Brookhiser and Wally Olson take great solace in polling data. What do they make of the finding that some 55 percent of the American people now believe in astrology, up from a third just twenty years ago? As Chesterton wrote, when people stop believing in God, they will not believe in nothing; they will believe in anything. □

SUDDENLY: THE AMERICAN IDEA ABROAD AND AT HOME, 1986-1990

George Will/The Free Press/417 pp. \$19.95

Matthew Scully

George Will's finest moment as a columnist came April 22, 1982, when he filed one of the most compelling essays ever about the abortion culture, "The Short Life and Long Dying of Infant Doe." As he examined the logic which led doctors in Bloomington, Indiana, to starve to death an infant with Down's syndrome, Will's best traits were evident—relentless rationality, a disdain of euphemism, a ferocious hatred of evil just barely restrained by civility. His own son, Will wrote at the end, had Down's syndrome and was "doing nicely, thank you." "He can do without people like Infant Doe's parents, and courts like Indiana's asserting by their actions that people like him are less than fully human. On the evidence, Down's syndrome citizens have little to learn about being human from the people responsible for the death of Infant Doe."

In fact, the best thing about that "Infant Doe" column was that it so thoroughly disregarded Will's own notion of political writing "as a public act." Commentary is necessarily public, but somehow the really persuasive columnists don't make it seem so. They write unselfconsciously, caring damn little how their piece will look as "a public act."

In *Suddenly*, a collection of columns going back to 1986, the old George Will is still there, only less often than we might have hoped. Simple, unequivocal, and unaffected columns like "Infant Doe" come too rarely. More and more his essays have the air of "public acts," intended to elevate, instruct, scold, reward, or otherwise direct the "soulcraft" in which politicians and political writers like himself are supposedly engaged.

The tone is tutorial from the very first two words of the introduction, informing us how "proper conservatives" think and act. Later on, we're favored with discourses on "political philosophy, properly undertaken," "conservatism, properly understood," and "vocations, properly pursued." About each, Will does indeed have something worth saying. If only he could say it

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more agreeably, without that implacable indignation that gives even the best argued of his columns a tension and bitterness. Less in the spirit of conservatism than liberalism, properly understood, he has a way of turning every issue (even something as innocent as America's shortage of nurses) into a broad indictment.

Milton Friedman comes in for some particularly nasty treatment. Professor Friedman, it seems, has a bad case of "taxophobia," Will's sophisticated term, and also favors decriminalizing drugs on libertarian grounds. "What rubbish," Will sniffs. "Friedman is caught. . . . [His] monomaniacal worship of 'free choice'—even regarding addictive substances—is less a philosophy than a fetish. It demonstrates the intellectual poverty of libertarianism, the antipolitical and antisocial doctrine of severe individualism."

There are reasonable enough grounds for doubting Friedman's analysis of the drug problem. But is it fair to brush him off as a purveyor of rubbish, an "antisocial" misfit "caught" trying to pull one over on us? Friedman may not possess Will's mastery of "governance"—though the various countries which seek his economic counsel seem to have done all right by him—but isn't even he entitled to that "civility" and "propriety" so vital to "soulcraft"?

Even more tiresome than Mr. Will's charges of "taxophobia" are the three or four columns in which he refers to "the nation's thick wallet," this to support his thesis that we're "a nation undertaxed." "The nation's wallet is remarkably thick. The government's wallet is thin by political choice. . . . Bush's taxophobia guarantees that the deficit will stifle rational debate about choices for the public household." Indeed, Will writes, the President was not only "monomaniacal" in opposing taxes; he's a "lapdog" so "hollowed at the center" as to be unfit for governance.

It doesn't occur to Will that when he finds himself eyeing other peoples' wallets, speculating on how much more can be extracted, he has strayed just a bit from the elevated pursuit of soul-

craft. The household is in arrears precisely because his "ethic of common provision"—another favorite loftyism—amounts in real life to common congressional troughsmanship, that subtle art of dolecraft by which billions are redistributed in exchange for votes.

Leaving aside Will's own peculiar manias, one can't quite account for that contemptuous tone in which he invariably addresses the head of our common household. Maybe it's just a case of wounded pride, Will having lost the presidential favor he relished in the Reagan years. This would explain the continued hectoring even now that Bush has shaken off his taxophobia. Whatever the cause, all that anger has not been good for Will's writing. "I write (of course) the old-fashioned way, in longhand, with a fountain pen," he confided in his 1983 *Statecraft as Soulcraft*, in the "firm conviction that the rushing typewriter, with its clackety-clack rhythm, is an enemy of well-crafted sentences." But as every writer knows, the well-crafted sentence has a still more determined enemy—vanity. Like the college editor who first discovers the satisfaction of being feared or admired for his words, Will strains just a bit too hard for the scathing put-down or high-minded denunciation.

Bush, he writes in the lead paragraph of his first-year assessment, "showed little promise and he has kept his promise"—a weak variation on the Churchill line about Attlee being modest, and having much to be modest about. The President "is reeling around the ring, groggy from a devastating flurry of hooks to his solar plexus and uppercuts to his chin, punches thrown by himself." To say anything good about Bush is "a Herculean task." His "low, dishonest campaign . . . squandered the precious commodity of the nation's attention." Bush's vice-presidential nominee "was so over-programmed that it seemed someone backstage, armed with a remote-control wand, was operating a compact disc—a very compact disc—in Quayle's skull . . ." (By contrast, Will writes in an equally strained attempt at praise, Democratic voters who turned down Senator Lloyd Bentsen in 1976 "should have been spanked and sent to their rooms without dinner.") Perhaps in some academic journal these finely crafted barbs would pass for howlers, but just how they could cause the least distress to the President of the United States is hard to figure. Intimidation, it's fair to say, is not the strong suit of either man.

It is depressing enough to find a thinker of Will's caliber emulating the rhetorical power plays of the left—regarding opponents as cranks laboring under one or another "phobia." Sad-der still, he's seldom to be found de-