
— COMMENDABLES —

Burditt's Happy Ending

Joyce Burditt: *The Cracker Factory*;
Macmillan; New York, 1977.

A housewife's autobiographical novel about a human being's recovery from alcoholism and mental trouble. Burditt committed two grave mistakes: her story glorifies a good husband and ends on a happy note. A liberal book-club turned down her book as "politically regressive." As Burditt said in an interview: "They objected to the main character going back to her husband in the end . . . Well, my husband supported me financially and every other way for a year and a half while I worked on it. He maintained his own writing career as well as cleaning, cooking, and taking care of three cats, a dog, and three teen-agers." ■

White's Serene Talents

E.B. White: *Essays of E.B. White*;
Harper & Row; New York, 1977.

The sizeable checks from magazines go nowadays to people who know how to use terms like "role models" or "role-playing" in their writing. Applying this nomenclature to an assessment of E.B. White, man and work, one might say: He is an American cultural model whose role is venerable simplicity. He certainly

is too, in our opinion, one of the few "men of letters" in our contemporary literary tradition. This distinguishes him from writers and novelists. Eudora Welty, a woman of letters, wrote recently about White in *The New York Times Book Review*: "The writing is itself dateless as a cloudless sky, because the author has dateless virtues . . ." And: "In this collection, Mr. White has made such scenes as the summers of 'the American family at play' fadeless for us." Such a literary feat seems incredible in our epoch of frustration and abomination perceived by writers as the gist of life. However, it seems to have been wrought in the pages of this book. ■

Caputo's Probity

Philip Caputo: *A Rumor of War*;
Holt, Rinehart & Winston, New York, 1977.

This is perhaps the first honest journalistic attempt to tell us more about Vietnam than the modish stereotypes. It exceeds journalism and attains the art of a thoughtful, literary documentation. The author obviously cares for integrity—his work's and his own. The war can now be seen not through political slogans, but through the human mind and human sensitivities. Caputo knows the taste of man's humiliation in the face of the unacceptable, and he values man's faculty for reasoning without relying on modish clichés. For this he has been uniformly acclaimed in all quarters of American cultural opinion. ■

Eidelberg's Keen Insight

Paul Eidelberg: *Beyond Détente*;
Sherwood Sugden & Company;
LaSalle, Illinois, 1977.

How to be right and honorable in foreign policy without being sentimental or jingoistic? This is the perennial quandary of statesmen and leaders. Dr. Eidelberg, Salvatori Research Professor at Claremont College, is a scientist's scientist gifted in the selection of apt quotations, and impressive in the multitude of statistics data adduced in support of his conclusions. He extrapolates from the writings of Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, Washington and Lincoln a projection of how they might behave if faced with Castros, Brezhnevs, the problems of the Export-Import Bank and our hamletic dilemma with computers sought by communists: to sell or not to sell? If you suppress your inclinations to comment on foreign policy, in fear of being accused of "imperialistic" and "reactionary" instincts—you would find in Professor Eidelberg a fountain of irrefutable arguments to fend off such incriminations. ■

Le Carré's Routine

John le Carré: *The Honourable Schoolboy*; Knopf; New York, 1977.

In Soviet Russia, there is an institutionalized obsession with spying, the spy novel sustains the official communist demonology. A shabby, politico-ideological fiction of the lowest intellectual quality is constantly produced where the CIA agent is responsible for crop disasters, and for promiscuity in the high schools. Until a couple of decades ago, the Western spy novel was a matter of entertainment, only occasionally used for a serious moral discourse (Joseph Conrad) or an exercise in elegant storytelling (Somerset Maugham) or an intellectual endeavor (Graham Greene). Of late, however, the showbiz character of the Ian Fleming *genre* has merged with the liberal proclivity for slandering America: the undercover-activity novel always galvanized enough suspense to entertain, but in our days it also serves to prove that secret agents are out to oppress Americans. Modish radical novelists in England and the U.S. tailor their paltry fantasy tales to fit a book market

suffused with journalistic platitudes on the subject: their pathetic clichés oddly parallel the Soviet vision of a Western agent, a *de facto* Satan incarnate.

The difference between the entertainment hacks and left-radical hacks on one side and le Carré on the other is simple but seminal: the latter brought into being a new stereotype. His British intelligence officers are disgusting, mangy little types motivated by petty needs. He invents situations in which skepticism, malaise, greed, cynicism, weariness and simple doltishness rationalize their existence as humans and spooks. This has been enough to endear le Carré to the jaded liberal Establishment in America which turned him into a best-selling writer. As both a writer and an expert, he seems highly overrated. His concepts are rooted in neither reason nor emotion but in poses. Patriotism or an ideological commitment of high degree, the time-honored motifs for clandestine involvement, do not exist for him. He and his men stand for nothing which can be evaluated in more complex terms than unspecified solidarity, or crude fatalism and inertia. He has a talent for evoking the utter unattractiveness of the allegedly attractive and overromanticized spy folklore, but this can hardly be deemed a literary merit. His last book is no exception. ■

Roth's Astute Narcissism

Philip Roth: *The Professor of Desire*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York, 1977.

This is an excellent piece of refined, humorous writing that serves nothing. Its usefulness for mankind is miniscule. Liberal humanism perceives pure knowing about man and woman as good in itself; thus Mr. Roth, an exquisite writer, once again puts into operation his prodigious skill to gaze at his own belly button. We are far from sympathetic toward didactic "socialist realism" and we much appreciate the examination of self, but once in a while something new about the navel must be introduced to retain the validity of introspection. Buying and reading last Roth one learns nothing about *one's* own navel, or one's wife's navel, or one's neighbor's navel (something Proust knew how to do when he wrote about navels). After all our efforts to fathom Roth's message, we wind up knowing only about Mr. Roth's navel. ■

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles of Culture*:

Vladimir Nabokov

What the Liberal Establishment wanted
us *NOT* to know about his writing, his thought, himself.

And:

Opinions & Views — Commendables — In Focus — Waste of Money