

know that the British played by the rules on every field of their civilization—except foreign policy and warfare, of course—and that British civilization flourished. Then, voices began to be heard among the Britons that sporting life, fairness and the pleasures of playing according to the rules are all junk while sophistry, satiation, psychoanalysis, cocaine and self-hatred could be much more interesting. No one knew better how to put a finger on this juncture of history than Evelyn Waugh. He was not alone, other bright minds tried to issue valid warnings, but Marxism combined with bitter intellectual shortsightedness were stronger, and today the British pound isn't even worth two dollars. Therefore it is good to leaf through Mr. Longrigg's book and read it as both enjoyment and caveat. □

Morrison's Escapism

Tony Morrison: *Song of Solomon*;
Knopf; New York, 1977.

It is not chic for a Black writer in our country to evoke—even if through lingering cultural reminiscences—tradition, myths, the Bible, and a multitude of petty enigmas of ethnic aberrations. A Garcia Marquez in Colombia is allowed to do such things, but he is a card-carrying communist party member, so nothing should reduce the enthusiasm for his off-beat literary ways. But a good Black-American is supposed to know for sure whom to blame for what, and not waste his/her time on socially ineffectual, even abortive, escapism. *The New York Review of Books* wrinkled its nose at *Song of Solomon's* "symbolic sensationalism," which may be symptomatic for this kind of lack of sympathy Ms. Morrison's novel may find among some whites. Nevertheless, the charms of folklore Ms. Morrison knows how to evoke may carry her toward some duly deserved literary awards. □

In Focus

The Lost Temple of Delight

by Nancy Yanes-Hoffman

Anne Sexton: A Self-Portrait in Letters; Edited by Linda Grey Sexton; Houghton Mifflin Co.; Boston, 1977.

Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work; Edited by Edward Butscher; Dodd, Mead; New York, 1978.

There is a Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times." The times of both Anne Sexton and Sylvia Plath were interesting, if neurosis, self-flagellation, pain, an emotional roller-coaster may be described as interesting. "A Glamour of Fatality hangs over the name of Sylvia Plath," says Irving Howe, in his "Partial Dissent," one of the few clear-eyed, hard-headed essays in *Sylvia Plath: The Woman and the Work*. The same "Glamour of Fatality" hangs over Anne Sexton's head when *Ms. Magazine* passes the terminal verdict that "Anne Sexton's life has been defined by her suicide"—a profound "truth" from that journal's repertory of unctuous slogans. Sexton's and Plath's importance to the literary world must begin and end with their poetry, not with their suicidal obsessions, which finally lead them both to their self-made gas chambers.

Friends, discussing their poetry over too many martinis in Boston's Ritz bar, New Englanders, compulsive letter-writers whose letters hide more than they reveal as their poems do not, Sexton and Plath have been apotheosized by an adoring feminist cult—for all the wrong reasons. For suffering, for anguish, for the appetite voracious for reassurance, for the coward's (who lives in us all) fear of the future. Both "confessed poets," influenced by Robert Lowell and John Berryman, they never thought to ask, "Why live?" (As Sexton wrote in her poem about Plath's suicide, "Sylvia's

Death.") The appeal of suicide was a self-evident affirmation.

Plath and Sexton are both minor poets, because their voices remained fragile and fragmentary, self-deprecating and precious, because they never connected with the fearsome structure of existence. As Keats put it so well, "Ay, in the very temple of Delight/Veil'd Melancholy has her sovran shrine." Sexton and Plath are well-steeped in the melancholy. The sense of the temple of Delight, however, eludes them. This reduces their poetry to an often exquisite recitative of poignant introspections, their sensitivities to finesse, and their insight into the human condition to a refined sublimation of oneself—that is of a spiritual particle cast against the slogans of modernity. □

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Fowles' Accomplishment

John Fowles: *Daniel Martin*; Little, Brown & Co.; Boston, 1977.

It is an impressively acclaimed novel. From all corners of the American cultural scene have come critical voices which have nothing but praise for it. Trustworthy people, polled for the pre-Christmas shopping choices, effusively extolled it. What made it find its way to both the best-seller list and to the preferences of sensible tastes?

Aside from the narrative qualities, for which Fowles is known, perhaps it's the tone of poise in regard to the familiar turmoils of the present, and the search after the timeless, poignant and humane. Fowles has been considered up to now a *romancier* who safely moved on the surfaces of depths; he perhaps was not afraid of diving into the more dangerous undercurrents of existence, but preferred cruising over them gracefully with the help of technical skills—compelling story-

telling and smooth delineation of both characters and situations. This time, he has reached for a greater profundity, ventured into more elusive dimensions of the self-imposed task—and the result seems a success. The reader responds with comprehension and involvement—and what more could a writer yearn for? Perhaps for durability in human minds, or for a part in shaping human consciousness, or for a momentous discovery of the epoch's alchemy? A writer who accomplishes that feat, remains a presence, his message, or exegesis, lives after he's gone. A writer who has written *just* an excellent novel whatever its virtues, values and brilliance—is just a *successful* writer. Into which category Mr. Fowles falls after *Daniel Martin*, it's difficult to tell now. Within a couple of years, he and we will know whether he'll be accepted as a literary measuring module, or reviewers given to nostalgic references will mention him as one of the success stories of the '70s. □

Waste of Money

Harrington's Socialdemocracy Blues

Michael Harrington: *A Journey to the World's Poor*;
Simon & Schuster; New York, 1977.

In this book, Mr. Harrington is plagued by an imperative to reject the nagging of his own conscience which needles him about the dismal destitution of the world's underdeveloped, starving South as juxtaposed with the overweight, industrial North. He does not want to rely on conscience, but wants to see action based on proper planning, research, and the conversion of a bad capitalism into a good one. Eventually, he subsides into conscience-ridden griping, and ends up, quite

predictably, with the old, safe, anti-capitalistic grievances, as well as with the conviction that U.S. labor unionism is an oasis of idealism. He is unable to explain why, although planning is virtually a global phenomenon, the world is economically in a worse mess than ever. He knows even less why Russia, which has *total* planning, must import basic food from the remnants of the "anarchistic" free market which have survived, in limited form, here and there. All in all, he knows very little, bravely admits a lot of helplessness, but then boldly resorts to condemning and suggesting, which, of course, makes his initial modesty void. □

Snepp's Fast Buck

Frank Snepp: *Decent Interval*;
Random House; New York, 1977.

Another "passage" in the anti-CIA paranoia. Intelligence agencies inevitably hire a number of street-wise, swaggering go-getters who fall for the trench-coat mystique and playing with a gun. At the very first sign of their bragging about their "connection" they are dropped and left to themselves, which leads to their becoming raconteurs in cheap bars. In totalitarian countries, they soon disappear in gulags. In Western Europe—they occasionally survive as small-time luncheonette owners with plenty of pub James-bondism to spill over the counter, or they may even marry a rich widow who likes to listen to their tales. In America, they write books in which they denounce their former employer and the liberal critics sing the praises of their low-brow historiography.

Like others of his stripe, Mr. Snepp puts the blame for historical disasters on his immediate superiors whom he hates the way the prototype sergeant smarts against the commissioned officer. If he had read Homer, he would know that in debacles the petty people must find human scapegoats, while the real culprits are gods who had previously decided who would be the loser and who would be the

winner. At its dawn, literature discovered that the causes of catastrophes involve a cosmic mess, a scourge visited upon the doomed by Moira. Thus, the rout during Vietnam's last days must not be blamed on the visible bunglers, but on the new Olympus of public opinion to which the lesser gods of the presidency, Congress, and the Colbys have bowed. Their underlings in turn—generals, ambassadors, CIA agents, etc.—were simply bewildered mortals whose impact on events was similar to that of the Royal Navy's equipment on what happened at Dunkirk. But Mr. Snepp, as he freely admits, joined the CIA at an early age in order to evade the draft, thus small wonder he had no time to study and learn from the fountains of ancient wisdom. This is why *Village Voice* called him "a hero for accuracy . . ." and praised him for "a kind of loyalty." Loyalty to whom? Accuracy in what? Those are quandaries that do not trouble a liberal reviewer. □

Hamill's Irish Schmalz

Pete Hamill: *Flesh and Blood*;
Random House; New York, 1977.

There have always been and still are certain preconditions for a picaresque saga, a street ballad, or a modern gutter epic: a romantic morality and some trueness to old-fashioned, even if naive, values. Cynicism and rancorous savvy have never worked in this literary genre; neither have they worked in any literary vision of the world shaped by a mere intellectual search for behavioral kinkiness. When artsy, modish and pseudo-intellectual pretensions come from pure sensationalism, tailored to Gotham's "sophistication" and labeled literature, the results are laughable. This is exactly what happened to Mr. Hamill, a Manhattan gazetteer, *Daily News* man-about-town, and convivialist of the city's chic bohemia. He presents an amusing case of altar boy chutzpah by trying to write an all-American epic about manliness.