

the Emperor's white horse. MacArthur never said anything nearly as outrageous. A possible explanation is that the ordinary GI (unlike the people at home) was acutely conscious that MacArthur had suffered a defeat in the Philippines from which only he and a few others had escaped. The fact that MacArthur never visited the front at Bataan or during the first campaign in New Guinea was enough to nourish the "Dugout Doug" fantasy. A real source of grievance developed later in the war because MacArthur did not use the possibilities offered by the War Department to rotate veterans. Though he did have good reasons for this, it evoked the understandable gibe "Join Mac—and never come back." and doubtless less printable things.

Manchester rightly gives MacArthur high marks for the occupation, the part of his career the General himself was most proud of. As the British upper class learned centuries ago, benevolent despotism in a foreign land can be great good fun, and MacArthur certainly enjoyed himself to the profit of both Americans and Japanese. Yet his judgment was so little corrupted that he favored terminating the occupation as early as 1947. An interesting discovery in reading Manchester's book is that liberal opinion was just as confused and revengeful about dealing with Japan as it was with Germany.

Manchester is less sure of himself in dealing with the issues raised by the Korean War and the Truman-MacArthur dispute, though he is careful to refute some of the exaggerated partisan suspicions that have crept into accounts of this controversy. He is, however, too uncritical of MacArthur's mishandling of the advance in North Korea in November 1950. Manchester is skeptical of the Truman administration's conduct of the war; as he points out, MacArthur was never given clear objectives after the Chinese entered the war. Truman reduced MacArthur, a Roosevelt-hater, to spells of nostalgia for FDR's leader-

ship during World War II.

But, though he intimates that the conduct of the Korean War as a disastrous precedent for the fumbling of the Second Indochina War, he fails to reach any clear-cut conclusion. Manchester does refute one or two of the sillier arguments against MacArthur's program, notably the claim that our European allies would have broken with us in protest against an "expansion" of the war. It is of course true that the critical question of how the Soviets would have reacted to blockading and bombing China in 1951 cannot be answered today. But, like John

Spanier and other liberal chroniclers of the Truman-MacArthur controversy, Manchester has failed to notice, much less discuss, how the Korean War was actually brought to an end. That was accomplished only after the Eisenhower administration threatened to employ tactical nuclear weapons in Korea and attack targets in China; i.e., after the United States threatened to carry out something like MacArthur's program.

American Caesar will not replace D. Clayton James' multivolume biography of MacArthur for the purposes of specialists. But it is a satisfying portrait for anyone else. □

Colorfully Human Fiction

Stephen Alter: *Neglected Lives*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.
Norman Kotker: *Miss Rhode Island*; Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

by Whit Stillman

"Negativism" in book reviewing has been too critically judged: people are always stressing its bad side, never the good. One of the few authors who has given this kind of negativism a fair appraisal is Isaac Bashevis Singer, the 1978 Nobel laureate for literature. In a July, 1970 interview in *Atlantic Monthly*, Singer said:

"If you read magazines you are told every week that a few geniuses have arisen. At the end of the year the same magazines complain that nothing worthwhile has appeared in literature that year. The reviewers have suffered from amnesia, or else they don't care . . . If Moses came down from Sinai today with Ten Commandments, they'd say, 'These are the best Commandments we've had in a decade,' and then throw them into the

garbage in the evening . . . There must come someone who will say we are poor in literature and also in criticism. I can see Gogol being resurrected and asking, 'What is the best book of the year?' and when he's handed *Portnoy's Complaint*, he'd want to go back to the grave."

Critical negativism is so justified, but in practice it tends to become tiresomely gloomy. Negativism does not have to be that way. There can be pleasure, and perhaps occasionally even joy, in reading luridly honest descriptions of what H. L. Mencken called "the desert of American fictioneering, so populous and yet so dreary." The one weighty objection to candid treatment is that it can be unkind to authors. But now that so many of them claim never to read their reviews, this concern has been largely obviated.

Stephen Alter's *Neglected Lives* is one of those novels which eludes the tactful approach. The author is twenty-two. He sets his tale in the isolated and decaying Indian hill resort of Debrakot. Lionel, the novel's protagonist, is an Anglo-Indian young man who has gotten a Hindu girl in trouble and retreated to live among the resort's dwindling Anglo-Indian community. General

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Theodore and Mrs. Natalie Augden, close friends of Lionel's parents and his hosts in Debrakot, live in the shadow of their part British ancestry and wholly British upbringing. The venerable "torn between two cultures" theme is noisily raised and then allowed to drift away.

ent juvenile. For example, Mrs. Natalie Augden's monotonous girlhood reminiscences are rendered in Alter's falsetto voice:

"For Christmas Daddy brought me a doll from Calcutta. It wasn't like the English girl's. It had a wooden head.

when, on a hunting jaunt. General Augden suddenly turns his carbine on Lionel and begins shooting. One wonders at first whether this is not another one of the novel's dream sequences, but—not so—all the characters are awake. Alter has prepared the reader for the General's behavior with an earlier mention of rogue elephants on senile rampages. After 147 pages, an end to the novel and its hero finally seems in prospect. But that is not to be. The general is buried in a fortuitous rock slide and dies, not Lionel. One senses an opportunity missed. Thirty pages later the novel does terminate. Lionel has taken Sylvia as his lawful wife. Construction has begun on the new road to Debrakot. The series of meaningless episodes has come to an end. The enigma of the Anglo-Indians remains.

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Norman Kotker's *Miss Rhode Island* also remains. D. Keith Mano wrote a rave review of this book in the December 8 issue of *National Review*. Granting that every writer's style is unique—as with snowflakes—there's a notable similarity in the approaches of Mano and Kotker. They both write in a style that's intensely—almost gaudily—clever, closely worked and yet quickly moving. One immediate difference is

"Norman Kotker has written an elegant novel . . . almost elegiac in tone."

—*The New Republic*

that while Mano employs every device of punctuation, Kotker is infatuated with the full stop. A Kotker paragraph has the look of a skin-care product advertisement: Three word sentences. And four word sentences. And verbless five word sentences. Or. Just. A. Series. Of. One. Word. Sentences.

As a vehicle for his talent in describing lovely young complexions in sentences of one word or more, Kotker has found the perfect story in this account of a Wellesley College girl who inad-

"A short first novel of unusual and exquisite quality."

—*The New Yorker*

"An important first novel with rich images, full characters, and a substantial theme."

—*Library Journal*

"*Neglected Lives* is a lovely book; I salute its author."

—Peter S. Prescott in *Newsweek*

That's the good part.

The two cultures Alter describes—three when the Moslems turn up—become under his hand less than one, and that not of the fascinating East. In Anglo-Indian Debrakot he creates a mock Winnetka or Scarsdale. It's liquor and libido—just as in the searing novelistic indictments of American suburbia popular one and two decades ago. *Neglected Lives* has almost everything in this regard: Mrs. Natalie Augden contemplating seduction of Lionel; General Teddy Augden suspecting that he is Lionel's real father; Natalie's violation when still in her teens by a young British official (counterpart in American fiction: rich college boy); Teddy's humiliation by a British officer (American counterpart: rich college boy); Salim, Lionel's eccentric fat friend (American counterpart: eccentric fat friend); and, just as in American novels, strange and tiring dream or hallucination sequences (it's not always made clear which). "An exotic world filled with life and color" says one obscure commentator quoted on the back of the book's jacket; "at once strange, appealing, and colorfully human" counters another.

To approach this strangely familiar exotic world Alter uses the narrative gambit most certain to fail—alternating first person monologue. It is the *Spoon River Anthology* as retold by a despond-

with painted black hair. It was fat. The clothes it wore were pale and ugly. It wasn't soft or warm, like I imagined the other doll was. I was angry with it and refused to hold it. Mother sat it in my chair at the dinner table. I threw it onto the floor. Mother spanked me and sent me to my room. She left me alone in my room and put the doll next to me on my bed. I threw it off after she went out. I lay there crying, listening to them eating dinner and laughing..."

Spoken aloud in a high voice and pronounced Anglo-Indian accent, with a long breath at the end of each clause, this passage is perhaps a convincing representation of how young Natalie might have talked. The section represents one seventh of Alter's "doll sequence," and that about one-one hundredth of the novel. Experienced readers will wonder whether this doll sequence is longer than the one which opens Colleen McCullough's *The Thorn Birds*, how it differs from Louisa May Alcott's or Edna Ferber's treatment of doll materials—and what to make of its obvious racism. Alter's version of how children speak evidently derives from considerable study of elementary school reading texts. The overall technique of matching narrative style to character he perhaps gets from James Joyce.

What could be called the moment of epiphany in *Neglected Lives* comes

vertently wins the "Miss Rhode Island" title and thus becomes a contender for "Miss America." The supposed sensibility of a Seven Sisters college girl is to be brought down upon the undoubted vulgarity of the beauty pageant world.

A condescending recent movie about a beauty pageant, *Smile*, now often appears in the television listings, along with a few made-for-TV imitations. For television programmers the appeal is obvious: the great ratings potential for a format which can accommodate pretty actresses galore.

For writers the subject seems to have two perverse attractions: the required chastity of pageant participants and the ugly aspects of American middle-class culture. With chastity abolished as a conventional virtue, the lives of those of whom it is still asked retain dramatic possibilities which screenwriters lust to explore. The clumsy satirical attack upon obvious middle American targets—as well as the cartoonish television representation of rich people—seem to be a part of a kind of "class imperative" which has New Class screenwriter/novelists satirizing, usually broadly, those "above" and "below."

The promise of something better which *Miss Rhode Island*, with its bright heroine, seems to offer is smothered in authorial brilliance. Where Stephen Alter contorts his voice to suit the supposed first person tone of his various characters, Norman Kotker puts all their thoughts into his own excessively clever voice. The capabilities of this voice are more interesting to him than his characters or their fates, and perhaps with good reason. It's a grim view from behind their eyes. But it's even uglier from his. Occasionally, the author will veer off into amazing punning soliloquies—"Miss Maine, I want to Bangor! Miss Mass., feel that ass!" and worse.

The clichés about characters "not coming alive" can and should be applied to *Neglected Lives* and *Miss Rhode Island*; but beyond technical failure—they seem to deny life, not just fail to

create it. As to the old creative mission of the novel, Kotker is not interested, and Alter is not able. For whatever reason, the negative becomes so terribly accentuated in these books that to blandly greet them with appreciative

remarks would involve almost a breach of faith; criticism is, in their cases, not attack but counterattack. There is a recipe for philistinism here, but with our popgun we are not going to kill off any masterworks. □

In Search of Cons* Appeal

Craig Schiller: *The (Guilty) Conscience of a Conservative*; Arlington House; New Rochelle, N.Y.

by Kenneth Kolson

Those who get excited about biorhythms, or who otherwise have a fetish for periodicity, can find much of interest in American electoral history. Since the founding of our republic there have occurred, at remarkably regular intervals, certain elections that may be termed "critical," in that they resolved old debates, defined new issues, and drew the lines of partisan combat for succeeding generations. It is generally agreed that these elections occurred in 1800 (the "revolution of 1800," according to Jefferson; it was the death knell of the Federalists); in 1828 (a second Adams vanquished; Jacksonian mobs flowed into Washington like the "revolting silo juices of Ohio" that were to turn Mencken's stomach a century later); in 1860 (the party system of a riven republic fails; the party of the Union prevails); in 1896 (McKinleyism triumphs over the silo juices); and in 1932 (McKinleyism expires; Big Brother is conceived). Each period is associated with a dominant party, and, as John Zvesper puts it, "each of these parties, although born in intense conflict, has yet been so victorious that it has been able to enforce its own principles as a consensus."

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**Conservative, of course.*

Readers who have been keeping score will note that another electoral realignment was "due" during the 1960s. At the time there were good grounds for believing that it was occurring. For one thing, critical elections are often accompanied or preceded by strong third party movements (the Populists of 1892, for example, or the Progressives of 1924), and in 1968 the American Independent Party, apparently on cue, came close to throwing the presidential election into the House. Even the "surge" that so often follows on the heels of realignments seemed to have occurred with the Nixon landslide of 1972. Intelligent observers such as Kevin Phillips seemed justified in proclaiming an "emerging Republican majority."

But Jimmy Carter's victory in 1976—so often attributed (wrongly) to his resurrection of the original New Deal coalition—now seems to have put the lie to the Realignment hypothesis, and gives new hope to regular Democrats and the practitioners of the Old Politics generally. What gives? It is now becoming evident (to me, at least; many political scientists would disagree) that the parties are not in the process so much of realigning as of assuming room temperature. Reports of their immortality, it seems, have been greatly exaggerated.

If the Democrats and Republicans (it is hard to know which has the more passionate death wish) do go the way of the dodo, it will not necessarily mean an end to the periodic convulsions that have punctuated American political history. Still, it is hard to know how