

Sex Almanac for Protozoans

Gay Talese: *Thy Neighbor's Wife*; Doubleday & Co.; New York.

by Herbert I. London

To the publishing world—where the bottom line is seemingly all that counts—the arrival of Gay Talese's *Thy Neighbor's Wife* is described as a major event. That this book has received so much attention is more of a commentary on this nation's values than on Mr. Talese. Wandering through the forest of pornography and perversion, Mr. Talese, a self-proclaimed sexual pioneer, discovers his Eden of liberation. In this Eden people do what they want unrestrained by morality, satisfying others, standards of conformity or common decency. This portrayal of America's dark secret—wife-swapping, promiscuous sex, perversion—is brought to the surface as a dream come true, nirvana in a massage parlor. No longer is there a holding back; now both literally and figuratively one can let it all hang out.

If two teen-agers had arrived at this conclusion after a superficial reading of Wilhelm Reich, it would be understandable. If two members of the "new class" had written this book as a response to Mike Nichols's *Carnal Knowledge*, it could be forgiven. But to think that a journalist with Gay Talese's reputation would write such a book is more than any well-developed imagination can accept. This book takes us on the Eden Express to ineffable pleasures. All one has to do is relax the code of moral proprieties, turn the clock back to prehistory. In fact one should—according to Talese's prescription—give in to urges however primordial they may be.

This argument, which appears to be as ingenuous as Candide facing the verities of life, ignores the totality of human experience. It is as if Gay Talese thinks

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he has discovered Somerset Maugham's "New-Found-Land" only to find it is Sodom and Gomorrah. His view of liberation is like Charles Reich's *Consciousness III*, where any restraint is considered a trick of the establishment to ensure social order. Of course evolution of a conscience does translate into order; but it is as much a trick of the establishment—whatever that is—as the belief that concentration in order to learn something is a trick of the FBI

subordinated to feelings of satisfaction. In reading the section of Talese's book that deals with the community, I was reminded of the hero of *Clockwork Orange* who is a prototype for the "new freedom." His cruel acts make him feel good, so why not do them? The Sandstone described by Talese does not legitimate sadism, but what he ignores is the obvious conformity demanded by the social norm in that setting. Like characters out of Aldous Huxley's novels, the

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—Robert Coles
New York Times Book Review

"In a sense, the book represents Gay's triumph over the puritanical strictures of Ocean City, strictures that so inhibited him that he didn't even masturbate until his second year in college."

—Vogue

to keep you out of trouble.

If desire is not harnessed, the pleasure principle is subject solely to utilitarian standards. Consider this extrapolation, one that Talese would certainly appreciate: if in the act of rape, the rapist derives twenty units of pleasure compared to ten units of displeasure he inflicts on the person being raped, his freedom to act seems socially desirable. The syllogism is logical, but the assumption is absurd. There are simply some acts that shouldn't be condoned regardless of the pleasure obtained.

Talese accepts the adolescent belief that doing what you want makes what you want worth doing. In the process a standard of "anything goes" prevails. At Sandstone, a community where sex is exchanged like handshakes, morality is

Sandstone crowd is composed of seedy decadents who would prefer to be caught in the act of adultery rather than face a charge of provincialism.

Where is the liberation to which Talese is so fond of referring? Is it possible for the pilgrims in the promised land of blissfully free sex to reject the prevailing expectations? And if so, at what price? It seems to me that liberation now masquerades as the new rigid code of conformity. Can one be a dissenter at Sandstone? Can a college student tell her friends that she is not ready for sexual experimentation without the often-cruel criticism of her peer group? Talese tells us that his generation was "up tight" about sex; it was caught in the bourgeois trap of religious and moral

standards which presumably caused shame, guilt, anxiety and neurosis. I won't attempt to explain to Mr. Talese the societal need for guilt; but what I find baffling is his seemingly total insensitivity to the conformist demands of the contemporary liberationists who, like Rousseau, argue that people "should be forced to be free."

For John Bullaro—one of the central actors in *Thy Neighbor's Wife*—an investigation into the orgies at Sandstone "saw whatever love and order that had been the stability of his life sacrificed to the whim of experimentation and change." According to Talese, "he was alone, jobless, without a sense of hope." Yet the Bullaro episode is told and dismissed like an unpleasant exception to the wondrous generalization. Members of a stable family unsheathed from the boundaries of respectable behavior consent to adultery with different partners and find that their lives sink into a cesspool of drink, loveless sex, therapy, divorce and loneliness.

As I recount this experience from Talese's book, I am reminded of Irving Kristol's argument that "whole classes of the population . . . are entering what can only be called, in the strictly clinical sense, a phase of infantile regression." With Abraham Maslow as its spiritual father, this generation of libertarians demands actualization which usually takes the form of sexual indulgence. How can I be a better person, it is argued, if I am not permitted self-expression? To hell with two hundred years of this American social contract. Who cares about four thousand years of civilization? Why concern oneself with bourgeois morality? As a disciple of Jerry Rubin's logic, Talese contends, if it feels good, do it.

The guru at Sandstone—the commune much admired by Talese as the vanguard of sexual reform—is John Williamson, a part-time engineer who became a self-proclaimed philosopher by reading the novels of Ayn Rand. Williamson tells his adherents to feel free, open up, fulfill their sexual fantasies.

But when Humpty Dumpty has his great fall, Williamson is not around to pick up the pieces. After all, he's preaching freedom from all ties, even those that might assuage the feelings of loneliness. That Mr. Williamson is an erstwhile engineer may not be coincidental. Sex at Sandstone—at least the sexual encounters described by Talese—are reminiscent of an instructional manual for Tinker Toys. Missing from the description are love, mystery and celebration. Sex has about as much poignancy as automobile mechanics and is engaged in for the same reason: it requires doing. We are told that our humanity is enhanced by open sexuality, but no proof for it can be found in Talese's text.

"Autonomous Man" has always been the goal of liberationists in our midst. And civilization unquestionably has always struggled with the need for social order and a competing desire for pleasure-giving experiences. But as any post-adolescent knows, life isn't all pleasure. Inhibitions can create a social cohesion that results in stability and the attendant value of repose. At a time when morality is determined by people of the couch, not those of the cloth, it is understandable that *Thy Neighbor's Wife* is considered an important book.

The contemporary search for absolute freedom is irresistible. Talese carries the sexual banner marching to the drumbeat of sexual awareness. Yet the irony

in this movement seems to escape him. For if any man is free, why associate with those who, by virtue of the association, limit that freedom? The natural concomitant of this argument is that those who are free are also without associations, except, of course, those associations that gratify immediate desires. Since any relationship presumes some degree of commitment, autonomous man must guard against a genuine involvement with others. As a consequence divorce rates soar as each of the mates considers himself a free spirit. Institutions like Sandstone are then created for the free spirits to come together. Curiously, when these free spirits do find meaning through associations, they exhibit a loyalty that borders on zealotry, a zealotry that often leads freedom to the sacrificial altar of the much-ballyhooed "purposeful life."

Hollywood has discovered Talese, and I'm afraid the *Zeitgeist* will duplicate the book with a variety of clones. We are likely to hear three cheers for sexual freedom from the rooftops of *Cosmopolitan*, *Playboy* and Al Goldstein's scurrilous publications. But when the shouting is subdued, when people are unwilling to accept conventional restraints, and when freedom's real meaning is unraveled, human relationships will have lost their loveliness and we will be in jeopardy of substituting sex for love at the same time we vocally defend a need for universal love. □

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Those Tedious Extremist Victories

Margaret Atwood: *Life Before Man*;
Simon & Schuster; New York.

by Stephen L. Tanner

What is literary art supposed to do for us? For a long time people thought it was supposed to help us better understand life and consequently live more successfully. According to this old-fashioned notion, the artist should struggle toward a vision of how things ought to be. This might include describing clearly where we are and what has gone wrong, but underlying it all was the assumption that human endeavor really counts, that there is a way things ought to be, and discovering it and aiming for it make sense. In this traditional approach, an author employs the techniques of art to create order, meaning and a basis for affirmation in an apparently chaotic world of undifferentiated particulars. He aspires to provide some kind of strategy for living. Sometimes he does not struggle enough and disappoints us with naive or facile affirmations, but we sympathize with his intentions.

Margaret Atwood, in her fourth novel, writes within a different tradition, a modern tradition that employs the devices of art to demonstrate that life is ultimately devoid of order and meaning, and human endeavor is at bottom quite ridiculous. The assumptions underlying this conception of literature's function are that writing about any kind of happiness is boring, that giving characters significant conflicts to resolve by responsible, free-willed action is cheating, and that a gloomy, unresolved slice of life realistically portrayed is the essence of serious fiction.

This is a fascinating novel in certain ways and contains a good deal of skillful writing, but it is cynical and pessimistic

in a way that makes it irrelevant for most readers. The average person may at times be intrigued by a harsh, bleak description of life, but he never can be convinced in his heart that life totally lacks unselfishness, satisfying sexual relationships and self-fulfillment. I suspect that in order to praise this novel one must be converted to the newer attitudes about what fiction should be, converted to the degree that one does not allow common sense and one's own genuine life experience to break in and discredit the model. Writers in the old tradition

sometimes erred by portraying felicity as too-easily achieved; Atwood errs by portraying it as impossible of achievement. Neither approach makes for significant art.

Life Before Man is set in Toronto during 1976 to 1978. The chapters, narrated in the present tense, are dated and alternately titled with the names of the three main characters: Elizabeth, Nate and Lesje. They resemble third-person journal entries and allow single characters and incidents to be viewed from a multiple perspective. The plot is easily summarized. Instead of the usual triangle, we have a hexagon. Elizabeth's lover, Chris, has recently committed suicide. Her husband, Nate, tiring of his lover, Martha, begins an affair with Lesje, who has been living with William. Elizabeth retaliates by going to bed with William. Nate, after considerable indecision, leaves Elizabeth to live with Lesje. Nothing works out well for anybody. Two characters commit suicide and five others contemplate it.

To the overworked subject of swapping bed partners, Atwood has added a psychological dimension intended to reveal how the characters became what they are. The dominant influence in each case is feminine. Elizabeth is tough and

self-centered because of a weak mother, an irresponsible father and a monstrous Aunt Muriel who raised her. The aunt's personality in turn had been distorted by a male-dominated culture: "Auntie Muriel had a strong personality and a good mind and she was not pretty, and patriarchal society punished her." Nate vacillates in "mid-air" between optimism and pessimism because his mother combines both. She is a do-gooder who keeps a map of the world with pins in it marking the latest cases of oppression. She sees that her son receives the Am-

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—*New York Times Book Review*

nesty International newsletter and wants him to be a legal-aid lawyer. But her optimistic activism masks a cynicism; she chose humanitarian effort as a desperate alternative to suicide after her husband was killed in war. The important influences upon Lesje were her grandmothers, one Ukrainian and one Jewish, who despised each other but doted on her. She is socially insecure, thinking she suffers from a "damaged gene pool." This psychological dimension enhances the novel but smacks of a psychology textbook.

Elizabeth seems to represent the liberated woman. She has a responsible job as a museum administrator. "She hates it when anyone has power over her," and her husband certainly holds no such power. Her marriage with Nate is so open that anything of value in it leaked out, leaving it empty. She insists that Nate "pull his own weight" by following a maze of domestic legalities prescribing when he does the cooking and dishes, which part of the washing is his responsibility, when he is to care for the children, etc. Though he pays half the rent, he feels the house is not as much his as hers. Elizabeth is "big on the value of compromises," but seems unac-

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