

is built on wide discontent based on often genuine grievances, which inspire grandiose illusions, which are, in turn, fed by demagogic speeches of leaders who are themselves deluded, cynical and monomaniacal. The brief spasm of revolt was characterized by wholesale, merciless killing that startles the reader with its savagery. There are no heroes in *The Year of the French*, only sad intimations of like years to come, elsewhere. (EJW) □

## Perceptibles

Charles Gaines: *Dangler*; Simon & Schuster; New York.

The number of millionaires in the U.S. isn't growing as fast as it did last year, according to figures from the U.S. Trust of New York, a bank that specializes in such sums. The bank's survey indicates that the percentage of newly wealthy rose 10.3% in 1980, while 15.4% made the mark in 1979. However, this slowing may be just as well, considering *Dangler*.

The novel concerns the wealthy (read: Super Rich) in America: not the ones who made the money, but those who have and spend it. That is, in looking at the rich, there are usually three types: the crusty old man who made the money through his entrepreneurial capabilities and tenacity; his offspring, who were raised in the lap of luxury; and the third generation, who don't know what a wallet is for and who think "work" is a periodic call to their broker. Many members of the Liberal Culture fall into the third group, as can be readily discerned by their support for massive spending programs. After all, they never see the deductions on a paycheck stub.

Gaines, in a pleurably scath-

ing manner, deals with the third group. The setting of the novel is the Dangler Adventure Camp Wildwood, which is something of a combination of TV's "Fantasy Island" and the film *Westworld*. Here the "campers" stay for \$2000 a week, living and dining in luxury, and playing in "a controlled wilderness setting." But as time goes on, Kenneth Dangler, the proprietor, a man described as resembling George Armstrong Custer, takes the controls off things. Gradually, the New Hampshire countryside isn't as friendly as it once was: the campers experience it as it really is. Dangler recognizes that the rich are becoming fat and soft (excluding himself and his wife), and his plan is to make them tough by subjecting them to the rigors of boar hunting, rock climbing, etc.—putting the equipment bought at L. L. Bean to the test. And with all the

possible consequences. He wants to form a cadre of People (not any of the 10.3% who made it in 1980) who will "take back the leadership that is rightfully [theirs] by birth and blood." But he doesn't tell the campers of his plan; they must learn the hard way.

The novel is truly in the American tradition: this approach to Americanism goes straight back to Natty Bumppo.

But when all is said and done, one can only think of General Custer's last words at the Battle of Little Big Horn: "We've got them!" Not only are the rich different, but Gaines indicates that they will always remain that way: a Boy Scout may become a millionaire, but a millionaire won't become a Boy Scout. After all, why take chances on picking a morel when the cook can put in a purchase order for truffles? (GSV) □

## Waste of Money

### Bargain-Basement Kafka

Thomas Berger: *Neighbors*; Delacorte Press/Seymour Lawrence; New York.

by William O'Brien

It was Kafka who taught me that at any moment banality might turn sinister, for existence was not meant to be unfailingly genial.

—Thomas Berger  
*New York Times Book Review*, April 10, 1980

*Neighbors* is the tenth novel by an American writer whose talent some claim is vastly

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underrated and whose comic virtuosity, his devotees insist, invites comparison to Twain. In previous works Berger has delved into a variety of literary landscapes, including the Western epic (*Little Big Man*), Arthurian legend (*Arthur Rex*), the private-eye thriller (*Who Is Teddy Villanova?*) and the war story (*Crazy in Berlin*). His latest offering sets out for new terrain, seemingly more humble in scope. Yet that humble terrain is fertile soil: Berger seeks Kafka's sinister banality in the time-honored American ritual of neighborly intercourse.

Earl Keese, a middle-aged, slightly stocky homeowner, is enjoying a quiet early-evening

drink with his inscrutable wife, Enid, in their comfortable house nestled at the cul-de-sac of a country road. They share their misgivings about the new, yet-unencountered occupants of the recently vacated house next door—the only other house on the street. The peaceful evening is abruptly interrupted by the arrival of the subjects in question: Ramona and Harry, a young couple whose arrogance and chameleonlike demeanor spark chaos in the Keese household. Earl is the victim of unceasing and incomprehensible harassment from these erstwhile strangers. His bafflement yields to a desperate endeavor for reason and reconciliation, finally degenerating into retribution and rage. Berger satirically orchestrates the farcical escalation of confusion, clashing tempers and finally violence—Ramona's sexual advances followed by accusations of rape (plus a similar charge from Harry), Harry's casual "borrowing" of money and Earl's car, the newcomers' commandeering of the Keese household, mutual destruction of autos, various physical assaults, even homicidal attempts—all with a mingling of sporadic gestures of affectionate friendship, which further bewilder poor Earl. Like Jacob's angel visitors in reverse, Harry and Ramona are devils in disguise who provoke Earl to undesired rage, even alienating him from his wife and daughter. Into the midst of these middle-class pugilistics Berger slips some heady moralizing: "A lot of countries are like that," Harry said. "Pillboxes at the border, barbed wire, minefields. And who's on the other side? Human beings, just other men."

All meant to be quite funny and significant stuff, it seems, a captivating, cutting satire which, like Earl's idiosyncrasy of frequent optical illusions ("Perhaps a half-dozen times a

year he thought he saw such phenomena as George Washington urinating against the wheel of a parked car (actually an old lady bent over a cane"), soon obscures the thin line separating reality and appearance. But there is a creeping cynicism behind the comedy; oscillating between slapstick and warfare, Berger's chronicle of human relations grows into a preponderant, sardonic accumulation of frontal assaults. With appropriate doses of homosexuality, violence and familial friction, the satire degenerates into the abusive comic ethos of *National Lampoon* or "Saturday Night Live." Like Earl, the reader stops laughing and comes to feel harassed by the humor, and is equally baffled

by the apparent lack of motive. The overly abrasive slapstick dulls whatever sinister effect Berger was seeking.

According to the jacket, the novel exposes truth "as brutally as the shame of an exhibitionist who lifts his raincoat in a park." The tone of the metaphor seems an appropriate description of the intertwining of humor and serious thematics—with the further appropriate implication that the exhibitionist is representative of the human experience. Kafka, one imagines, would be puzzled by such an aesthetically dismal vehicle for probing the painful riddle of mankind, and Twain would certainly be dismayed by the state of humor in American letters. □

## A Friday of Manhattan Island

Nancy Friday: *Men in Love*; Delacorte Press; New York.

Before one reads this book, or even parts of it (its mechanistic and monotonous content makes reading *pars pro toto* the only escape from boredom for anyone with a nonpsychotic attitude toward things sexual), one should have a peek at the back cover. There, one will find a picture of a pleasant-looking middle-aged woman, not unattractive, even engaging. That's Ms. Friday, the author. After delving into the text for as long as one's endurance will allow, one may have to glance at Ms. Friday's portrait again. One may undergo a peculiar optical experience: suddenly, at least to us, it seems as if a large speck of undefinable excrement has been splashed somewhere around Ms. Friday's nose and mouth since our first inspection. Certainly, not everybody may experience such a mirage, but it did occur to us. That's how the book stimulated our fantasy.

Ms. Friday seems to be a perfect example of someone who misunderstood Freud—that ill-fated doctor, so abused by countless Fridays—but nonetheless decided to make a lot of money from her ignorance. It appears that she will succeed superbly in her intentions. Her preposterous and mendacious "thesis," that men "love" women because, in their fantasies, men pant for unrestricted physiological experiences, is a best-selling proposition these days. The liberal culture daily generates immense audiences for the pop writing about our mucous membranes and glandular excretions: it is as if not figurative dirtiness but actual unwashedness has become the cultural longing of the masses, who are under the spiritual guidance of TV talk shows and the exploitative sexual-therapy industry.

What amazes us is that vast numbers of people are actually buying the uniform, monotonous boredom peddled by Ms. Friday, even though her always-

the-same tales about the poorly limited number of motions, orifices and gestures are about as interesting as playing with the ten-digit keyboard of a cash register. She uses the confessions of pornographers *du dimanche*, dabblers in the art of *Hustler*, as her "research" sources; they, of course, use her books as an outlet for their exhibitionist passions—their anonymity notwithstanding. Ms. Friday's own comments are both asinine and brazen—a common feature of deficient thinking and writing. Books like hers, published under the false pretense of social serviceability and therapeutic morality, fill today's America with the cheaply perfumed fetor of a windowless massage parlor. The trouble with all the Fridays on Manhattan island is not that they are neither naive nor goodhearted, but that they turn their smart aleckism into a barbarian shamanlike power. (CC) □

## Toffler's Hokum

Alvin Toffler: *The Third Wave*; William Morrow & Co.; New York.

Confusion now hath made his masterpiece.

—Shakespeare  
*Macbeth*

Alvin Toffler has struck again. In his best-selling *Future Shock*, he bamboozled the public with nonsense masquerading as psychological and social insight. Now, with *The Third Wave*, he has made a quantum leap into advanced gibberish manipulated to appear to be a breakthrough discovery of a new cultural imperative.

You have to hand it to him. He has hit upon, but not invented, a foolproof formula for stardom as a social commentator. Some years back the technique was developed into a high

## Social Register

**Honors & Awards.** It has been announced that the Anti-Defamation League, an American institution devoted to noble moral causes, has awarded to Mr. Hugh Hefner its First Amendment Freedom Award. As is widely known, Mr. Hefner is the founder and chief officer of probably the most successful defamation operation in history: he heads a conglomerate which has modernized and technologized the process of debasing the feminine body to an extent never dreamt of in



the brothels of Corinth, medieval Venice or rococo Paris. A Freedom Award may be justified, though, because Mr. Hefner uses only volunteer females. He handsomely pays these ladies to demean themselves, which accounts for his fabulous profits and puts him into an all-time top-entrepreneur category in the annals of the oldest profession. We rest assured that Mr. Hefner's elevation by the ADL was accompanied by his handsome contribution to its coffers. We congratulate both the honorable institution and its honored laureate for their fortunate and edifying partnership. □