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matters in Iran. The Shah's predecessors were often devoted exponents of the pyramid-of-skulls school of statesmanship.

Kelly perhaps overdoes his theme of the unchanging East. He is apt to reason a bit too facily from precedent and to ignore or minimize the impact of the modern world on the Middle East and the ability of its peoples at least partly to adapt to it. We are told, for example, that the Iranian army has never fought well in the past, and Iran has never had a navy; therefore, Kelly seems to assume, they cannot and will not fight now, or learn to handle modern weapons. Yet the Iranian army has fought much better against Iraq than Kelly and others expected. Although Kelly does present good reasons for thinking that the present policies of the Gulf rulers will not lead to successful modernization of their

countries, he perhaps dismisses the possibility too readily. Unfortunately, his arguments for believing that if the Middle East ever catches up with the West and Japan it will be as an enemy rather than as a friend seem all too sound.

In the short run, however, Kelly is absolutely convincing in arguing that the Saudi regime cannot be depended on any more than the Shah's. He also takes a very bleak view of the economic effects of the OPEC drain on the West. It is probable, he thinks, that the West will eventually be forced to intervene militarily to prevent the total disruption of oil supplies by local conflicts, another oil embargo or a Soviet threat to the Gulf. This is a very unpleasant prospect, and one that could have been avoided had Western leaders exhibited some nerve and sense in dealing with the Gulf and the oil cartel. □

(probably just right for *Ms.*, *Cosmo* or their British clones) about "babies and menstruation and male-chauvinist pigs and whole-meal foods and London life in all its tawdry monotony." But as one of her precious friends tells her in a moment of drunken honesty, she has "an unerring eye for the crap." True radical feminist that she is, she is convinced that "every bad thing that's happened to me happened to me because I'm a woman. There's no point in pretending it's not so." Whatever can't be blamed on men must be attributed to childhood: "No doubt it all had something to do with the anal phase, whatever that was. And pot training. Wasn't homosexuality supposed to have something to do with that too?"

But despite her successes as a writer, she becomes dissatisfied with her life for reasons which the author never makes intelligible. She confesses that "I thought I was a revolutionary, but I'm not . . . I used to enjoy the smell of battle, but I've got sick of it, I'm really sick of it. I'm worn out." Since her private life has degenerated into a series of sour love affairs with sexual losers, love is no longer "a journey, an adventure, an essay of hope," but rather "an infection, a ritual, a drama with a bloody last act."

Having made the fatal mistake of the feminist in believing that a woman can find fulfillment only in a career (even if it's clerking in a five-and-dime) but never in family or a relationship with a man, she discovers suddenly that the war against male chauvinism no longer arouses her. She decides what she wants:

No more headlines, no more underlinings, no more stories about Women of Our Times. No wonder those women in Rowley didn't fit into a pattern. Why the hell should they? Enough of patterns. She'd spent enough time looking for patterns and trends. Hugo was right, she'd get nowhere if she spent the rest of her life forcing things into articles and programmes when they didn't want to be forced. Shapeless diversity, what was wrong with that?

## Marginal People

Margaret Drabble: *The Middle Ground*; Alfred A. Knopf; New York.

Gilbert Sorrentino: *Aberration of Starlight*; Random House; New York.

by Robert C. Steensma

Fifty years ago T. S. Eliot spoke of his generation as "the hollow men . . . the stuffed men" in a "dead land . . . cactus land." Now Kate Armstrong, the central figure in Margaret Drabble's latest novel, surveys her circle of friends and describes them aptly as "marginal people," a set of confused and meaningless characters who are quite at home in the wasteland of modern culture as it is usually portrayed in contemporary British and American fiction.

Such an appraisal of society's beauti-

ful people may be heresy in the eyes of the high priests of modern criticism, but it fits precisely the characters not only of Miss Drabble's *The Middle Ground* but also those of Gilbert Sorrentino's *Aberration of Starlight*, both of which will probably evoke ecstatic squeals from the critical establishment. In each of these novels we meet people who are, for the most part, entirely bereft of any moral or spiritual moorings—and who don't really care.

Miss Drabble gives us Mrs. Armstrong, the journalistic darling of the militant British feminists, a woman nervously approaching middle age ("the middle ground") and anxiously examining the baggage she has accumulated on her rise to the top: a divorce, an abortion, a circle of chic friends with too much leisure and too few brains, and a panting femlib audience which greets every new article with mindless applause.

She has drifted with the modern current, pouring out her facile pieces

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Her fixations about men, women and the world begin to change as the ennui of her professional success wears away the scars over the old wounds of her personal life.

Ironically, she finally learns something about herself and life, not from the feminists or her liberated friends, but from several men who have moved on the fringes of her life. Hugo, an amputee writer and friend, teaches her perseverance and how to move on to new horizons when old ones fade. Her son Mark is everything that feminists deny is possible in a man: gentleness, love, understanding, concern. Most paradoxically of all, Mujid, the Iraqi whom Kate and her smart friends have never tried to understand, proves by a simple gift what being human is all about.

Thus Kate learns what many women have come to realize—that true feminine liberation is to be found outside the narrow inquisitorial orthodoxy of the gospel according to Steinem, Abzug, Millett and Greer. Unfortunately these are points that we must extrapolate from the novel, for Miss Drabble is content merely to imply (and the point will irritate many feminist readers) that the women's movement is basically flawed in some of its fundamental assumptions. One can hope that she will move on to deal with the implications she has raised in *The Middle Ground*.

Gilbert Sorrentino's *Aberration of Starlight*, on the other hand, is simply pretentious and hopeless, both as a piece of fiction and as a statement of any consequence. To call it a novel would be misleading, for Sorrentino obviously intended it to be an antinovel, in this case nothing more than a formless, incoherent and tasteless farrago about the sexual hangups and lecherous incompetence of a group of—"marginal" would be too kind a word—forgettable people living in a seedy New Jersey boarding house for about thirty-six hours in the summer of 1939. More simply, the story concerns the clumsy attempts of Tom Thebus, easily the dumbest salesman in lit-

erature since Willie Loman, to get Marie Recco, a neurotic divorcée, out of her clothes and into the back seat of his car. His attempts to seduce Marie are complicated by the presence of Billy (her cross-eyed son) and her goatish, foul-tempered and bumbling father, John McGrath.

Sorrentino's story is muddled right from the beginning (with four pedantic

*"Aberration of Starlight is a disciplined and achieved work, perhaps Sorrentino's best novel . . ."*

*—The New Republic*

epigraphs in three languages) to its whimpering close. By means of sexual fantasies, boring and slangy letters which tell little, interviews which go nowhere, disconnected fragments of dialogue, and footnotes (yes—footnotes!), the author describes, *ad nauseam*, the same meager episodes from four points of view. The rapid and confusing shifts in perspective, the dislocations in style and tone, the redundancy of plot may very well define the trendy antinovel, but they do nothing for the reader in search of a character.

After all this literary horseplay, there's really not much left. We're supposed to laugh at the neovirginal doubts of Marie as she fights off the hot-handed Tom, at John McGrath as he leers at the German widow, and even at poor ten-year-old Billy. But the laughter will not come. Rather than being funny, Sorrentino is merely being cruel at the expense of characters whose lives are as trivial as the popular songs, fifth-rate poetry and scruffy thoughts by which they measure out their days.

If a theme is to be found, it might be hidden in the most profound and stylistically striking sentence in the whole book: "Time wounds all heels," as Marie reminds her ex-husband. Perhaps Sorrentino intended the burden of the book to be carried by a final epigraph—"The meanest bloody thing in hell made this world"—but unfortunately this has a little relationship to what happens in the book as the title and the other epi-

graphs.

Thus *The Middle Ground* and *Aberration of Starlight* suffer from failed aspirations. Miss Drabble has aimed at a realistic portrayal of the dissatisfactions of an aging feminist, while Sorrentino attempts to satirize a group of pathetic misfits. But both realism and satire start with a human reference point, and if the

realist or the satirist cannot provide us with characters who engage our attention, evoke our sympathy or invite our anger, we will remain skeptical. For all the good intentions of both Miss Drabble and Mr. Sorrentino, the people of these two novels are marginal in their vitality as human beings and marginal in their usefulness to us. But as such they reflect the world in which their authors choose to set them. □

#### Human Concerns in America

*Parade*, the Sunday supplement to family newspapers, has a famed department, "Personality Parade," in which it furnishes America with momentous "facts," "opinions" and "truths"—according to its own credit line. We can read there:

Q. How much will it cost Michael Landon, 44, star of "Little House on the Prairie," if he dumps his wife for Cindy Clerico, 22?

A. After 18 years of marriage and four children, Landon—according to divorce lawyers—will have to settle at least \$5 million on his wife Lynn in community property, possibly much more.

Succinct, businesslike, crystal clear. No unanswered questions, no doubts, no hesitations. If you have \$5 million or more, dumping a wife does not pose any other problems. The free press in America won't let you go uninformed. □

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# Dreams Adulterated by Propaganda

Studs Terkel: *American Dreams Lost and Found*; Pantheon Books; New York.

by Mike Lavelle

A tape recorder, selective interviews and selective editing can be the ingredients of a pop sociology and a best-selling book. Studs Terkel is neither an author nor a sociopolitical sage, though he is celebrated as both by the liberal media eager for a reflection of their liberal views. Studs Terkel is a clever propagandist with a merchant's eye and a pseudo-Marxist feel for the *Zeitgeist*.

He is much aware of the media fondness for fads. In the first chapter of *American Dreams Lost and Found*, Terkel pays homage to the feminist disdain for the beauty contest. We meet a former beauty queen (Miss U.S.A. 1973) who, in retrospect, discovers that: "For many girls who enter the contest, it's part of the American Dream. It was never mine." She also compares herself to a table lamp and proclaims that she hates to curl her hair. *Ms.* magazine and Phil Donahue couldn't have said it better. If she had said, "Gee whiz. I loved it," she wouldn't have been in Terkel's book.

We meet a labor organizer who says of the mid-30's, "Here we had the richest country in the world, and we were hungry. At least people were not going hungry in the Soviet Union." In the mid-30's, Stalin's program of forced collectivization and slaughter of the kulaks (small farmers) caused a massive famine in the Soviet Union which was responsible for the deaths of approximately 15 million people. No questions, no history lesson from Studs Terkel.

We are introduced to an American Indian woman who connects the My Lai massacre of the Vietnam war with the

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Indian wars of the last century. Evil America catches it again. There is no mention by Studs Terkel of the genocide in Cambodia undertaken by the Khmer Rouge nor of the totalitarian hammer atomizing Vietnam nor the general conditions of present-day Southeast Asia. In fact, in this book of interviews collected and edited by Studs Terkel, Vietnam is hardly mentioned and only then with a left-wing perspective, and without even the slightest attempt at objectification, which could adjust the perspective in light of what has happened during the last five years.

Since 1975, thousands of Southeast Asian refugees have settled in America. It's a safe assumption that they could give some stunning insights into the American Dream and the totalitarian nightmare that they fled. There is not one Vietnamese, Cambodian or Laotian refugee who appears in this book. Can anyone imagine a book entitled *American Dreams Lost and Found* written between 1945 and 1950 without even one interview with a European émigré concerning his impressions of America and

Asia.

Studs Terkel does more than merely compile selective voyeuristic collections of interviews for his various books. He has been associated with the media for well over 30 years as an actor, music critic and currently as a talk-show host on WFMT in Chicago. I have seen him operate before a college audience and damn near convince them that the working class in America was storming the socialist gates to utopia. His books *Working*, *Division Street* and *American Dreams* were the backdrops—the expertise. The college kids, eager for contact with the "real world," would be satisfied with a counterfeit reality and even more so when their professors told them that this vox populi guru had his finger on the grassroots pulse of America. The Terkel patter is a mix of socialist Michael Harrington and circus showman P. T. Barnum. Abbie Hoffman, still scratching at his diaper rash, referred to Terkel as "My good buddy" on a Chicago ("Kup's Show") TV program.

I have listened to the Studs Terkel

"Terkel knows where to find America . . ."

—Commonweal

his memories of Nazi horrors? Such a book would have been ignored and/or silently scorned (rightly so) by book reviewers and by the mass media. But today, the media have shifted so far to the left that an Orwellian corruption of history by omission gets a further Orwellian twist by not even having that omission noted by fawning TV interviewers or newspeak book reviewers. Certainly a book of 470 pages with 101 interviews of Americans from all strata of society should have included at least one Southeast Asian refugee. It's amazing that the liberals who are constantly blathering about the "people's right to know" seem to feel that we don't need to know what "peace" has brought to Southeast

show on WFMT for a good part of the last ten years and I have rarely heard an original idea expressed by him or by any of his guests. The program is partially funded by public tax dollars, but the public is seldom represented. What is primarily heard is a constant repetition of the same theme: an exercise in how many ways to say socialism without naming it and how to preach national pacifism without mentioning the consequences of Auschwitz, Vorkuta, Cambodia, Munich and Yalta. No dissent to Terkel's view is ever heard; complaints are simply handled with the claim of "Studs's free and inquiring spirit."

Yet the politics of Terkel are very much out of sync with those of the group