

Guns, Laws, Rights

Alan M. Gottlieb: *The Rights of Gun Owners*; Caroline House Publishers; Aurora, Illinois.

The hard face of liberal irrationality shows itself nowhere more clearly than on the issue of gun control. Most liberals own no guns; indeed, they break out in a cold sweat at the mere sight of one, unless, of course, the offensive weapon be wielded by a ghetto child or a Third World revolutionary: then it becomes an accessory of sainthood. Liberal fantasies roam freely over the psychic landscape in an effort to stereotype gun owners. In the resulting fanciful construct, the gun owner becomes a beetle-browed redneck, seething with rage against feminists, blacks, Jews and homosexuals. To vent his rage he kills anything that moves, from fluffy-tailed rabbits to limpid-eyed deer. Besides, everyone knows he is impotent, for his attachment to gun barrels betrays a Freudian obsession with his own inadequacies. By such flights of fantasy the liberal transforms those threatening rednecks in pickup trucks into figures of liberal demonology.

It would be foolish to deny that "gun nuts" exist; we have all known that individual whose house resembles a well-stocked arsenal and whose unstable ego demands reassurance from a .357-magnum revolver. But do we disarm everyone in order to control these few? The Bill of Rights clearly guarantees the right to bear arms, and the desire to exercise this right is deeply embedded in the American character. Alan Gottlieb defends gun ownership, shows its firm foundation in law and

historic practice and reminds gun owners that responsibilities must always accompany rights. His state-by-state listing of gun-control ordinances conveys the message that gun owners must obey the laws of the land, even when they find those laws burdensome. In a curious turnabout, a good deal of lawlessness springs not from gun owners but, as Mr. Gottlieb shows, from the zealous agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, To-

bacco and Firearms who practice harassment and entrapment in their efforts to disarm the populace. It would be good to live in a society where criminals were lovable scoundrels and citizens felt no need to arm themselves in self-defense. But until that day arrives, we had best recognize the profound truth contained in a favorite slogan of gun lobbyists: "When Guns Are Outlawed, Only Outlaws Will Own Guns." □

IN FOCUS

Let's Discuss It

Samuel L. Blumenfeld: *Is Public Education Necessary?*; The Devin-Adair Co.; Old Greenwich, Connecticut.

by George M. Curtis III

This tempestuous, argumentative book raises more questions than it answers. Ostensibly the question posed in the title suggests a utilitarian treatment of a vexing contemporary issue. Not so. Blumenfeld concentrates his attention upon 18th- and 19th-century perpetrators of the monster we have come to know as public education. His title then is rhetorical, for a resoundingly negative answer is presumed throughout. In what appears to be a hastily crafted book, Blumenfeld, a staunch defender of private education, seeks to identify and analyze the people, ideas and ideologies that contributed to the victory of public education by 1850.

Blumenfeld's historical landscape is dreary, monopolized as it is with the likes of Robert

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Owen, Horace Mann, the rank and file of Unitarianism, the kindred spirits of the new communitarian movements and the champions of secular statism. From a late 20th-century perspective, it often comes as a depressing surprise to learn that there existed strong-minded reformers in the generation after the Founders who advocated the positive state and who viewed it as a social, political and cultural force to manipulate behavior so as to serve the ends of the state. Adding to Blumenfeld's distress is his discovery that most of this jaded group were, in actuality, the twisted progeny of New England Calvinism—albeit by then shorn of faith in either theocracy or education governed by Protestant churches or church leadership. Blumenfeld is offended by both the godlessness of Owen and the heresy of Unitarianism and finds in each a sinister and ominous portent for an increasingly secularized and intrusive state. All these disturbing trends seem to culminate in Horace Mann, the long-time secretary for the Massachusetts Board of Education and the intellectual

father of universal, state-operated education.

It is Blumenfeld's obvious purpose to discredit these people and their ideas, no matter how benign their individual views might have been. The shrill, angry tone that pervades this book becomes troublesome. It prompts one to wonder whether the intemperate presentation might cost the author his chance for a fair hearing from those he really seeks to persuade. Obviously those already committed to his views might find welcome reinforcement in his trumpetlike calls. But does Blumenfeld really believe that his insights and suggestions will win a lasting intellectual beachhead on those influential desert islands known as colleges of education? Perhaps Blumenfeld does not care about this audience, preferring instead to clear his lungs among friends. If so, one wonders why.

Ultimately his intemperance does neither his defenders nor his pertinent criticisms any real and lasting service. His excursion into American history is so patently adversarial that his hypotheses become vulnerable to any attack which utilizes contrary evidence. This intellectual strip-mining of the American past for the purpose of fueling the fires of contemporary argument is a comparatively simple job. Cutting and pasting bits and pieces from the lives and ideas of a select few and interspersing contemporary commentary makes for interesting grist for those political mills already dedicated to a particular mission. But it does little to change people's minds or to do real justice to the American past. The adage about truth being stranger than fiction applies to this book. When history is fodder, then a proportional equation goes into effect: the better the history, the more convincing the argument. The converse is also true. One hopes that Blumenfeld has not made a tomb

for the subject. The questions he raises about the relationship of the state and education transcend the treatment he provides; they deserve an articulate response based on the historical record, which is far more complex and compelling than the world he portrays. □

A Little Allegory

Toni Morrison: *Tar Baby*;
Alfred A. Knopf; New York.

by Jane Ball

Imagine if you will that American society could be reduced to an island microcosm. Imagine that blacks and whites with their racial prejudices, stereotypes and mutual misconceptions could be personified in six people: two white, four black. If you can imagine that, you have *Tar Baby*.

In Toni Morrison's latest novel, Valerian Street is a wealthy white man who presides over his Caribbean island estate with genteel despotism. He has a wife, Margaret; two black servants, Sidney and Ondine; and a beautiful young black protégée, Jadine, who is also the niece of his two servants. The island estate is a paradise: money has provided everything that nature neglected or forgot.

Then—in much the same way that the serpent infiltrated Eden—an intruder disturbs the apparent tranquility of Valerian Street's world, which ultimately shatters into dangerous shards of suspicion and dislike. The intruder is a young black man who calls himself, among other things, Son, and he breaks in upon this serene household like a burglar. His shocking appear-

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ance—long, dirty dreadlocks, unbathed body, bare feet and filthy clothes—terrifies Margaret, who discovers him hiding in her clothes closet. Yet it is soon discovered that, aside from having pilfered enough food to survive, Son has no nefarious designs on anything or anyone in the household. Once he is bathed, shaved and barbered, he is a very attractive, personable young man.

Son is attracted to Jadine and, to her annoyance, she finds she is attracted to him, too. Their eventual love affair takes them to New York, then to his hometown in Florida, then back to New York. Their differences in outlook gradually sever the fragile connection of their love for each other, and Jadine flees back to Valerian Street's Caribbean home.

The change in that household is striking and dreadful. Valerian, before so sure in his position, power and wealth, seems to have declined to near invalidism. The two once-confident servants are on edge, distrustful and waiting. Margaret, the wife, is eerily cheerily taking care of Valerian's needs, apparently happy that he at last has a need for her and that she has a new-found purpose in life. Jadine quickly leaves the island for Paris, hoping to find some semblance of the life she had before Son's appearance. Son, in the meantime, waits for her in New York until it becomes obvious that she will not be returning. Then he goes to the island, and the book ends with him looking for Jadine.

Toni Morrison tells this story with all the apparent delight of a wordsmith. She toys with imagery as if she were constructing a delicate filigree of words. There are times, though, when this style gets in the way of the story and seems merely cute instead of masterful. However, the strength of the novel is not so much in style and plot as it is in the remarkable treatise on



black-white, man-woman relationships couched in the book. Most obvious is the symbolic story of the race situation in America since the 1950's. Here is how the metaphor should be read: White-dominated American society was resting comfortably between World War I and World War II. Blacks (personified by Sidney and Ondine) stayed in their place for the most part and concerned themselves either with "earning" the respect of whites through diligent performance of menial tasks or with upward mobility through education (personified by Jadine). Whites (Valerian and Margaret) were tolerant and in some ways generous and often provided the security blacks believed they wanted.

However, the black militant, the new Negro (Son) burst upon this world in the late 50's and 60's, refusing to be like other blacks, wanting to be himself. The other, more conventional blacks didn't quite know how to handle him; he frightened some whites (Margaret) and fascinated others (Valerian). But he wanted neither integration nor separatism; he wanted simply to have what he wanted (Jadine). He couldn't relate to the aspirations of the "traditional" Negro and he couldn't (or wouldn't) change just to suit their expectations.

The encounter of these human elements of American society altered them all, except that the new Negro was still unable or

unwilling to understand or be accepted either by traditional blacks or by whites. He remains a maverick, searching for what he wants, not what others say he should want.

Examined in this light, *Tar Baby* is a neat little allegoric tale. Yet there is still more to the novel than searching eyes find just under the surface story. It is not a happy book because it is about traps laid for blacks and whites alike in this world dominated by the white man with his judgments about what life *must* be like. Toni Morrison tries to show that the strong who struggle against these constrictions struggle alone for the most part because black men don't understand black women, and white men don't even *try* to understand white women. □

Against Stereotypes

Jack Chen: *The Chinese of America*; Harper & Row; New York.

by D. P. Diffine

In *The Chinese of America*, Jack Chen, himself a Chinese immigrant, examines the experience of his countrymen who have migrated to the United States since the middle of the 19th century. He deals with the reception they received upon arrival, the exclusion acts that sought to stop the flow of immigration from the East, and the problems these people have faced in finding their place in American society.

The U.S. Immigration Commission began to record the arrival of Chinese as early as 1820,

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