

Having It Neither Way

Irwin Shaw: *Acceptable Losses*;
Arbor House; New York.

by Allen Brodsky

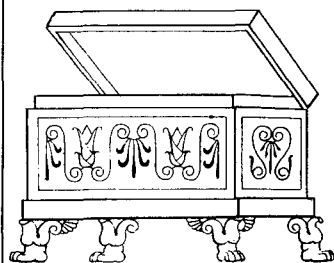
Irwin Shaw has caught himself in a bind. He wants his novels to have mass appeal, so he adorns his characters and plots with adolescent fantasies. Mild-mannered men are incredibly attractive to beautiful women and have affairs with one glamorous beauty after another. Shaw's heroes are often men who obtain sexual pleasures and material wealth to fantastic degrees with little, if any, exertion. The protagonist of *Acceptable Losses* is typical. He is married to a juvenile's dream of the perfect wife: a sexy woman who gladly takes care of all her husband's needs and who never hassles him, no matter how many other women he sleeps with.

But Shaw also wants his novels to express serious themes, so he presents a world that is often brutal and unfair. Although *Acceptable Losses* is set in contemporary peacetime America, the novel suggests that men are still in a state of war with one another. Apparently the point is that violence and anger are permanent parts of man's nature, so we need to find ways of living with them instead of pretending they don't exist. The novel implies that the wartime notion of acceptable losses holds for peacetime as well. In other words, one must struggle to succeed. This is less than an original theme, but it is a salutary one, and one that is expressed infrequently in public discourse. Television shows and much current fiction express the opposite

Mr. Brodsky writes from Philadelphia.

view: the world owes you everything you want, and more. The bind for Shaw is that the two sides of his work contradict each other. A hero who is half adolescent male fantasy and half representation of traditional American values (even though a simplistic representation) is incoherent. The fantasy side of Shaw's works contributes to their popularity, but it strips the force from his themes.

The reason for the cross-eyed quality of Shaw's fiction is his limited understanding of art, evidenced by some thoughts about Aristotle that improbably appear in *Acceptable Losses*. To gain some respite from his worries about a stranger's threats, the hero takes his wife out to see a film. They find the film deeply moving, and the protagonist is impressed by the director's ability to bring the audience to tears: "Catharsis through pity and terror, he thought." But the hero goes on to oppose the fiction with the reality of his life. That is, he carries a list of possible enemies, about which he thinks, "that was reality, not the formula for pre-Christian Greek playwrights; there was terror . . . in his pocket, but no pity and no catharsis." This is a false opposition. The *Poetics* argues that catharsis arises from the skillful representation of reality. Indeed, the example Shaw uses to illustrate his point, the Australian film *'Breaker' Morant*, is based on real people and real events. (Morant is an Australian hero.) Shaw does not realize that he can move his readers and gain a large



audience by writing well about reality, rather than by sneaking his view of life between insipid fantasies. In the best fiction, theme is effect deepened; after all, life has meaning. □

Nonsense for Nonsexists

Stories for Free Children;
Edited by Letty Cottin
Pogrebin; McGraw-Hill; New York.

"My first and last philosophy, that which I believe in with unbroken certainty, I learnt in the nursery," wrote G. K. Chesterton. "I generally learnt it from a nurse; that is, from the solemn and star-appointed priestess at once of democracy and tradition. The things I believed most then, the things I believe most now, are things called fairy tales." Nor is Chesterton the only one to understand that a culture's fairy tales and legends, despite their seemingly fabulous elements, provide a profound education for children in a folk wisdom accrued through generations and history. Bruno Bettelheim argues in *The Uses of Enchantment* that such stories provide an invaluable emotional and imaginative preparation for a world really inhabited by various sorts of trolls, ogres, giants, and witches—as well as by shining knights and beautiful princesses. The value of this folklore, Bettelheim warned, is greatly diminished, however, when "unpleasant" elements are expunged. Children must learn that giants *do* eat people and that dragons do more than singe the eyebrows of unsuccessful warriors. Unfortunately, the aim of *Ms. magazine* and its editor Ms. Pogrebin in compiling *Stories for Free Children* is precisely to shield children from a most

"unpleasant" feature of traditional children's stories, their pervasive "sexism." So instead of a daring prince rescuing a fair damsel, we have a very tall princess who "stands on her own two feet" as she looks down at a short, thin, and "elegant" prince with "large brown eyes." Instead of the couple who marry and live happily ever after, we have the model career woman who "does not need marriage" and works happily ever after. Gone are Paul Bunyan, Pecos Bill, and Davy Crockett, as we "bring sex-equity to our dreams of greatness" with prefab "new legends" about women sailors, baseball players, and suffragettes. Unlike the usual stories for juveniles celebrating the masculine-feminine polarity which has for centuries added tang and zest to our lives, this collection repudiates "the foolish business of dividing humanity into pinks and blues" with a story about "X," an androgynous child who grows up totally "fulfilled" by never being classified as boy or girl. While most juvenile literature helps the child find identity within the context of a social and historical heritage, these Polonius-like authors lecture the "free child" on the need to "be true to yourself" by resisting "other people's ideas of what a girl or boy is 'supposed' to be." A few selections—including one on handicapped children and one on the retarded—are sensitive and worthwhile, but most are merely echo chambers for the slogans of trendy feminism. These boring pieces command none of the imaginative power which informs *real* fairy tales, though they do share with certain fairyland witches the power to cast one spell: nothing could put a child to sleep faster. The end result is a caricature of both life and letters from which a child escapes to the trivial world of television—where at least people look as if they are divided into genders. (BC) □

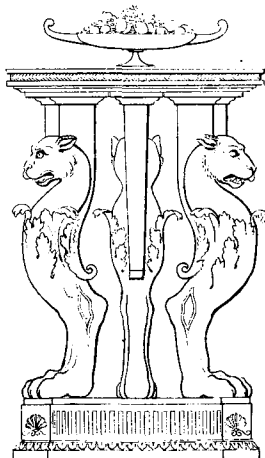
Semipseudo Cinema Verité and Benighted Viewers

William Rothman: *Hitchcock—The Murderous Gaze*; Harvard University Press; Cambridge, MA.

Donald Crafton: *Before Mickey: The Animated Film 1898-1928*; The MIT Press; Cambridge, MA.

by Stephen Macaulay

In all areas of artistic endeavor there is typically a distinct, synthetic separation between practitioners who are considered artists and those who are considered entertainers. In contemporary letters, for example, there are two novelists, Tom Robbins and Thomas Pynchon, who are, seemingly, of approximately the same age and who have, apparently, some of the same interests. Pynchon, typically reticent with regard to public events, wrote a laser-bright blurb for Robbins's *Even Cowgirls Get the Blues*, a novel that only an ideological soul mate could love. Robbins, perhaps best known for his trendy *Another Roadside Attraction*, is generously considered an entertainer; one of the most notable things about him is the fact that he is almost as popular as Pac-Man on college campuses. Pynchon, of course, is an artist, a statement that can be made with little fear of contradiction, supported as it is by the National Book Award Seal of Good Practice printed on his *Gravity's Rainbow* (a novel only a devotee of modern literature can read). Post-Picasso artists are all but invisible on the mainstream scene, with the exception of those like Judy Chicago, who pole-vault themselves out of the pages of art journals and into *Time* and *Newsweek* by using a shtick of controversy (those artists are but fleeting, though: who remembers the name of the one who let gallery visitors take shots at him with a handgun?). To explain the difference between the perceptions of the practitioners by the audience there's often the resort to phrenology, wherein measure-



ments are made of the region above the eyes and below the locks and the resultant area used to account for an individual's tastes. What such computations don't sum, however, is the fact that in earlier ages the artificial distinction between artist and entertainer wasn't as obvious—and perhaps not as self-fulfilling—as evidenced by Shakespeare, Dickens, and others whom the rabble and cognoscenti both enjoyed and admired. Modern sophisticates, those who can be cer-

tain to secure a copy of the *New York Times* even if they reside in Ann Arbor, like to think that there is an exquisite qualitative difference between themselves and the provincial rustics who read, say, the *Ann Arbor News*. Thus the differentiation between Robbins and Pynchon, musicians Philip Glass and Frank Zappa, and so on. This line of thought says that a palate which enjoys pâté de foie gras cannot abide the mere aroma of a McDonald's hamburger.

The late Alfred Hitchcock is a cultural anomaly. His career as a filmmaker spanned from the mid-20's, when Pabst, Lang, and Eisenstein were making films, to the late 70's, which saw the emergence of Lucas, Scorsese, and Forman. More impressive—and important—than chronological longevity is the fact that Hitchcock made films that one's mother can find satisfyingly suspenseful and to which even despisers of the auteur theory bow. Leopold Tyrmand once told me that he had participated in an early screening of *Psycho* in Warsaw; the attendees were the cream of the Polish film industry—directors, writers,

In the Mail

The Concentration Camp Conspiracy: A Second Pearl Harbor by Lillian Baker; AFHA Publications; Lawndale, CA. The author of *The Collector's Encyclopedia of Hatpins and Hatpin Holders* attempts to make the point that some Japanese-American claims stemming from World War II forced relocation are outlandish.

The Constitutional Polity: Essays on the Founding Principles of American Politics edited by Sidney A. Pearson, Jr.; University Press of America; Washington, DC. Not only do the principles of the Founding Fathers get interpreted, but so too do the interpretations of commentators as diverse as William Howard Taft and Reinhold Niebuhr.

Spirituality and Human Emotion by Robert C. Roberts; Wm. B. Eerdmans; Grand Rapids, MI. For some, philosophy and Christianity are poles apart. We aren't among them. Nor is the author, as evidenced by his synthesis.

Renaissance (Vol. XXXV, No. 2) edited by Joseph Schwartz; Marquette University Press; Milwaukee, WI. A stately but not plump issue devoted to Dublin's almost-favorite son, marking his centenary. A worthy portrait.

Father Divine and the Struggle for Racial Equality by Robert Weisbrot; University of Illinois Press; Champaign, IL. Although his surname may have been a fabrication, for many in the ghettos it couldn't have been closer to the truth. □