

## COMMENDABLES

### Skewering Schlesinger

**Thomas B. Silver: *Coolidge and the Historians***; Carolina Academic Press; Durham, NC.

Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. is widely regarded as one of America's leading historians, scholars, and writers. The author of several books and a frequent contributor to esteemed highbrow publications, he has received the Bancroft Award and the Pulitzer Prize for his achievements. However, if Thomas B. Silver's *Coolidge and the Historians* enjoys the wide circulation it richly deserves, his acclaim will plummet dramatically. Written to defend Calvin Coolidge and his successor, Herbert Hoover, against the charges leveled at them by regnant historians, this valuable study is a telling indictment of the tendentiousness and patent dishonesty to which Professor Schlesinger and his academic epigones stooped in order to remake the past into a support for left-liberal dogmas. The truth about America's 30th President—that he was an industrious and profound statesman, a cultivated interpreter of Dante and Cicero, and a decisive leader of broad vision and unimpeachable moral character—simply will not do, since Coolidge was a conservative Republican who presided over a period of stability and prosperity. And so, with encouragement and help from lesser savants, the sage from Harvard contrived a suitable myth: Coolidge the unresourceful and indolent pawn of rapacious businessmen. But the myth is as phony as the historiography which created it. With wit barbed with sarcasm,

Dr. Silver catches Dr. Schlesinger mendaciously lifting snatches of quotes out of context, obscuring his sources, ignoring or distorting pertinent evidence, and consistently violating his own professed principles. In an essay on the Civil War, Schlesinger opined: "We must judge the men of the past with the same forbearance and charity which we hope the future will apply toward us." It is an ironically appropriate epitaph for his own reputation. (BC) □

### West of Belle Isle

**Loren D. Estleman: *The Glass Highway***; Houghton Mifflin; Boston.

On the bandstand a black pianist with a weightlifter's torso was tearing chords out of the keyboard in long, ragged strips while his partners on horn and bass stood by nodding and grunting behind dark glasses. It sounded to me like someone kicking a box of Lincoln Logs downstairs, but then I'm a Fats Waller man.

There are few like Amos Walker, the speaker of those

lines, few who even know that Fats Waller existed, to say nothing of what he did. This is because there are few writers like Loren D. Estleman. Estleman is a pro. We hasten to add that by *pro* we mean professional, not prostitute. Some in certain circles that Estleman writes about in *The Glass Highway* would naturally assume the second meaning. Although he is just 30, Estleman is the author of 13 books, both Westerns and mysteries. Some who put pen to paper would rather pledge their first-born than even admit to thinking about writing in those genres. But Estleman has no need to feel any embarrassment: he is making a living through the books. More importantly, they are good. He is a member of a rare avant-garde: he writes normal books. What's more, he seems to care about what he is doing. For example, two of his earlier novels have Sherlock Holmes as the protagonist; one pits Holmes against Bram Stoker's (not Hollywood's) Dracula and the other features a confrontation with Mr. Hyde (Stevenson's). Estleman doesn't simply act as a copycat; he has internalized the original texts so well that his productions have no rough edges—and it's hard to find the seams.

For *The Glass Highway* and the other three Amos Walker mysteries Estleman, it seems, went to the master of the genre: Raymond Chandler. Walker isn't exactly Marlowe (the original, not Bogart's), but they do share a cadence and an attitude. Whereas Marlowe cruised the streets

that held platinum blondes looking for a role, mugs gone west, and needle-pushing physicians, Walker's turf is Detroit. If anything, the Motor City of today is less appealing than the L.A. Chandler delineated. Estleman didn't create his city with a visitor's guide from Cobo Hall and a road map; he knows it. Intimately. There is passion under Walker's cynicism; both are born of the place. Detroit was once known for its craftsmen, its skilled workers. Estleman, although a resident of a town west of the city, can still be considered part of Motown's artisanal tradition. □

### Books & the Crisis of Culture

**Peter Mann: *From Author to Reader: A Social Study of Books***; Routledge & Kegan Paul; Boston.

When it comes to the subject of sociology and books, it seems that Marxists of one breed or another are in the vanguard, touting obfuscating theories that are supposed to "demystify" things (i.e., lay bare the dominant bourgeois ideology that creates the superstructure raised over the unequal economic base—whew!). The gang of three from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research—Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse—have the monopoly at present. Their observations on "the culture industry," which sometimes goes by an alias, "the consciousness industry," are marketable commodities in journals where such things are of value. There was a slight devaluation a few years back, but then Walter Benjamin was "rediscovered," and since he and Adorno were pals...

Peter Mann's book is like a fresh wind blowing through a fetid cheese factory. Mann truly reveals things as he points out



how little is actually known about the relationships between authors and books and books and readers. Why does an author write a particular book? Is it because he has something to say; if so, does he think that anybody is inclined to listen? Or does the author look at book-writing as an occupation; if so, then would he be inclined to write anything but a grocery-store romance or a diet book, both types of best-sellers? Why does a reader select a particular book from (a) all of the available categories and (b) from the specific category in which he is interested? (A note about readers is in order: there are precious few of them. Mann indicates that in England "only about half the population uses bookstores at all" and that libraries in that country aren't deluged by anxious readers—and this is in a society "where 'book learning' still carries high prestige and affords high social status.") Mann raises these and several other questions and provides many tentative answers. The fact that there can be so many answers undermines the certainty of many of the statements made by the Frankfurt gang.

One conclusion that Mann presents should be of signal concern to all who support cultural standards that aren't defined by TV sitcoms. Mann states that "interest in, and readership of, the modern literary novel is restricted to a very small minority of the population for whom novel reading is a specialized interest." Not only are there fewer readers, but those who still read aren't reading what is conventionally considered "literature." Although art is elitist, it is also true that novels are, in a sense, commodities. Authors who may be best able to interpret and define aspects of this world, on which, we are often told, nothing can be "known," may find themselves unable to communicate their message: there would be no

room on the presses for what may be of enduring value. This is not to suggest that entertaining books be curtailed; a world wherein only Kafka could be read would be truly Kafkaesque. It is to recommend that the works by those whom we have elsewhere designated *dwarfs* be shown to be the vapid, meaningless productions that they are,

which would, perhaps, keep them from being the "blockbusters" that they do not deserve to be. Those modern texts that express the idea that there still exist valid standards and concepts that can be known and which should be affirmed and promulgated would then be more readily able to make it through the welter on the shelves. □

## IN FOCUS

### Yeah, Yeah, Yeah

**Peter Brown and Steven Gaines: *The Love You Make: An Insider's Story of The Beatles*; McGraw-Hill; New York.**

by Brian Murray

At first, nobody thought The Beatles would last. True, throughout the winter and spring of 1964, every department store in the Western world was amply stocked with the icons of Beatlemania—Beatle wigs and Beatle dolls and Beatle T-shirts and Beatle beach balls. But since the late 1950's, many a rock'n'roll act had been as widely adored as the hula hoop and lasted about as long. Elvis Presley was still making millions even as the folk singers, the surf-music specialists, and the Brylcreemed crooners from South Philadelphia came and, within a year, went; but then Presley was, well, Presley. How could these "mop-topped" Englishmen ever be as big as Presley?

Of course, for the next six years, The Beatles did remain the most popular blokes in the whole global village. And pack-

aging helped—especially in the beginning. When Brian Epstein discovered the group back in 1961, they were still playing in seedy beat clubs, still wearing black leather jackets and rolled-up blue jeans. Sensing that a successful pop group must possess what he called "classless" appeal, Epstein shrewdly put The Beatles in Pierre Cardin suits and taught



them how to bow. He let them keep—even play up—their slangy Liverpool accents, but he also let it be known that John Lennon read James Joyce, and that Paul McCartney knew a Picasso when he saw one.

But packaging minus talent equals Fabian. And The Beatles, mirabile dictu, did have talent. In the beginning, they appeared live

on the Ed Sullivan Show and proved to 70 million transfixed souls that they could perform their own upbeat compositions with both skill and hammy enthusiasm. In the years that followed, they wrote and recorded such fetchingly melodic songs as "Yesterday" and "Michelle" and "Eleanor Rigby"—songs that were quickly covered by string orchestras and chamber ensembles; by all-male choirs and all-girl accordion bands. In 1967 they released the meticulously multi-tracked and overdubbed *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*—a pioneering "concept" album which sold millions of copies, even as some highbrow critics likened its lyrics to those of T. S. Eliot, and found in its musical lyricism the spirit of Schumann. In essence, then, The Beatles wound up doing for rock what Benny Goodman and Duke Ellington, three decades earlier, had done for jazz: they made it respectable in certain circles.

As the turbulent 60's progressed, The Beatles' supramusical status increased. Wherever they went, the youth of Europe and America eventually followed. When "The Fab Four" suddenly adopted gaudy hippie-type garb, they created a mass market for bell-bottom trousers, "love beads," and wide, flower-patterned ties. When they announced their allegiance to the giggling swami, the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, they sparked a pop-mysticism craze that continued well into the 70's. And when they spoke flippantly of the alleged therapeutic and creative benefits of LSD, they greatly abetted the rise of psychedelamania and thus, alas, the formation of the drug culture that surrounds us still.

And yet, through it all, The Beatles themselves remained among the most private of public men. They lived behind gates on huge estates in suburban London's "stockbroker's belt" and granted few interviews. From

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