

belief perhaps more central to their lives than any other. Surely, their ideal of family partook of myth . . . Nonetheless, Virginians often found that the ideal of the perfect family was in fact the image of their own family.

The Americans so engaged joined with other inhabitants of the North Atlantic world "in refashioning the family for the modern age." Men gave more attention to their wives and

children. The new importance attached to the domestic sphere "necessarily enhanced the position of women." The distinctive American family—that institution which so impressed Alexis de Tocqueville during the 1830's—had been born.

In an age which sometimes rhapsodizes over the "strength" of "single parent," "communal," and "gay" families, this little volume reminds us just how far we have fallen. (AC) □

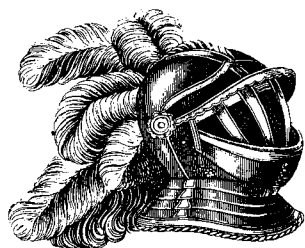
IN FOCUS

Aloof and Awry

George H. Douglas: *Edmund Wilson's America*; The University Press of Kentucky, Lexington, KY.

Henry David Thoreau went to Walden Pond, so he told the world, to get away from people. But the reader of *Walden* may wonder with James Russell Lowell if Thoreau is not just a poseur who actually wants "a seclusion which keeps him in the public eye." That is, Thoreau desired not only to be apart from and above his fellow Americans, but he also wished to enjoy their admiration and attention for his separateness. "There is something delightfully absurd," observed Lowell, "in six volumes addressed to a world of such 'vulgar fellows' as Thoreau affirmed his fellowmen to be."

Like Thoreau, Edmund Wilson played the part of a superior loner with a large audience. Though he spent his writing career "interested in and involved with the United States," he did so entirely as an individual, not as part of a religious, philosophic, or political community. As the title of George H. Douglas's study suggests, it was always Edmund Wil-



son's America, not America's Edmund Wilson. As Dr. Douglas notes, Wilson's criticism and fiction evinced a "highly idiosyncratic personality, always somewhat estranged from his native land, somewhat out of joint with it." At times, Wilson's personal independence afforded him a vantage point from which he offered eminently sane perceptions, as when he inveighed in *The Fruits of the MLA* against the pedantic absurdities of literary academicians. But too often, Wilson's aloofness prevented him from understanding his subjects as well as those Americans whom he presumed to lecture on them. Even Dr. Douglas, whose evaluation of Wilson seems overgenerous, admits that in his infatuation with Marxism during the 1930's, Wilson "had rather too easily given up on the

American system." Though Wilson outgrew this foolish infatuation, his attitude toward his own country and countrymen never did mature into even an average sense of national commitment or patriotism. For almost 10 years he filed no income tax returns and in his introduction to *Patriotic Gore*, published only 10 years before his death, he depicted America as just as oppressive to its citizens and to other lands as is the Soviet Union. Even if talented, as Wilson was, when a writer reaches such ludicrous conclusions because of self-imposed isolation, he ought to keep them to himself—or share them only with the wild loons described in *Walden*. (BC) □

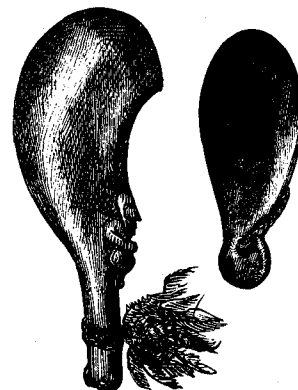
Mirror, Mirror

Nora Johnson: *The Two Of Us*; Simon and Schuster, New York.

Individuality seems to be the key word today, and growing up in a world where no one is willing to conform can be a most difficult task. Growing up as identical twins in this "I gotta be me" world can cause deep-seated feelings of contempt that may mar forever the relationship of such matched sets of bookends.

From the moment of birth identical twins are treated only slightly kinder than circus freaks by otherwise well-meaning persons. They are immediately labeled "the twins" by those who can tell no difference between the two children and do not want to be embarrassed by calling one by the other's name. The parents of the twins, however, are the greatest participants in the attempt to make two persons into one by insisting on calling the children by poetically rhyming names, dressing them like matching pandas, insisting that they be enrolled in the same classes upon entering school,

and encouraging them to share the same circle of friends. To



parents, grandparents, and the general populace, everything about the twins is "cute." For the twin, however, this condition of being so like another person, seeing yourself at all times without benefit of a mirror, being referred to and spoken to as a unit, basically treated as though joined to your sibling at the hip, is not fun at all. On occasion, it can be traumatic.

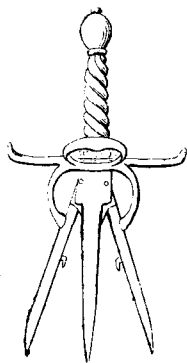
In *The Two Of Us*, Nora Johnson does an exemplary job of showing the effects that these very tactics can have on twins. She takes the relationship of Cassie and Celia Armstrong from early childhood to late adulthood and shows the extremes that they go to to be as "unlike" as possible. Though a work of fiction, many twins will see themselves in the pages of Ms. Johnson's book; hopefully, so will their parents. (KW) □

Writing at the Bar

Allen Drury: *Decision*; Doubleday, New York.

Literature—structural studies and attendant quibbles notwithstanding—is the almost-miraculous result of a synergistic confluence of form and content. Those works that are produced

with form and only form in mind are shells—perhaps striking, but still hollow. When content is paramount, propaganda and/or paltry storytelling is the result. Allen Drury hit the mark with *Advise and Consent*, his 1960 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, though, Mr. Drury has, it seems, eschewed formal considerations for the sake of making his point. Admittedly, what he has to declaim is laudable: the criminal justice system in America, the gears of which grind more slowly than those in hell, requires the judicious application of lubrication if it is to continue to function in the contemporary polity. However, the means through which he states this has more in common with a TV miniseries than with even the most rudimentary form of literature. □



Beneficent Bondage

Christine Sutherland: *The Princess of Siberia: The Story of Maria Volkonsky and the December Exiles*;

Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York.

In the years since the announcement of the institutionalized "sexual revolution," it has become increasingly clear that the individual, unfettered rutter is an absurd and meaningless creature. Because meaning inheres only in loyalties, commitments, *bonds*, "liberation" is

empty when it takes the sundering of bonds as its self-sufficient end and not as the necessary preparation to the creation of voluntary but deeper bonds. Such liberation can bring no solace to the soul—though it may provide AIDS for the body. Until fairly recently, most people understood this well enough to sacrifice willingly a large portion of their liberty in order to create, "for better or for worse," the human meanings possible only within "the holy bonds of matrimony." Maria Volkonsky, the woman whose life Christine Sutherland competently narrates in *The Princess of Siberia*, had only been married a year when her husband was sent to prison in Siberia for his part in the unsuccessful Decembrist revolt against the czar in 1825. Guided by "marital loyalty, love, and a feeling of moral obligation," Maria chose to join her spouse in Siberia. Life in that bleak setting was harsh and difficult, devoid of the luxuries Maria had grown accustomed to as a pampered Russian aristocrat. But her willingness to honor her marriage vows by enduring such privation freed her husband from despair and probably from premature death. Malibu swingers may be more liberated than this woman, but their existence adds up to far less. (BC) □

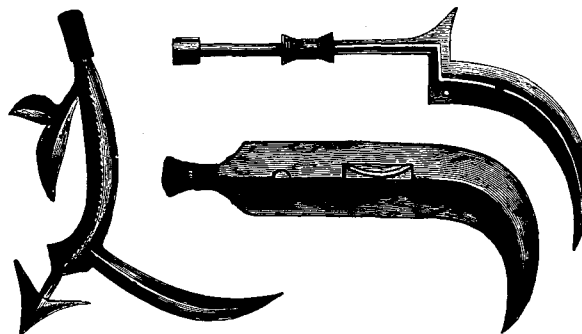
Perceptibles

I. Grekova: *Russian Women: Two Stories*; Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich; New York.

Judy Blume: *Smart Women*; G. P. Putnam's Sons; New York.

During the "sexual revolution" in Russia in the 1920's, writer Alexandra Kollontai acquired notoriety for her "glass

of water" theory, according to which "love was but [a] sexual urge akin to thirst, with the quenching of either a trivial enough matter." This theory was snatched by American intellectuals who were smitten by their



pro communist ardors; some of its consequences can be discerned in epidemic proportions in the behavioral reality in this country today. Ms. Grekova, in her short stories about Russian women, makes it clear what happened to Ms. Kollontai's theory in the Soviet Union of today. She has no apparent need to use sex as a glass to hold her readers' attention and shows that Russian women—even those who are professionally successful—place as their first priority traditional wifely roles: they treat their men not only with respect, but with outright deference, and practice unquestioned obedience and fidelity. If they were not Russian, Soviet, and communist, *Ms. Magazine* would declare them genocidal maniacs and humanity's Public Enemy No. 1.

If, on the other hand, characters like those in Judy Blume's latest novel are to be believed, *all* American women have cast conventional mores—marriage, husband, children, and home—out to sea in an uncorked bottle. Actually, she talks about herself only, unable to transcend her own poky self-cum-experience—which makes her "novel" a non-novel. Ms. Blume sips at a cocktail consisting of Perrier and

pollutants as she moves her characters from hot tubs to steamy bedrooms. This author, best known for her children's stories, can only portray adults as animated reproductory organs whose greatest need is to find

anyone with the required equipment for a quick roll in a king-size waterbed. Such efforts deserve to be submerged. (KW) □

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Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*; University of Minnesota Press; Minneapolis.

When the book emerged from the bellows of the Viking Press in 1977, *The New Republic* remarked, "*Anti-Oedipus*, more than any other intersection of Marx and Freud, renders palpable the metaphor of the unconscious as a worker, and does it in a brilliant, appropriately nutty way." Candy bars are appropriately nutty, not books inflated with a preface by the likes of M. Michel Foucault—or so we always thought. A look into the translated Gallic babble results, however, in a recognition that texts can be *beyond nutty*. Lunacy is one of the subjects of the two literary au courant demisavants; given their proximity to the subject and the evidence in *Anti-Oedipus*, we suspect that it's catching. □