



## American Idol by Fred Chappell

"Eldorado banal de tous les vieux garçons."

—Charles Baudelaire

Russell Banks: *Continental Drift*; Harper & Row; New York.

The last sentence in Russell Banks's magnificent novel is surprising in its inevitability: "Go, my book, and help destroy the world as it is." Here is a sentence to conclude a politically radical novel, a story of socially revolutionary purpose. But there is no hint in *Continental Drift* about the personal politics of its author; the imperatives of this book are not political but ethical.

This final sentence actually points up the highly traditional nature of Banks's novel. It is such a novel as a contemporary Joseph Conrad might write, or a Dreiser or a Dickens. It is a brilliantly detailed, minute but solid, observation of two individual destinies which inform and reflect the contrasting milieus in which they are lived. Banks's moral purposes are as evident and as heartfelt as Tolstoy's, his artistry not much less stunning.

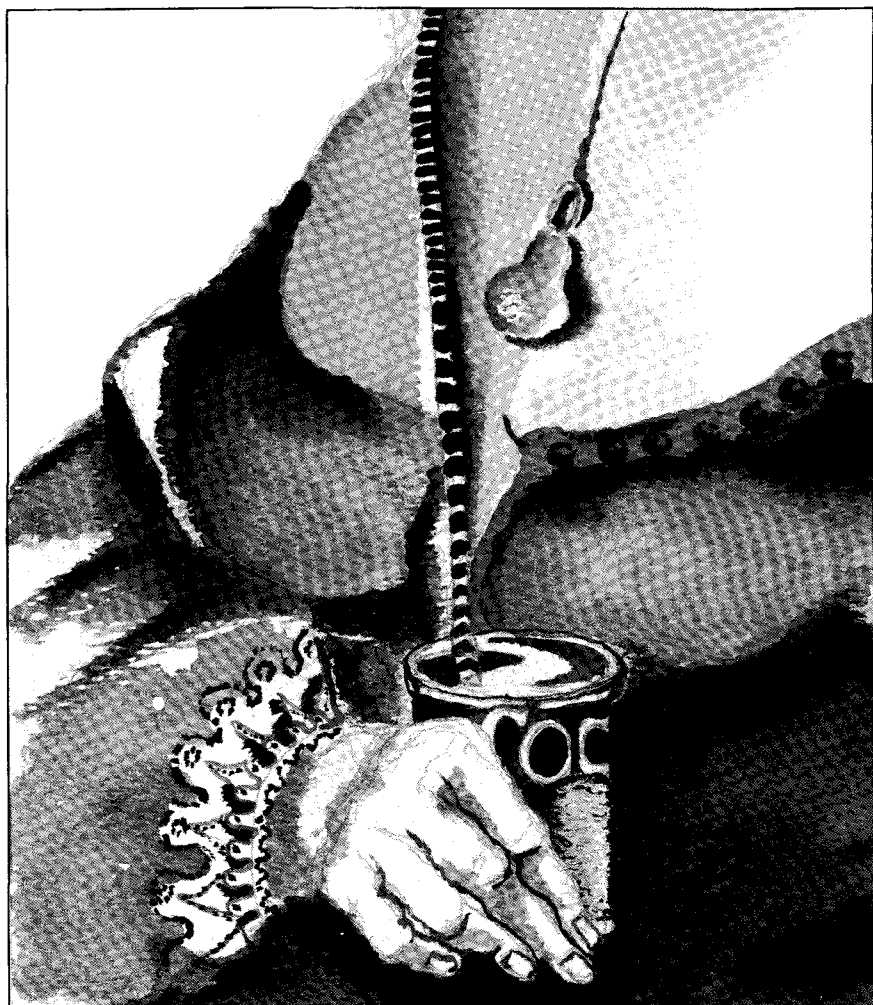
*Continental Drift* is a story of independent but parallel odysseys which finally intersect with terrifying result. One protagonist is Robert Dubois, a 31-year-old oil-burner repairman who lives in New England. He is dissatisfied with his lot in much the same way that Dreiser's Clyde Griffiths was dissatisfied. He gives up his dull career and moves to Florida to take a job as a clerk in his brother's liquor store. But for Dubois Florida is not merely a place on the map; Florida represents freedom, opportunity, fresh begin-

nings, the fabled golden land of light.

Florida is for Dubois the same ineffable El Dorado that "America" is for Vanise Dorsinville. Vanise is a young Haitian mother determined to flee the cruelties and poverty of her island and to transport her baby and young male cousin to the gleaming shores of Miami. The vicissitudes she endures in trying to do so are nightmarish but believable.

That is a major point about *Continental Drift*; it is convincing. No one who has read Banks's brilliant *Trailer-park* will be surprised at his grasp of significant detail, his wide knowledge of the situations of ordinary life. His expertise about mortgages, liens, automobiles, jobs, wages, and so forth will equal that of any of the great masters of naturalism about their chosen subjects. But allegiance to literary naturalism is now insufficient to render a believable account of modern society.

The phantasmagoric contemporary world is too vivid, too towering, to be faithfully represented by accumulation of detail or by patiently plotted trage-



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dy. Both these achievements are finely present in *Continental Drift*; they are, in fact, the backbone of the novel. But at bottom Banks's understanding of our situation is that of the surrealist, the allegorical fantasist. This is the kind of understanding a novelist needs in order to *take for granted* the impossible injustices, the impossible terrors, that characterize our present time on earth.

Banks's understanding is unsparing and generously given. As a novelist, he is truly wise and in *Continental Drift* has chosen an omniscient point of view which firmly accommodates his insights. Here, for example, is an introductory glimpse of Jimmy Grabow, a very minor character:

He smiled often, talked rapidly and volubly and enjoyed touching people while he rattled away at them, enjoyed putting his hands on whomever he talked to, his arms around shoulders, his hands on cheeks, arms, chests, so that most people, when they left the shop, reached for their wallets, and finding them, wondered what Grabow had taken from them, for always, after talking with Grabow, one felt somehow he'd managed to take away something that wasn't rightfully his.

The kind of interpretation this passage exhibits is common in the novel, and it is observable even from this one sentence that Banks's commentary is not ironic in purpose; it intends straightforwardly to inform and illuminate. In fact, apart from that inherent in the plot, there is little irony in the book. Banks faces all his material—which is ripe for ironic treatment—head on. He even judges his characters: Vanise Dorsinville, whose story is grindingly sordid in some respects, is a heroic figure; Robert Dubois is a decent man who haplessly commits multiple murders.

In Aeschylus' phrase, Helen of Troy was "destroyer of men, destroyer of cities." In *Continental Drift*, it is the idea of Golden America which takes on this destructive power, leading the strong and hopeless, as well as the weak and wistful, to inexorable calamity. Yet the novel is not utterly anti-

In the forthcoming issue of *Chronicles of Culture*:

## ***Marxism: A Dying God***

"Some Westerners apparently reject any distinction between authoritarianism and totalitarianism, and it is hard to know what to say to them. At a minimum, they are stuck with the untenable position of refusing to allow that Solzhenitsyn is an antitotalitarian, despite the whole record of his life and works. They also must come to terms with the whole historical record of regimes which did not seek to control every aspect of a citizen's life—social, cultural, personal—which allowed freedoms of speech, thought, travel, occupation, academic pursuit, religious belief and practice. They are forced to say that all leaders not democratically elected are tyrants."

—from "Solzhenitsyn and Democracy"  
by Edward E. Ericson Jr.

ALSO

Paul Hollander lays bare the contradictions  
of Marxist theory and practice

Michael Warder reopens the case of Arkady Shevchenko

J. Enoch Powell explores the experience of ancient Christians

idealistic. Vanise Dorsinville is not entirely mistaken in her dream of freedom in the United States. Dubois is mistaken, partly about the nature of his native land, mostly about the nature of freedom itself. Freedom, Banks gives us to know, is not merely the opportunity to escape boredom and to ascend the ladder of upward mobility. It is a way of feeling and thinking so enormous, so pervasive, that we who live inside its easy atmosphere can rarely make out its character.

Simple enough to see that Dubois is deceived by a false idol, and one piece of irony that Banks does engage in is to contrast Dubois' deceived unreligious faith against the Haitian woman's steadfast ardent belief in *voudon* (what you and I call "voodoo"). So far as I know, only Jorge Amado has ever before treated this important religion seriously in literature, and Banks in doing so is surely attacking his audience's uninformed prejudices. Yet it is not enough to treat it seriously; it must also be comprehensible and convinc-

ing. Banks's knowledge in this matter seems as careful and detailed as his knowledge of the mores of Florida. The *voudon* scenes are crucial, and he has brought them off.

*Continental Drift* is a grand book, one of the very best novels of recent times. Banks has appealed to the sophisticated reader in such a way as to disarm his sophistication, and if there are any unsophisticated readers still at large upon the planet, they must be breathlessly absorbed by the book. For it is an absorbing novel; the anticipated intersection of destinies doesn't even begin to take place until page 283 of 366, but one never feels impatient or put upon. The suspense is unforced, but it is unrelenting.

And that is one of the best satisfactions of *Continental Drift*, our unobtrusive awareness that the author always knows exactly what he is doing. There are few of even our best contemporary writers to whom we give this confidence.

cc

# Grand Designs *by John Lukacs*

*"Liberty, the daughter of oppression, after having brought forth several fair children, as Riches, Arts, Learning, Trade, and many others, was at last delivered of her youngest daughter, called FACTION."*

—Jonathan Swift

Richard H. Pells: *The Liberal Mind in a Conservative Age: American Intellectuals in the 1940s and 1950s*; Harper & Row; New York; \$18.95.

There are many things wrong with this book, beginning with its title. The Liberal Mind is not what this book is about. (Nor were the 1940's and 1950's really a Conservative Age—but let this pass.) It is about the intellection of the New York left. Liberality of mind is a desirable condition—yes, also (and perhaps especially) for political conservatives. It is an overall desideratum and not a term properly applicable to the designation of specific conventicles of intellectuals. Professor Pells's book is about the closely circumscribed and often cramped and airless circle of the latter. There were all kinds of men and women among them, good and bad, but in the 1940's and 1950's their influence on the course of the Republic and on the life of its people was nonexistent. Pells argues that their ideas *were* important; that, as is the case with certain writers, thinkers, artists, etc., they were the antennae of the race; that their arguments were forerunners of what would happen later. "In effect, the intellectual skirmishes which took place between 1955 and 1960 were rehearsals for the full-dress battles that continued to convulse the nation long after the age of Stalin, Truman, and Eisenhower had given way to Vietnam, Watergate, and a renewed Cold War." Not at all: those intellectual skirmishes were drearily limited; they meant nothing.

Yes, Ideas Have Consequences (the

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title of Richard Weaver's early conservative book); but in different ways. Since 1960 an American meritocracy began to emerge, so that all kinds of Presidents became dependent, at least partly, on academics who had crawled and kicked and chewed their way to the top by means of publicity. Also, the significant event in American intellectual—or, rather, ideological—history in the 1950's was the emergence of what goes under the name of "conservatism." About this Pells writes nothing. Yet, say what you will, and, whatever their stylistic and intellectual merits, since 1955 the influence of *National Review* rose, while that of *Partisan Review* declined. I do not berate Professor Pells for not writing about Bill Buckley—after all, that was not his self-defined task—but there is not a word in this book about Weaver, Tate, Kirk, and Canon Bernard Iddings (not Daniel) Bell, of the early and perhaps neo-classical conservatives. Pells's book is about the world of New York intellectuals. Yet he should have heeded Orwell who once wrote that intellectuals live in a world of ideas and have little contact with reality.

He does not mention Edmund Wilson's *To the Finland Station* either, whereby hangs a tale—or, rather, this paragraph. For 30 years *To the Finland Station* was the biblical exegesis of American intellectuals for the understanding of Communism. Yet *To the Finland Station* was hopelessly—and I mean hopelessly—wrong. To understand the reality of the Soviet Union by stringing an ideological disquisition through the writings of Michelet, Hegel, Marx, Plekhanov, etc., is like writing a history of the French Revolution by discussing Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau and ending up with Mirabeau.

Pells spends much time and enormous respect on the "seminal" books of Hannah Arendt, Richard Hofstad-

ter, John Kenneth Galbraith. He does not see their enormous shortcomings, even now. These shortcomings were due to the fact—and it is a fact—that their authors were opportunistic and ephemeral. Their writings and their view of history *were* opportune, because they projected the past and the future from their view of the present, from what then *seemed* to be going on. Hannah Arendt's *The Origins of Totalitarianism* ("a towering figure," "the political masterpiece of the postwar era") was a typical example of that. Having—somewhat belatedly—recognized that Stalin's regime was totalitarian and anti-Semitic, resembling in part (but only in part) Hitler's, she sat down to write a book *circa* 1949 with three theses: first, that anti-Semitism is the inevitable ingredient of every totalitarian regime (not true: Robespierre? Lenin? Castro?); second, that a totalitarian regime inevitably becomes more and more totalitarian as time goes on (not true: was Khrushchev more totalitarian than Stalin?); third, that a popular revolt against a totalitarian regime is impossible. (Soon after the publication of her book came the East German and Polish and Hungarian revolts—with no effect on her reputation, of course.)

According to Pells, Hofstadter's *The Age of Reform* was another "masterpiece"; it "remains a classic indictment of American liberalism." Not at all: Hofstadter was a frightened American liberal professor. His book was his frightened reaction to McCarthyism, in which Hofstadter rightly recognized elements of American populism (something that had been recognized by Canon Bell, Peter Viereck, and even by this writer years before, but no matter). But Pells is quite wrong in writing that Hofstadter's book was an indictment of Populists and Progressives. No: *The Age of Reform* deals only with the former, not the latter—the difference between the two being that the Populists became national socialists, while the Progressives remained wedded to an American version of internationalism, that is, to a form of international socialism. Also, while some of the Populists became anti-intellectual, the Progressives were proponents of intellectualism in every way. Hofstadter, the author of *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*