

So are his suspenders, socks, and glass frames. There is no resemblance to, say, an Elton John.

Keillor's preshow warm-up includes comments that, per Economics 101, the value of the tickets is far greater than the price since they are in short supply. All remaining shows are sold out. Of course, the use value is higher than either. Keillor is not above adding light to his sweetness. He knows the audience will understand his reference to the college course: They, or their children, have endured it themselves.

The Everly Brothers: Smoky harmonies speak of bourbon on the veranda, not wine coolers on the beach *à la* Jan and Dean, nor port in a bag in a subway, as consumed by Simon and Garfunkel.

Keillor taps a foot to keep time. Normally it's his right, but he's ambidextrous. Curiously, his feet are tuned to some internal rhythm that has nothing to do with the beat of the song.

Taj Mahal looks like Famous Amos of chocolate-chip cookie fame. He sings "Paradise" and "Everybody Is Somebody." What happened to the "Walking Blues"?

Where else would Phil and Don sing backup for Taj?

Analog watches are worn in Lake Wobegon. There's no on-the-hour—and off-the-hour—beeping.

Interest dwindles as a quartet from Milwaukee plays a medley of Norwegian favorites. It isn't their fault. Things pick up as a couple dressed in, presumably, authentic ethnic costumes come out and do a brisk polka. It must be a big hit for American Public Radio lovers. The entire session is mercifully brief. Yet the night wouldn't be complete without a banjo, accordion, and a few "yips"!

During the news, Keillor describes a

small town in the Midwest on a summer's night. "It's not hard to fall in love on such a night," he says.

How can those in NYC and LA understand the soothing smell of lilies and the reassuring sound of water sprinklers?

"This is a life that will hold us up. This is permanent. This is what we live for."

There's more reverence in the audience than is possible at a symphony or rock concert. Those who cough make every effort to stop. Silent asphyxiation would be preferable.

"Softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling all you sinners, come home," says one of the final songs. There is more honest religious feeling in the theater than is possible on any televised ministry, and probably a good deal more than in many churches. Every performer on the stage could be bad to the bone, yet, there is salvation in the music.

The counterpoint to Keillor's opening, "Hello, Love," is exquisite: the Everly Brothers doing "Bye, Bye, Love."

Gary Vasilash grew up listening to *The Beatles*, *Motown*, and the *Everly Brothers*.

ART

A Poetics of the Mundane

by David Kaufman

Alex Katz by Ann Beattie, New York: Harry N. Abrams; \$27.50.

A year or two before Ann Beattie's

breakthrough second novel, *Falling in Place*, a cartoon appeared in *The New Yorker* showing a crowd of people, dressed in evening gowns and suits, drinks in hand, milling around what looked like an outdoor cocktail party with nearly all of humanity in attendance. The caption read simply: "Woodstock: Tenth Reunion."

During the 70's, while everyone was wondering what had become of the 60's generation, they were always to be found in Ann Beattie's fiction. At the time, there was a popular opinion that the hippies and the revolutionaries merely went underground, biding their time while waiting to reemerge with their ideals intact. But Beattie knew better. In her *New Yorker* stories and in her first novel, *Chilly Scenes of Winter*, Beattie depicted the children of the 60's who had come of age only to realize how naive and adolescent they were. If they had lost something in the process of getting older, their relinquished ideals were replaced by an all-consuming vacancy, an ennui. For the most part, Beattie located them in the Northeast—in rural towns in Vermont or in the second-hand suburbs of used cities in Connecticut, outside New Haven or on the outskirts of Bridgeport.

By the time *Falling in Place* was published in 1980, Beattie had picked up the narrative device that struck many of her readers as vital—her omniscient voice, free of the judgmental baggage that usually reveals an author to her readers. The world of letters received Ann Beattie as the era's answer to Updike and to Cheever.

Falling in Place captured a breed of Americans who seemed to be everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. If her characters seemed to have an existence beyond her conception of them, it's because they did. They were overly familiar at least to everyone who, like Beattie, grew up in the 50's and the 60's. Indeed, for many members of Beattie's audience, they were a little too close for comfort.

Because of her repeated references in *Falling in Place* to rock singers, Beattie became the disc jockey of American letters. But more than this, she seemed to be a kind of TV monitor that one could turn on if one wanted to tune into the contemporary sensibility. Whether or not it was an aim of

BOOKS IN BRIEF—BACK IN PRINT

A Buried Land by Madison Jones, Sag Hill, NY: Second Chance Press; \$18.95. Madison Jones's allegory on progress first appeared to great acclaim in 1963. Set in the valley of the Tennessee River, the novel records the moral impact of the TVA on a young lawyer entranced by the vision of the New South. At some points the writer's purpose may be a little too visible, but the conclusion is as powerful as anything in Faulkner.

The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot, Seventh Revised Edition, Chicago: Regnery Books; \$19.95. There is little that has not been said in praise of the book that made Russell Kirk the leading conservative intellectual figure in the U.S. This latest edition includes a new forward by Kirk.

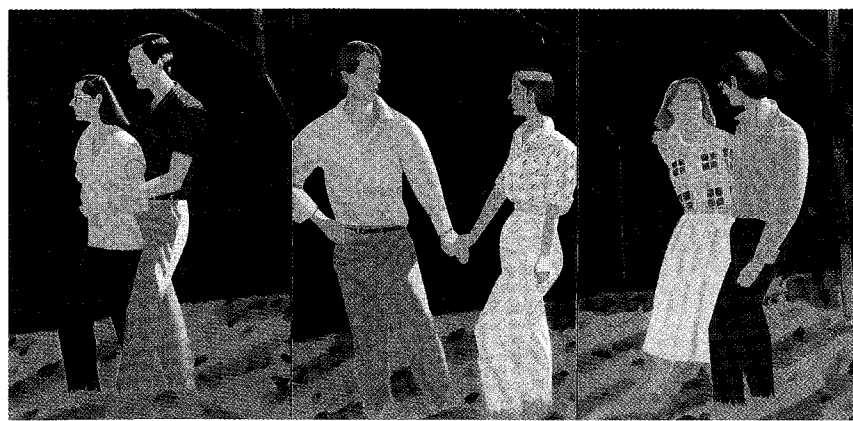
her mission, Beattie herself was as amoral and indifferent as the dial.

By the time her next novel, *Love Always*, was published in 1985, Beattie was accorded all of the usual distinctions: "The essential literary voice of the generation that came of age in the 1960's," wrote Christopher Lehman-Haupt in the *Times*; "A literary high priestess of the Baby Boomers' generation," offered Josh Rubins in *The New York Review of Books*. But something was wrong. *Love Always* was also received as a fall from grace. Just as the society that she had been writing about had been moving into less neutral or more extreme positions, Beattie herself had become more of a presence. Worse yet, the empathy that had figured in her earlier work had been transformed here—not into sympathy but rather into an aloof disdain for her characters.

In view of her own work, the idea to invite Beattie to respond to the representational paintings of the celebrated Alex Katz was irresistible. Many of the figures in Katz's paintings might have easily walked off the pages of Beattie's fictions. His paintings give "still-life" a new meaning—one that suggests the spirit or élan of life has become stagnant and uneventful for his subjects. When art critic Robert Rosenbloom describes Katz, he might just as well be talking about Beattie: "What begins as a way of seeing that can be literal enough to record . . . is uncannily transformed into a still imperturbable world that is simultaneously rooted in, but remote from, our prosaic environment."

At its worst, Beattie's discussion of Katz reads like an extended press release, filled more with glowing redundancies than with critical insights. At its best, it divulges Beattie's unguarded attitude to her own earlier work and accounts for the creative impulse beneath her fictions. By the second or third page of her 70-page treatise, it becomes eminently clear that her commentary on Katz serves only too well as an explanation of her own stories and novels. By the 10th page, we sense that she's describing her own work even more than Katz, evidently without her realizing that she's fallen into such a trap.

"Katz says," she tells us, "that he is not interested in the psychology of his



Alex Katz's *Summer Triptych*. Photo courtesy Marlborough Gallery.

subjects when he paints them, or interested in what they think after the fact." A few paragraphs later she explains that his paintings are "simplifications that point out complexities." Later still, that he "creates . . . human representations that are stand-ins for attitude" and that "people miss the point when they talk about Katz painting surfaces; actually, he distrusts surfaces so much that he will not allow them to provide easy definitions of his subjects." This last remark, defensively delivered, could be a direct reaction to those critics who have accused Beattie of being superficial in her own work.

Approaching something of a summary, Beattie argues that "Katz is undeniably more interested in coherence than in chaos, but what he chronicles may be a strain or alienation that his subjects pay a price for, and what the painter does, himself, is not easy. What is communicated from the various images of sunny days and close embraces can still be fairly interpreted as complex, contradictory, and sad or frightening. Katz presents the images coolly ["cool" is perhaps the most frequently employed word to describe Beattie's fiction], and his interest is in formality: in people who are not harried or passionate or in a state of chaos. But one need not enact extremes to be so dramatic that one is convincing. . . . Working out of a naturalistic tradition . . . Katz has decided to pose us with the problem of a vision in which he is interested in what is simple, but to present that simplicity in an exaggerated way."

Beattie likes to talk around her subject, usually along the lines of describing what these paintings mean to her,

but not necessarily what they—or Katz for that matter—might signify to another viewer. Much of her analysis here focuses on where these figures are "at," where they are coming from, or going to. Perhaps she never quite overcame a feeling that she was out of her element, or stretching her authority, by writing about a painter. Perhaps it's even more ingrained than that: Beattie's special narratorless voice does not serve the purposes of a nonfiction exploration.

By spending long sessions with Katz himself, interviewing a number of his subjects, and quoting other painters, Beattie made gestures in the right direction. But her emphasis on the subject and context of the paintings is always at the expense of technique.

For this reason alone, her book fails to bridge the gap between the visual and narrative spheres. If anything, Ann Beattie's study of Alex Katz unwittingly perpetrates the late-20th-century myth that one artistic medium must remain enigmatic to, and impenetrable by, another.

Still, *Alex Katz* is a handsome specimen of a book. At the very least, it is bound to survive as a mid-80's curiosity. But in using the paintings of Alex Katz to explain, inadvertently, her own fictions, Beattie's most interesting message remains covert. What she doesn't say, but what her own work has made clear, and what her investigations have now imparted to Katz's work, is that a specter of ennui has become an inescapable subtext, if not a context, for the contemporary sensibility.

David Kaufman writes from New York.