

young; Johann Gutenberg's first printed book dates to 1436, and it has been a mere five hundred years since Erasmus of Rotterdam leaped from his carriage, squatted in a muddy lane, and inspected a scrap of newsprint, so thrilled was he to encounter the printed word. There may yet be a future for the written word; on the other hand, the age of the book may be over before it reaches its 600th birthday.

What is to be done? Codrescu issues what he calls "a manifesto for escape," directed in large measure at his fellow writers. He calls for a renewed reverence for language and for telling the truth with it; he calls for public discourse and an end to the present condition wherein, as he puts it, "most writing today appears headed for the résumé, its final resting place." He urges us to take the example of other exiles, who went Outside rather than submit to the tyranny of their homelands: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Czesław Miłosz, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, Milan Kundera. He demands a

repudiation of worldwide culture, a return to a planet on which Times Square is markedly different from Piccadilly Circus and the Ginza in every particular. And he sets a high subversive goal for his peers: "The poet's job," he announces, "is to short-circuit the imaginary globe."

Codrescu's manifesto is stimulating and, like all his books, impeccably well-written. It brims with the writer's hallmark aphorisms, his witty one-liners to trap the unwary: "Modern Russia is an homage to Henry Ford, not to Karl Marx." *The Disappearance of the Outside* is a reader's delight as well, a long evening's entertainment, a book that provokes nods of assent, provides plenty of room for argument, and raises as many questions as it attempts to answer. Switch off the set and have a look.

Gregory McNamee's most recent book is *The Return of Richard Nixon and Other Essays*.

Only the Boring

by Janet Scott Barlow

Dark Star: The Roy Orbison Story

by Ellis Amburn

New York: Lyle Stuart/Carol

Publishing Group; 283 pp., \$18.95

Generally speaking, fans of early rock and roll fall into two categories: those who want to hear Roy Orbison's "Only the Lonely" more than once a year, and those who don't—and I belong to the latter group. One of the strengths of vintage rock was that it meant nothing more and nothing less than what its teenage audience said it meant (unless, of course, you listen to rock critics, but nobody does, which is why, impotent and resentful, they write mainly for each other). I always thought the music existed to make you want to laugh out loud, or dance, or take a wallow in adolescent melancholy, the experience songwriter Mickey Newbury called "feeling good feeling bad."

But rock and roll wasn't meant to create pain, and that was my problem with Roy Orbison—his voice and his songs were nothing if not emotionally wounded. In addition, no one in rock and roll possessed a physicality less suited to rock style. Orbison had no "moves" (there was a certain integrity in that, but it wasn't the kind of integrity I was interested in), and when he covered his small, pale frame in shades, dyed and molded blue-black hair, and a black jumpsuit, he looked like somebody's country uncle dressed up for Rock Around the Clock Night down at the VFW.

But people who love Roy Orbison's music really love it, and he occupies an important, if slightly off-center, niche in rock and roll history. His untrained voice was beautiful and unique. His songwriting and musicianship were admired by his contemporaries. And his life, which included early poverty, personal tragedies, drug abuse, and a trip from fame to obscurity and back again, is the stuff of rock legends. What's more, he is surely alone among first-generation rockers in having enjoyed comic books and the writings of Winston Churchill.

Why then, is Ellis Amburn's *Dark Star* so tedious? Is it because rock legends who live fast and die before

BRIEF MENTIONS

BODY by Harry Crews

New York: Poseidon Press; 240 pp., \$18.95

Dorothy Turnipseed, rechristened Shereel Dupont by her trainer and free-weighted into world class shape, has arrived at a Florida hotel for the Ms. Cosmos world championship women's bodybuilding contest. Come to cheer her on, all the way down from Waycross, Georgia, in a pair of pickup trucks, are her huge relations and her psychotic feendsay, Nail Head. There to provide her stiffest competition is Marvella, a heavyweight from Detroit with four equally large, equally deltoid sisters loudly in tow. For Shereel's trainer Russell Morgan it is the championship he was never so much as in the running for. For Shereel it is the fight of her life.

Fans of *Pumping Iron II: The Women* should line up for this novel, to which the movie bears some relation. The contest there as here is between the advocates of "femininity" vs. "muscularity," what is evidently the great controversy among women bodybuilders. But the true theme of the novel is Crews' usual one, that the competition is everything. Eating, sleeping, intimacy, talk—everything is a battle and the winner will take all. And for Nail Head, forged into violence by the Vietnam War, and his childhood sweetheart Shereel, forged by Russell, the Ms. Cosmos competition quickly becomes the decisive event of their lives, beyond which is either everything or nothing.

Like all Crews' writing *Body* is not something to give your great-aunt; he takes a pleasure in the perverse that is unnerving. More unnerving still is the fatalistic logic of his Grits characters, a self-destructiveness that comes from legitimate anger at the world and, most importantly, strength. His Turnipseeds are demoralizing, funny (not laughable) and admirable, and they are, for all their bizarreness, very real. Pure tragedy is pure theater. *Body*, billed as a tragicomedy and very funny in parts, is much more like life.

Harry Crews, with his love of martial arts and boxing and other kinds of physical abuse, has like his characters made something of a cult of strength. *Body* may not be, as touted, the best book of his career—I remain most partial to *The Gospel Singer* myself—but all those weeks of power typing have not been wasted.

—Jack Ramsay

their time have become a pop culture cliché? Is it because Orbison's persona, despite the rock trappings, was uncharismatic? Or is it because Ellis Amburn, who previously collaborated on books with Shelley Winters and Priscilla Presley, lacks the capacity to be surprised by his subject?

One rule of thumb in these cases is: when in doubt, blame the writer. There is no sense in *Dark Star* that its author views Roy Orbison, who died of a heart attack in 1988 at the peak of an amazing comeback, as anything but convenient and timely book fodder. Much of *Dark Star* is biography as itinerary ("Roy . . . made the day-long trip to Fort Worth . . . Roy flew to Canada in October . . . After Texas, Roy was off to Santa Ana, California"). There is no attempt to explore, much less understand, the complexities that accompany a creative personality. Some of Orbison's friends describe him as gentle, gracious, shy, modest, and even-tempered; others call him egomaniacal, vengeful, spoiled, vain, envious, and self-pitying. These contradictions simply sit there on the page, as the author moves on to yet another list of cities for yet another of Orbison's tours.

Likewise, the only worthwhile insights into the mysteries and pleasures of a natural vocal gift like Orbison's come not from the author but from the singer himself: "It was sort of a wonder. It was a great feeling, and it didn't hurt anybody, and it made me feel good, and some people even said, 'Roy, that's nice.' I've always been in love with my voice. It was fascinating, I liked the sound of it, I liked making it sing, making a voice ring, and I just kept doing it."

In fact, were it not for Orbison's own words (most of them culled from previously published interviews), *Dark Star* would lack any vividness at all. In an insufficient yet repetitive chapter on Roy Orbison's unhappy adolescence as a misfit in Wink, Texas (a chapter in which I entertained myself by keeping a list of the colorful names of Orbison's family and friends, names like Orbie Lee, Coyt, Clois, Hezzie, Double O, Pooky, Freako, Slob, and one female Jake), the time, the place, and the man come together sharply only when Amburn quotes Orbison's comments to *Rolling Stone*: "[I]t was macho guys

working in the oil field, and football, and oil and grease and sand and being a stud and being cool. I got out of there as quick as I could. . . . It was tough as could be, but no illusions. No mysteries in Wink."

But the real problem with *Dark Star* is that it contains the kind of red-flag errors that raise questions about the credibility of everything that surrounds them. For the record Janis Ian wasn't a "rock singer," she was a folk singer; Jerry Lee Lewis's "first single" release for Sun Records wasn't "Whole Lotta Shakin' Goin' On," it was "Crazy Arms," and Elvis Presley's birthplace, as even non-fans are aware, was Tupelo, Mississippi, not Memphis. (Furthermore, it is preposterous to compare Roy Orbison to Jimmy Durante, even if Ellis Amburn does believe, for some strange reason, that "each was a phenomenon who escaped being made into a joke . . . by a hair's breadth.")

In question here is the credibility of Amburn's thesis, which is that Roy Orbison was "as dangerous as a loose cannon," a man destroyed by the "poison" of success. As proof, he offers examples of Orbison's disregard for his health, as if fastidious health habits would mean anything to a man defined from boyhood by an obsession with fame, wealth, and popular acceptance.

He writes darkly of Orbison's compulsion to work, suggesting it was some sort of curse, but it's obvious that Orbison's achievement of his own desires—to succeed in the 60's, survive failure in the 70's, and renew his career in the 80's—would have been impossible without his determined work ethic. And some ideas are so overwrought as to be unfathomable. Of Orbison's habit of watching several movies in a row before starting a recording session ("It freshens my mind," he said), Amburn writes that it "smacked of idiosyncrasy [sic] bordering on insanity."

Roy Orbison was a poor, insecure, and unhandsome country boy who used his talent to make real his dreams of fame, fast cars, and pretty women. Ellis Amburn contends melodramatically that the realization of Orbison's dreams was in fact a tragedy. But *Dark Star* offers no evidence that Orbison himself regretted the life he created. And why should he have regretted it? For a man who considered himself both physically ugly and musically "fascinating," which would be harder to accept: rock and roll stardom, or jobs chopping weeds and playing honky-tonks in west Texas?

Janet Scott Barlow covers popular culture from Cincinnati.

LIBERAL ARTS

LOTTERIES, LOVE, AND LITIGATION

The number of cases of former couples fighting over claims to lottery winnings are increasing, and lawyers have hit the jackpot. Thirty-two states and the District of Columbia have lotteries, and lawsuits similar to the two that occurred in Florida earlier this year are bound to become more common.

Florida's latest lottery lawsuit came in late May, when June Shaner, a Port St. Lucie waitress, sued her ex-fiancé for one-quarter of a \$16 million New York jackpot won in 1987. According to Ms. Shaner, he bought the winning ticket with money earned at the plumbing business she owned but failed to give her any of the proceeds when they moved to Florida and split up last December.

Shaner's charge followed a dispute in Stuart, Florida, where a jury awarded Lewis Snipes one-quarter of his ex-wife's \$31.5 million Florida jackpot. The jury argued that Snipes was entitled to a share of the prize, since he bought the winning ticket only to see his ex-wife sign it and split the money with her sister. Snipes, however, said he may reject the award and seek half of the jackpot.