

success. It would be difficult for me to explain to you how nearly impossible it is to tell a lie. . . . Used to, I could tell a dozen lies before breakfast and not even break a sweat." There the text seems to allude to another in which a character famously declares, "Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast," and which finally and lyrically asks us, *Life, what is it but a dream?* Joe Robert Kirkman lives in a wonderland of his own perceptions, or of his own devising, or of his son's evocation—depending on how you look at it.

This world in which anything can happen must somehow also be one in which nothing and no one is to be taken for granted. The most mundane experience is of the earth, earthy, and partakes if not of the divine order, then of the pagan realm, before this world was desacralized:

Now wasn't this the sweetest part of the day, milking the easy cows? Nudging head and shoulder into the comfortable flanks, washing the teats and squeezing them gently at first in case of soreness and gradually building into rhythm, stream after straight stream in a pulse as regular as the stately heart of the animal, bright jets of milk xing to fill the pail with warm lace, with delicate foam that touched his knuckles like a spiderweb. These days, these hours were of life the cream supreme . . .

But such a static moment is typical of this tale only in its lyricism. Most of Joe Robert's long Friday is rife with action, interaction, and reversals. When, at three in the morning, he attempts to intimidate his hunting companions with a tall tale about a devil-possum, he finds himself climbing a tree to go capture the thing. When he rescues a little girl from drowning, he is rewarded in a way he never conceived of. When, as a schoolteacher, he must confront the parents of a wounded veteran and former student, the result is not one he could have anticipated—or the reader either.

The "curious mixed-up day" includes episodes of instruction in "General Science," celebrations of Huxley and Darwin, defenses of academic free-

dom, memories of childhood conflicts with a tenant family, an encounter with a secret memorial for the victims of war, and a phantasmagoric run-in with a goat on a rooftop—one who makes some striking suggestions.

When the schoolteacher finally gets his class on a roll, his play-Socrates runs away with the day's lesson and makes mincemeat of that teacher's pretensions. Joe Robert's long-awaited confrontation with the school board becomes a nonevent, even a mystery. A journalist is the news she purports to transcribe. An innocent high-school student is not what she seems, not by a long shot.

Surrounded by wonders and dazzled by revelations, Joe Robert Kirkman may indeed be the Aeneas that he thinks his son sees him as. But if he is less than an epic hero, he is still a man who knows the world—"The world was plenty." That world is both natural and supernatural, a world of visions and dreams and flesh-made words. The world in its fullness of body and spirit is the world of Fred Chappell's fiction. The least we can say of it is that it's a world well worth living in while we recreate it by scanning the words it's made of. The most we can say of it is that if you can find better fiction this season, read that. If not—a big if—then read this.

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## Good Lovers Are Dead Lovers

by Katherine Dalton

Charley Bland

by Mary Lee Settle

New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux;  
207 pp., \$18.95

Charley Bland, as his father describes him, would have been a prodigal son except he never had the gumption to leave home. Still, he has the charm most lost souls have, and for the widowed, 35-year-old narrator of Mary Lee Settle's eleventh novel, returned home to West Virginia from a Bohemian life in Europe, this most eligible and most ineligible of bachelors

## LIBERAL ARTS

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—from Publishers Weekly,  
October 6, 1989

becomes her reason to stay.

Living on what she can earn writing or tutoring French, hand to mouth in a part of the world and an era (late 50's-early 60's) in which money, heaven forbid poverty, cannot be discussed, she spends her time and energy and last bit of youth on this 40-plus bachelor who cannot make a man of himself. "[P]rofan love," she says, "is a place, an Eden, a prison. Within it, people glow, colors are bright, you believe everything you have always wanted to believe. It is a place of trust, of guilelessness and deep iridescent illusion. I think the snake that seduced Eve was not temptation but guile, for it was the one quality that could destroy her."

The narrator is a foreigner now in her own hometown even to the extent that she is always explaining to the reader, her confessor, the Southernisms in what was once, surely, her own English. At first an object of interest, she holds on to the favorite Charley Bland longer than is acceptable, and is dropped with that crushing Southern politeness that is without malice and without pity.

Like so many books about dead affairs, this one is also an exorcism. And like so many writers, especially women writers, Settle through the medium of her narrator wants to dissect the hows and the whys of a lost intensity. There is not much in the way of plot, but as an "In Memoriam" the novel works very

well. We read a writer as much for what he sees and how he describes what he sees as for the story he has to tell, and Settle not only has a lucid style but a wonderful eye. She understands with perfect clarity the kind of strong-willed mother that makes for a weak-willed son. She understands, too, that this free-ranging bachelor is bound like a slave to home, and that his lover, caught up in something she knows to be hope-

less, living in the wrong part of town, dropped by his crowd, the country club crowd, is the free one.

But freedom, like money, is not a good in itself; it's what you do with it that counts, and having spent so much of her life on bric-a-brac Charley Bland's lover finds that when this affair is over she is only free to leave. Freedom was never what she wanted anyway; it is only all she has left. As she packs her

trailer for New York her friend Plain George tells her "You'll be back before you know it," giving her "the only words of comfort he knew," the only words of comfort for an exile. Like so much of the (little enough) kindness that has been shown her, it is both a blessing and a lie.

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## REVISIONS



### ONWARD CHRISTIAN SOLDIERS!

According to so-called scientific polls designed and executed by the Gallup Organization and the Princeton Religious Research Center, the great majority of the American people continue to believe in the Millennium, even if a lesser majority—or perhaps actually a minority—don't know what it is.

*The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York and London: Macmillan; 278 pp., \$19.95) by George Gallup, Jr. and Jim Castelli, is full of interesting bits of information, not all of them depressing. We learn, for example, that as of 1982, 42 percent of Americans knew who delivered the Sermon on the Mount, while 46 percent could name all four gospels and a whopping 70 percent could say where Christ was born. On the other hand, as of 1954, those figures were 34, 35, and 75 percent, respectively, so that, in just less than thirty years, we've made progress: two steps forward and one step back.

The Gallup Organization has been around for half a century now, in which time, the authors assure us, the religious character of the nation has been—despite "volatility" and a steady decline in church attendance since the 1950's—what they call "stable." "Basic religious beliefs, and even religious practice, today differ relatively little from the levels recorded fifty years ago," when a

Gallup survey found the Bible to be a close first in the home libraries of Americans, almost in a dead heat with *Gone With the Wind*. Somewhat to their surprise, apparently, Messrs. Gallup and Castelli can write that the American faith remains not just orthodox but even "fundamentalist" (their word), inasmuch as nine of ten Americans claim never to have doubted the existence of God; while eight in ten expect to have to account for their sins on Judgment Day, another eight in ten profess to believe that God still works miracles, and seven in ten believe in a life after death.

This information, of a kind likely to produce a chilling effect on Norman Lear, Arthur Kropp, and company over at People for the American Way, is positive so far as it goes. On the debit side, sentences like, "Americans are evenly divided on the statement, 'I don't have to belong to an organized religion because I lead a good life,'" and "only a large minority of Americans agree that there are clear standards for judging good and evil that never change," are followed by a section called "What Americans Want From Their Churches" that is—well, dispiriting. "Americans want a wide variety of services, both spiritual and practical, from their churches and synagogues," the authors claim. "And whether Americans feel they are getting these services is, all in all, a more important factor in determining whether or not

they will attend church than are larger philosophic questions."

What Americans want, it seems, are a sense of community, an opportunity for direct involvement in the social issues of the day, and "practical help" in such matters as child rearing and "learning how to be parents," and they have made up their collective mind that the church of their choice is the natural provider of these things. (As one team of scholars, including Martin Marty, has noted, there is "[e]vidence of a tendency [for Americans] to view religion as useful for some personal or social end rather than as an expression of devotion to God alone; an increase in the concern for adjustment to this life, in contrast to preparing for life after death.") What Americans emphatically *don't* want from their churches, it seems, are hierarchy, discipline, or direction, whether of the institutional or the theological variety. As for interpreting the Word of God and applying that interpretation to personal and social behavior, they wish to be left alone to do their own thing (without benefit of clergy, past or present).

Preceding the Day of Judgment, God may perhaps feel Himself compelled to administer courses in Christian theology to the souls of American faithful that will make freshman catch-up classes at contemporary Yale and Harvard look like an old-fashioned Sunday School picnic. (CW)