

As anyone familiar with any of Crews' other work (including the lucrative *Random House Handbook*, which is at once gloriously funny and extremely useful and practical) knows, all of it is highly intelligent, wonderfully sane, often very witty, frequently subtle, and sometimes right on the memorable and aphoristic money: "Throughout most of the previous decade, sexual and religious aspiration had been a single blur for Updike. But nobody's adolescence can last forever."

Mainly, as the title promises, this book is a critique of contemporary academic critics of various kinds, their acts and ways being set against the background of attack and counterattack on the brutal battlefields of "our currently polarized academy." Crews presents himself as something of a moderate, standing between those he calls the New Americanists (defined by "connection to our historic national shames—slavery, 'Indian removal,' aggressive expansion, imperialism, and so forth—and to current struggles for equal social opportunity") and those he names as "cultural nostalgics," who are "people who conceive of the ideal university as a pantheon for the presentation of great works and great ideas." Moderate as he may be, especially when compared to space-age savages like Jane Tompkins, Frank Lentricchia, and Sacvan Bercovitch, Crews clearly leans more toward the cult of the politically correct than that of the "conservative Jeremiahs"; and he shares any number of common attitudes popularly held among prominent New Americanists, simply taking for granted, for example, that it is accurate to define the historic Deep South as an "old blend of vileness and aristocratic pretense." Not surprisingly he finds *Tom Sawyer* to be demonstrably "haunted by violence, fear, guilt, sadism, and suggestions of universal egotism and cowardice." Of Hemingway he argues: "What Hemingway needs is an ideal reader who can discard everything that is meretricious in our image of him but then do justice to the literary art that remains." And, a little farther along, he adds: "To arrive at that vulnerable and exacting artist, we must first learn to forgo the Hemingway legend." Hemingway is seen as lying, "bloodthirsty," and impotent—"Hemingway evidently fancied an unclimactic fondling that evoked infantile passivity and gender confusion." Even worse, there seems to be something to

the suspicion that he was sometimes anti-Semitic and homophobic. Or, anyway, some of his central characters, whom Crews assumes, when he pleases, to be mouthpieces for the author, are so discovered to be depicted. Similarly we have to come to terms with "the egregiousness of Faulkner's sexism and racism."

Crews' best essay may be his title piece on Flannery O'Connor, if only for his persuasive account of O'Connor as a child of the Iowa Writers' Workshop and the New Criticism. "A cynic might say, then," he writes, "that in lionizing O'Connor the American university has not so much acknowledged a literary genius as bestowed a posthumous laurel on its most diligent student." And Crews cannot be faulted for pointing out that her great achievement comes chiefly through "the perfecting of a single hard-edged mode." But someone who can casually write, as he does in an earlier essay, about "the most politically conservative concept of sin," someone who views the "explicitly Christian expansion of sympathy" in "The Artificial Nigger" as "a regressive political act," cannot be taken as a completely just authority in his appraisals of either Catholic (O'Connor) or Protestant (Updike) faith. Crews seems to have minimal sympathy for or understanding of Christianity except as a matter of intellectual history, a diminishing part of the embattled canon.

But there is much about *The Critics Bear It Away* that may be valuable, and not merely Crews' insights (and there are plenty), nor, indeed, the genuine pleasures of his writing in general and detail, nor, for that matter, his serious arguments for sensible moderation, a quality surely and sorely needed in English departments everywhere. One considerable service is that he freely quotes and paraphrases the arguments and outrageous statements of some of the leading figures among the New Americanists, thus leading the reader directly to the happy conclusion that we need not waste any more precious time and energy reading any more of their efforts. We may consider Crews an advocate and mediator in this matter (not our *only* one, but at least a worthy witness); and we can return to the original texts, Twain and Hemingway and Faulkner and O'Connor and Updike and all the others in the sure and certain hope that we need no New American-

ist critic to guide us to our own destination.

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Gerald Who?

by Bill Kauffman

Memories of the Ford Administration

by John Updike
New York: Alfred A. Knopf;
369 pp., \$23.00



S naking out from the Middle Atlantic states is a long distinguished line of political and literary Copperheads: Millard Fillmore, Horatio Seymour, Harold Frederic, Edmund Wilson, and the Pennsylvania duo of James Buchanan and John Updike. These men were certainly not proslavery, but they did view the Union cause with rather more skepticism than did their New England brethren. As with Southerners, they remember their dead: the anti-Lincoln New York Governor Seymour was memorialized years later by novelist Frederic, who in turn was rediscovered by his choleric fellow North Country patriot Wilson. Likewise, Shillington, Pennsylvania's Updike dedicated a play, "Buchanan Dying" (1974), to the Keystone State's only President, the oft-derided failure "in the trembling shadow of the Civil War." With *Memories of the Ford Administration*, John Updike takes another crack at this doughface whose sole claim to fame—his bachelorhood—has of late won him the tag (from, among others, *Penthouse*) of "America's first gay President."

The novel's queer title comes from its character Alf Landon Clayton, a history instructor at the all-girl, too-cute-by-half Wayward Junior College in a dreary New Hampshire industrial town. Alf is asked to provide "memories and impressions" of Gerald R. Ford's presidency for a scholarly journal; what he writes, instead, is a retrospective of his

collapsing marriage and bed-hopping during the years 1974 to 1977.

You've read all this before: bored faculty wives awash in gin, pert coeds, available menopause babes, etc. It is the exiguous grist of campus Creative Writer Mills, impossible to read but not, alas, to write. Talk about chewing more than you've bitten off; if any American thirsts for one more peek at the couplings of unattractive campus un-deads in their graves of academe, come and get it. But there is more. Side by side with Alf's boring lecheries are fragments of his "historical/psychological, lyrical/elegiacal," as well as highly speculative, biography of his magnificent obsession, President James Buchanan.

Buchanan is the most unlovable doughface. Douglas at least had Lincoln, and Pierce his dead son and his drinking problem, but poor Old Buck seldom gets credit for anything more than "shrewd inertia." To Alf, however, "he projected a certain vaporous largeness, the largeness of ambivalence. . . . [Regarding] Buchanan's mind, people complained he couldn't make it up, and I liked that."

The key to Alf's Buchanan lies in his courtship of Anne Coleman, the fickle daughter of a Lancaster iron magnate. Jimmy Buchanan is a young lawyer, a Federalist, and somewhat of an *arriviste*, and like so many of our eminent forefathers he wants to marry well. Anne, his betrothed, is a volatile pettish princess; she calls off the engagement after a silly misunderstanding fueled by a local doxy. Or so goes the story Alf concocts from the scraps and gobbets of gossip that survive over the years. Sent to Philadelphia for some R&R, the distraught Anne dies—a suicidal overdose of laudanum, goes the whispering—and Buchanan is cursed ever after. "He was scared of the world, Buchanan was. He thought it was out to get him, and it was."

The interdeterminacy of history bedevils Alf. Did Anne really dismiss Jimmy because of an unstable tart's loose lips? Did Anne take her own life? How can we possibly know the welter of secret motivations and hidden jealousies that animate the wooden stiffs in the history books? And it's all so random. In one of the novel's many delightful passages, Alf imagines swain Jimmy pursuing Anne to Philadelphia, winning her back, and settling into the blissful domesticity of Lancaster, while President

Stephen Douglas craftily and bloodlessly reconciles North and South.

Young Buchanan, more than Old Buck the President, is Alf's quarry. He broods upon "the curious long wrestle between God and Buchanan, who, burned early in life by a flare of violence, devoted his whole cunning and assiduous career thereafter to avoiding further heat, and yet was burned at the end, as the Union exploded under him. The gods are bigger than we are, was to be the moral. They kill us for their sport."

Scattered throughout the novel are refreshing revisions that give the Buchanan material the character of an amiable, digressive, iconoclastic essay: "He tried to keep peace. That whole decade of Presidents did, Fillmore and Pierce and Buchanan—try, I mean—and they *succeeded*, they *did* keep the South placated, and in the Union, which was important, since if war had come in 1850 instead of 1860, the outcome might have been very different; the South had all its assets in place—the military tradition, the great officers, the down-home patriotism, King Cotton—and the North still needed to grow. And precious little thanks they've got from history for it—the doughface Presidents. History loves blood. It loves the great blood-spillers. Poor Buchanan was ahead of his time, trying to bring mankind up a notch, out of the blood."

Much of Alf's biography of Buchanan affects the euphuistic language of the period's popular prose; there are no leaves in the Lancaster fall, but there is plenty of "arborial foliage." And if it's Updike, there must be sex, although the fornication scenes are detumescent as ever—"as tiresome as an old mortgage," as the novelist Henry W. Clune complains.

Despite the parallels in the lives of Alf Clayton and James Buchanan, the dual narratives are neatly divided. The reader who can overcome his compunctious reluctance to skip pages—dozens of them—will be rewarded with a charming and playful novelette about a little-known President who, for all his difficult dithering, killed 600,000 fewer Americans than did his successor.

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Truth in Self-Advertisement

by Gregory McNamee

Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson

by Paul Perry
New York: Thunder's Mouth Press;
288 pp., \$22.95



Hunter S. Thompson does not suffer fools gladly. For that matter, he seems to suffer no one at all, gladly or not. A survivor of the 1960's, he has deemed his contemporaries "a whole subculture of frightened illiterates" and those younger than they "a generation of swine." (And these are the people he professes to like; never mind those he despises, such as George Bush and Charles Keating.) Still, he has carved out a niche for himself as the most beatifically foolish journalist working in America today, a practitioner of inspired lunacy in the name of truth-seeking inquiry. No believer in so-called reportorial objectivity, he has become far better known than most of his subjects. How many people remember Thomas Eagleton (a sideshow character in Thompson's savage book of 1972, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*) these days?

The Acid Era has left its scars on the man. For one thing, he is now incapable of speaking a coherent, un-whiskey-slurred sentence, an odd condition for a man who makes much of his living on the college lecture circuit. (The kiddies want only to see this legendary man, we must suppose, not to hear what he has to say.) For another, he has never recovered from the paranoia of the Nixon years, and his reclusiveness is legendary. For that reason, Paul Perry warns us early on, his life of Thompson "is a violently unauthorized biography."

Perry himself is no detached observer. As editor of *Running* magazine in the early 1980's, he commissioned Thompson to attend an Ironman Competition (a grueling athletic contest comprised of swimming, bicycling, and running) in Hawaii. Thompson, fueled by all sorts of chemical compounds and incentive-reducing beverages, never delivered the manuscript Perry expected, but the all-