

BOOKS

Photo courtesy of Library of Congress



Black families waiting for the boat to St. Louis.

An exodus without a Moses

Black freedmen seek a new Canaan in John Brown's old home.

EXODUSTERS: BLACK MIGRATION TO KANSAS AFTER RECONSTRUCTION

By Nell Irwin Painter
Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y., \$12.95

In the spring of 1879, 14 years after the Civil War had supposedly confirmed the freedom of southern blacks, thousands of them lined the banks of the Mississippi, seeking passage on boats that would take them first to St. Louis and then to Kansas. The verdict of the war was being eroded and undermined as their former masters regained power and systematically deprived blacks of their civil and political rights and, in some cases, even their lives. The North, tired of reading about Southern outrages, had simply turned its back on the freedmen, and they now knew that they had no friends to aid them.

The blacks from Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas who took part in the "exodus" to Kansas may not have had any clear idea of what they would find in this new Canaan, but they knew what Egypt was like. Henry Adams, a former Union soldier from rural Louisiana, kept a record of 683

separate incidents of racial violence:

"164th. Nathan Williams (colored), badly whipped and his cotton taken away without any cause by Bill Mark, a white man, on his place, in 1874, because he voted the Radical [Republican] ticket."

Not only were blacks prevented from voting, they were denied the opportunity to educate their children. The vicious system of debt peonage was already assuming its role as a replacement for slavery. As one put it, "We have been free 14 years and are still poor and ignorant, yet we make as much cotton and sugar as we did when we were slaves, and it does us as little good now as it did then."

A talented young black historian, Nell Irwin Painter views the migration to Kansas as a reasonable response to increasingly intolerable conditions in the post-Reconstruction South. Although contemporary whites preferred to consider it the case of a people misled by unscrupulous leaders, victims of a mass delusion, Painter sees the exodus as proof that "Afro-Americans

did not quietly resign themselves to the political or economic order of the Redeemed South."

Kansas operated on the minds of the Exodusters as a powerful myth that allowed desperate men and women to hope that freedom awaited them in another place. Canaan proved hard to reach. Boats refused to pick up the blacks encamped on the river banks. But those who did finally get across found at least a measure of relief. They did not, of course, escape racism, but they did escape the brutal violence and debt peonage of the Deep South. In this sense, the Exodusters proved to be smarter than the "Representative Colored Men" who tried to dispel their dream of finding freedom in John Brown's former home.

By emphasizing the role rural blacks played in shaping their own history, Nell Irwin Painter has made an important contribution to the history of Americans.

—Arthur Zilversmit

Arthur Zilversmit is the author of *Lincoln on Black and White: A Documentary History*.

Life is rigorous in Suburbia

THE GRASS IS ALWAYS GREENER OVER THE SEPTIC TANK

By Erma Bombeck
New York, McGraw-Hill, 1976, \$6.95

Erma Bombeck is one of the funniest women on TV, as you know if you have ever watched her on ABC's "Good Morning, America." A former obituary writer (and home-room mother), she has the knack of transferring verbal comedy to the printed page.

Her three previous best-sellers, (*At Wit's End*, *Just Wait Till You Have Children of Your Own*, and *I Lost Everything in the Post-Natal Depression*) have mined the humor of the frustrations of everyday middle-class American life. In *The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank* she takes up her cudgels in defense of the thousands of city dwellers who journeyed to the suburbs "in search of a bath and a half and a tree."

"The suburbs were discovered quite by accident one day in the early 1940s by a Welcome Wagon lady who was lost. As she stood in a mushy marshland, her sturdy

Red Cross shoes sinking into the mire, she looked down and exclaimed, 'It's a septic tank. I've discovered the suburbs!'"

"The first winter more than half the original settlers perished. ... Other poor devils died of old age trying to merge onto the freeway to the city. One was attacked by a fast-growing evergreen the builder planted near his front door. (They named a high school after him.)"

Bombeck has experienced many of the frustrations she writes about and makes instant contact with readers delighted to learn that someone else has endured their most-cherished misfortunes, or the equivalent. As she recounts her life and that of her neighbors in the newly developed community of Suburban Gems, we are introduced to a set of characters who could qualify as just plain folks were it not for the peculiar events that the author claims are an inevitable part of life in the suburbs, which turn them into irrational, depressed and fanatical men and women. There are husbands fighting for custody of the lawn;

lonely wives having lunch with their wigs, or fighting against the dread disease of "car-pool crouch."

Some fresh light is shed on the plight of a "liberated woman" who settles in Suburbia. As Bombeck sees it, she is subjected to a chilling ostracism that is usually enough to transform her into a carbon copy of her neighbors: forgetful bored women "biding their time until the children are grown."

There is an undercurrent of semi-serious commentary on other social or political issues, but the main idea is to entertain and the author pulls that off with style.

The Grass Is Always Greener Over the Septic Tank is simply and lucidly written, and never having lived in the suburbs will not diminish the reader's enjoyment of it. Few things are as risible as the other fellow's troubles.

—Tashian Ferrell

Tashian Ferrell works in publishing in New York City.

THEATER

Brownsville Raid is good bet for TV

On a dry summer evening in 1906 the quiet of Brownsville, Texas, was suddenly shattered by a barrage of gunfire. A Mexican lay dead; the town was outraged. Everyone was convinced that the culprits were riflemen from a black regiment recently stationed in Brownsville over the protests of its redneck residents.

Despite unsettling incongruities in the evidence, the white authorities assumed the guilt of at least some of the blacks. They tried to muster a handful of scapegoats, and when they failed, the entire regiment of 167 men was dishonorably discharged without the slightest bow to such legal niceties as courts-martial.

The Brownsville Raid, by Charles Fuller, currently being presented at New York's Theatre de Lys by the Negro Ensemble Company, recounts this instance of pure tyranny, emphasizing the political motivation of the white power structure and the helplessness of the black soldiers, betrayed by a military apparatus they trust to look out for its own.

The focal character, Sergeant Mingo Saunders (played by Douglas Turner Ward) believes that the army is a system of rules, albeit hard ones, that are reliable if you play by them. The blacks are good soldiers; that is what counts. But under these conditions the mask of reciprocity falls aside, revealing the grim reality of arbitrary power.

Fuller approaches his material like a lawyer, gradually sifting through the evidence, exposing the procedural irregularities of

the investigation, hinting that the people of Brownsville may have engineered a conspiracy against the blacks. The script instructs the audience in the abuse of power and the law within the framework of a mystery whose carefully planted clues evolve into an unexpected and spirited defense summation, à la Perry Mason.

The event depicted in *The Brownsville Raid* involves a profound personal theme—the sundering of the foundation of an entire system of beliefs. Fuller knows this; his characters say as much. But their experience is not transmitted dramatically. There are few dialogues or soliloquies in which their hopes and fears are made concrete. Most of the playwright's attention is on plotting. The script seems less like theater and more like serious TV.

There are many changes of scene and director Israel Hicks handles them, for the most part, by simply overlapping the action: one scene fading out as the next one fades in on a different stage area. This too suggests that the play might be more effective on TV where the camera makes this approach so much easier.

As theater *The Brownsville Raid* is not completely satisfying. But as a detailed case history of injustice it performs an important service, and as a filmed TV show it could be excellent.

—Sally Banes and Noel Carroll

Noel Carroll teaches film at N.Y.U. Sally Banes is a dance and theater critic.



Douglas Turner Ward laying down the rules.

FILM

FUN WITH DICK AND JANE

Directed by Ted Kotcheff; screenplay by David Giler, Jerry Belson and Mordecai Richler

Starring Jane Fonda, George Segal and Ed McMahon

Produced by Peter Bart and Max Palevsky; Rated PG

Bigger is better in burglaries by subversive suburbanites

From the hilarious opening credits to the teletyped epilogue, *Fun with Dick and Jane* is that rarest of achievements—a totally successful, genuine, 14-carat farce.

Successful with the audience, that is. It will surely offend the pillars of all Establishments, from the aerospace industry to your friendly neighborhood savings and loan; from Social Security to Immigration; from the followers of Billy Graham, et al. to the devotees of Ralph Waldo Emerson. One can imagine the screen writers pausing in the final stages of their work to ask each other, "Now is there anyone else we ought to take a swipe at?"

The real target is the American middle-class value system (subscribed to by large sections of the working class as well): a "good life" measured in mountains of material possessions; self-respect rooted in a credit rating adequate to cover payments-due; and a morality based on respect for private—or even better, corporate property. The system takes a hell of a beating at the hands of Dick and Jane. And there is a quality in the laughter that greets each solidly landed punch that indicates Americans have been waiting for this longer than we knew.

Dick and Jane are, of course,



Segal and Fonda at the moment of truth.

grown-up versions of protagonists of the old Scott-Foresman readers. Only now they are married, have one child (male), a dog (named Spot), a split-level home in a Southern California suburb, two mortgages, half a swimming pool, a dozen credit cards, and nothing in the bank. Dick is an aerospace executive, junior grade, but the Industry is de-

pressed and retrenching, and he gets fired.

Jane tried to get a job, but has no skills except clothes-horsing. Dick applies for unemployment and food stamps. The shrubbery is repossessed by the nursery that installed it. The lawn is rolled up and trucked away. The electricity is shut off. The dinner menu is Hamburger Help-

er. All the cash they can get from the loan company is \$1,000 at 18 percent compound, and that only because the shark "likes people."

At this desperate juncture they fall victim to a poorly executed stick-up which points them in the direction where hope lies. There are a few false starts. For a while it looks as if the engineer who

helped put a man on the moon is not going to be able to start a car without keys. But luck and a little work in the library turn the trick, and in less time than it takes to foreclose a mortgage Dick and Jane are a two-car, two-person team of unmasked bandits.

George Segal and Jane Fonda play the title roles with elegant nonchalance. They are accomplished comedians with fine timing and the ability to move from slapstick to something like a comedy of manners and back without stripping gears. But their performances are no better than those of their supporting players, all of whom are very good, and some of whom are super. Memorable among the fat bits is Jane's mother, played by Mary Jackson whose simpleton smile and fervent repetition of her husband's last platitude about self-reliance makes a caustic comment on American Grandmotherism.

While you're watching Dick and Jane aim higher and higher and waiting for the retribution that seems inevitable (you remember that the Motion Picture Code used to require that crime be punished); you are laughing too hard to do much heavy thinking. But what stays with you after the end credits have faded is a concept as subversive as Chaplin's analogy between capitalism and murder in *Monsieur Verdoux*.

Something about how it's not the principle, but the scale that counts. Or bigger is better, especially in burglary.

—Janet Stevenson

Sadlowski

Continued from page 3.

The almost unbroken phalanx of "official family" support for McBride, from top international officers to local presi-

dents, greatly helped McBride with money, publicity, credibility and the loyalty of people within the union who have strong personal ambitions. Despite the active campaign and much outside publicity, many workers had heard little about the candidates or issues.

McBride's major campaign theme, that Sadlowski was bankrolled by outsiders and employers, seemed to make little impact. Red-baiting, which declined late in the campaign, hurt in a few locals, but

Robert Bambic, president of Local 2 in Joliet, said, "The communist shit don't work in big locals. There, every time somebody goes up against the foreman, they get called 'communist.' People don't pay any attention, but it's different in little locals."

With McBride's clear lead, outgoing president I. W. Abel will stay on during the steel negotiations that start this week. McBride's victory statement urged "all factions to close ranks" behind negotia-

tors. He took a swipe at Sadlowski, saying that "those who charge our union has lost its resolve and direction do not know our membership very well."

But a Sadlowski campaign activist thought there was another lesson: "The people who are dissatisfied now know something about organizing. They're not going to forget that." The conflict in the Steelworkers union and the career of Ed Sadlowski have not been permanently halted. ■

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