

ASSAULT WITH A DEADLY WEAPON: The Autobiography of a Street Criminal by "John Allen," edited by Diane Hall Kelly and Philip Heymann. Pantheon Books, New York, 1977, \$8.95

There's a scene early in *Assault With a Deadly Weapon (ADW)* that speaks volumes about ghetto life in America.

"John Allen," a youth gang leader, robber, dope dealer and pimp, has just shot a rival gang leader on the street. He arrives home to find the police in the process of arresting his grandfather (also named "John Allen") for the crime. "Let me go," the grandfather cries, "I haven't shot anyone in years."

ADW is a book about street crime as work—as a more or less carefully chosen occupation, picked from the few available to a young black man in the Washington (D.C.) ghetto. On one level, it is a powerful and often moving account of one man's effort to hold his own in a violent, dangerous, and frustrating world. On another level, it is a powerful, though implicit, critique of the way we approach the problem of urban crime.

Until recently, the key theme in American crime-control was the idea that crime was a kind of illness to be cured by "treating" offenders. But the book makes clear that there's nothing wrong with "John Allen"; he's not crazy, not unmotivated, not "deficient." He's a hard driving, often successful entrepreneur, whose skills and persistence have paid off in financial gain, status, and power in his community. He became leader of his gang when he was still much younger than most of the other gang members. He did well enough dealing dope to make a very good living and win a position of trust in the fierce and hierarchical world of the drug trade. Until a police bullet in the spine cut short his career and confined him to a wheelchair,

BOOKS

Crime does pay—better than most jobs open to ghetto kids



Jane Melnick

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he was a model of sorts to the young men who came up after him.

"Allen's" methods were often harsh. The book is a helpful reminder that there's nothing romantic—or revolutionary—about the brutal business of street crime. But "Allen's" violence was never random or "senseless," always used to advance the twin goals of getting ahead and making a reputation for himself—goals as prevalent among corporate executives as among street criminals.

"In life," Allen writes, "somebody's got to be stepped on"; a sentiment that would be echoed, at least privately, by bourgeois apologists from Hobbes to Henry Ford. "Allen's" commitment to gaining status and privilege through coercion and fear differs from the American norm mainly in the means available to put it into practice.

Nowadays, the idea of crime as illness has lost favor with American criminologists. The new conventional wisdom holds that we can stop crime by doling out stiffer sentences and building more and bigger prisons. *ADW* helps shatter that myth, too. "John Allen" went to prison, several times, often for long sentences. The experience didn't "deter" him from going back to his trade as soon as he got out. By his own account, the main effect of imprisonment was to teach him new and better ways to make a living by ripping other people off. "I didn't fear punishment," he notes, "because I knew I could handle it."

Prison won't stop the John Allens, because prison, like violence, is one of the routine risks of street crime as a job. And that job is an attractive and rewarding one, compared to what else is available in the wastelands of the inner cities. Until we begin to provide real alternatives, street crime will remain a favored occupation for the urban poor.

—Elliott Currie

Elliott Currie is a writer specializing in urban and criminal justice.

Surely goodness and mercy...

ON MORAL FICTION
By John Gardner
Basic Books, 1978, \$8.95

John Gardner, professor, popular novelist, Chaucerian scholar of high reputation, declares in this loose collection of essays that "moral art in its highest form holds up models of virtue, whether they be heroic models like Homer's Achilles or models of quiet endurance, like the coal miners, the steelworkers, the southern midwife or the soldiers in the photographs of W. Eugene Smith."

In his view, good art is moral art, and "morality means nothing more than doing what is unselfish, helpful, kind and noble-hearted." Like many of us, Garner seems frightened silly by the overstated brutality and cynicism of 20th century western society and art. He yearns for a myth of Man Triumphant, with virtue rewarded and the downtrodden poised perpetually for redemption.

One strives to agree with him. Pouncing on a critic who is urging modern artists to affirm Life, Virtue and Goodness is a little like kicking the doggie in the window. But Professor Gardner's medieval code must be called what it is: totalitarian optimism.

"Good art is...unsentimentally rooted in love." One wishes that were true as one wishes that Jimmy Carter's repeated invocations of love really meant something. But as much good art had been

rooted in hatred, anger, loneliness, desperation and ignoble ambition as love. The important thing is truth. I would rather the book had been called "On Truthful Fiction," to stress accuracy and authenticity in art, rather than kindness.

The truth is, since Auschwitz and Hiroshima artists have found it difficult to look to either God or the heart of man for love and instead have been developing the forms and languages of their arts into cool, beautiful structures. Mr. Gardner himself looks elsewhere than humanity's modern heart for his material: ancient myths (*Grendel*), fairy tales (*Nickel Mountain*) and medieval studies (*The Life and Times of Chaucer*).

"What's true for Hector and Achilles is true for all of us." Then isn't what is true for Raskolnikov and Yossarian true for all of us too, if presented cogently and artistically?

No. Good art is moral art, and morality is what Gardner tells us it is. Heroism is moral; abstraction and experimental art are not. Nor do the "gangs of absurdists and jubilant nihilists" meet his criteria. Tom Stoppard and William Gass are not first-rate artists for him. They create not works of "conviction" but mere "linguistic sculptures." He likes Euripides but not Albee, Bach but not John Cage, Shakespeare but not J.D. Salinger, Tolstoy but not Hawkes, Dante but not Cheever.

"Saul Bellow, actually not a novelist at heart but an essayist disguised as a writer of fiction," is characterized as a stand-up philosopher with canned laughter in the background. And "a brilliantly imagined novel about a rapist or murderer...is only in a marginal sense art." Richard Wright and Dostoyevsky be damned.

Looking to Camelot rather than Detroit for his material places Professor Gardner at odds with his contemporaries, who are trying to forge myths of post-industrial Man rather than conjure the pre-industrial version. Gardner is bored with modern art, impatient with this period of artistic transition in which method has replaced myth as preoccupation and Man is beyond nature: "We are living, for all practical purposes, in an age of mediocre art."

On Moral Fiction is a book of noble themes, but of minimal validity for modern readers. It is in fact a literary pilgrimage across America and Europe, sour, smug, diffusively written, and all the more devastating for its pretensions to being a labor of love.

Ultimately, Gardner can promise only that Achilles and other progeny of gods will rescue us, but we've had all that before. It is time now to understand the sons and daughters of women.

—Jeffrey Gillenkirk
Jeffrey Gillenkirk is a free-lance writer in Los Angeles who reviews regularly for IN THESE TIMES.



Novelist and critic John Gardner

Gardner is bored with modern art and impatient with this period in which man is beyond nature.



Ken Firestone

By David Helvarg

SAN DIEGO

A little after 3:00 on the morning of February 15th, a man described as being of medium height, in his mid-20s, with long brown hair walked into a Winchell's donut shop on Garnet Avenue here, broke two bottles of gasoline on the floor and ignited them, sending two employees scurrying and causing \$15,000 dollars damage. A short while later the *San Diego Evening Tribune* received a call from somebody "with a German accent" demanding that Winchell's Donuts not expand their chain into Ocean Beach.

A month later a second firebombing caused an additional \$35,000 to a second Winchell's Donut shop.

These two firebombings focused city-wide attention on the struggle of several Ocean Beach organizations to keep the Denny's/Winchell's fast food conglomerate from moving into their community.

Ocean Beach, generally referred to as OB, is a low income working-class youth community of about 15,000 located on a peninsula opposite the North Island Naval Air Station at the foot of San Diego Bay. Over the last ten years OB has developed a reputation as a center of countercultural lifestyle and political protest.

Although sometimes dismissed as a cultural anachronism, an out-of-date Berkeley with bodysurf, ten years of community organizing has generated a sense of neighborhood cohesiveness and power in OB rarely found in Southern California.

This is reflected in the various alternative institutions that operate in the OB area: a Free school now teaching its second generation of students, a community school offering free courses in everything from macrame to marxism, a child care project, a widely used "People's Food Store" food co-op and a popularly elected Community Planning Board,

DONUT WAR!

Ocean Beach was a quiet haven of counterculture life. And then Winchell's donuts moved in. They offered a wood exterior and a whole-wheat donut, but the residents weren't buying.

the outgrowth of a seven-year struggle against apartment and condominium developers.

In the fall of '77 the Denny's/Winchell's Corporation approached the Community Planning Board about the possibility of opening one of their donut shops at the entrance to OB. In trying to keep with "the spirit of the community" they offered to construct their shop with an all-wood decor and add a wholewheat organic donut to their standard selection.

The board voted to recommend against a building permit for Winchell's, citing potential traffic, safety and litter problems as influencing their decision. Over 50,000 cars a day pass the site of the proposed donut shop, and Robb Field, a park where many community children play, is located directly across the street from the site. Several board members also questioned the nutritional value of fast-food and the potential effect a franchise might have on local bakeries and restaurants.

The planning board's argument failed to impress the state Coastal Commission, however, which voted to grant Winchell's the right to build despite the fact that twice before it had voted to deny the 7-11 chain a permit to build at the same locale.

The Coastal Commission decision upset a number of local residents who, falling back on a tradition of anti-war, anti-development organizing, soon established the People Against Winchell's (PAW). PAW began distributing leaflets, petitions, a children's book (*The Wizard of O.B. vs. the Donut Giant*) and bumper stickers reading "Boycott Winchell's - Save O.B."

Soon these yellow warnings began appearing on car bumpers, in windows and on stop signs and walls throughout the neighborhood.

In late April the leadership of PAW held a strategy meeting at the Little Chef Cafe on Newport Street, the palm-lined "Main Street" of OB. Over shakes and coffee they discussed what new steps to take in the wake of the announcement by the Orange County based Denny's that despite the bombings and protests the company would "take its stand" in Ocean Beach.

The leadership of PAW reflects the larger demographics of Ocean Beach. There is a cab driver who is also an elected member of the planning board, an optical engineer, a housewife, a teacher at the Free School, a student, a welfare mother and a carpenter.

They, along with 30 to 50 of their friends and supporters, have been holding weekend vigils at the proposed shop site since mid-February. The main attraction at these rallies, other than the guitars and bake-sale pastries, has been a large red and black banner reading: "Honk if you're against Winchell's."

About half the cars that pass the corner during these rallies lean on their horns, creating hours of cacophony and a new category of experience for the petro-chemical culture of Southern California: the drive-through demo. "I think it's really kind of hypocritical," confided a San Diego policewoman watching one of the demonstrations, "they claim to be for ecology but then create all this noise pollution."

Rolling in dough.

According to its annual report Denny's Inc. made over \$20 million dollars profit last year on close to half a billion dollars revenue. It has over 600 restaurants and over 750 donut shops operating throughout the U.S. and the "Free World" (Puerto Rico, Guam, Taiwan, etc.).

Although over 90 percent of the hamburger market and 80 percent of the pizza and ice cream are already controlled by chains, Denny's sees tremendous expansion potential in the full menu and donut sectors of the economy. Americans consume about \$1.5 billion donuts a year, yet the sales of the three leading chains add up to only \$400 million (including Winchell's at \$100 million a year).

Representatives from Winchell's recently met with leaders of PAW. They said that OB was the dirtiest beach town they had ever seen and that a Winchell's donut shop would be an improvement, if only in terms of sanitation. They implied that they knew that PAW was linked with the recent bombings, a charge repeatedly and vigorously denied by both the Planning Board and PAW. ("Charges like that are very much like Winchell's donuts," said a PAW member, "tasteless and without substance.")

PAW is planning to start picketing Denny's corporate headquarters in La Mirada, Calif., and is encouraging the Community Planning Board to put the question of the donut shop on the ballot for the upcoming June elections.

At this point Denny's is unlikely to be swayed one way or another by a community-wide referendum. "We've already made our decision. We've got the permits we need and we are going to proceed with our construction," George Hellick, the marketing director for Winchell's told IN THESE TIMES.

"They're fools if they try and build here," said one source close to the donut underground. "Their new surveillance cameras won't protect them. Look what happened to that airport in Japan when they tried to ignore the local populace. You know it's a lot harder to get to an airport control tower than it is to a set of deep-fat fryers."

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