

ART «» ENTERTAINMENT

BOOKS

Women writers' plight

SILENCES

By Tillie Olsen
Delacorte, New York, \$10.95

There's a story Tillie Olsen tells about her Russian-born mother, an "incorruptible atheist" who died of cancer and left her children this dream she had one winter: There was a knock on the door and three wise men entered, dressed in beautiful robes of gold and blue and crimson that were covered with the intricate hand embroidery created so painstakingly by the village women.

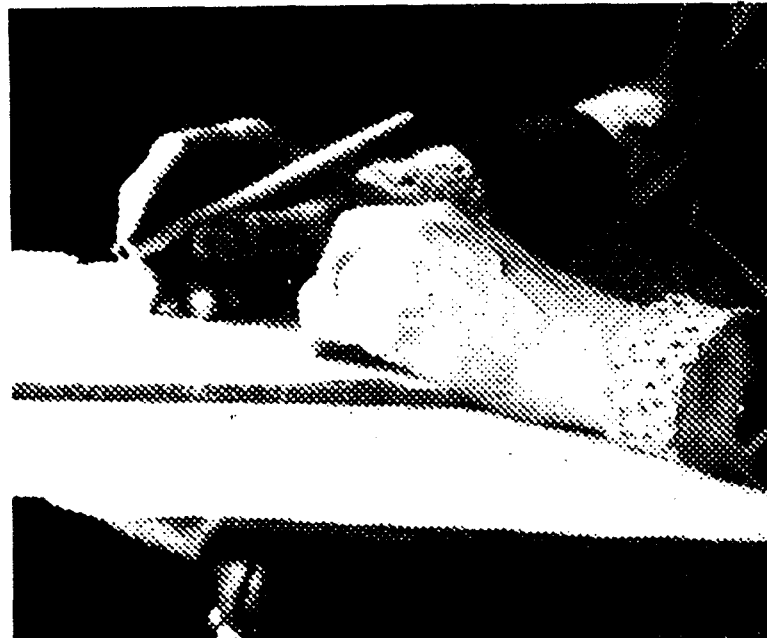
The first wise man said, "We have come to talk with you," but Tillie's mother replied, "Oh, no, I am not a believer!" When they insisted they had come to talk only about wisdom and about life, she allowed them to enter; but as they began talking she saw they were not men at all, but women.

And they were not dressed in royal colors but as peasants, their bodies not beautiful but bent, "used like a tool, if used." When she saw what the women were worshipping she felt like worshipping, too; because it was what she had worshipped all her life, and it had made her a revolutionary. She saw they knelt before the universal human infant, soon to be crucified—into sex, into race, into class.

Her mother's dream was a vision of the wrong in the world to Tillie Olsen, for whom the circumstances of raising and supporting four children took the bulk of time in the 20 years after she published her first work of fiction. *Silences* is about those "unnatural" silences of writers, when "circumstances, including class, color, sex; the times, climate into which one is born" work to thwart the creative pro-

cess. Part I brings together three previous essays: "Silences," "One Out of Twelve: Writers Who Are Women in Our Century," and her afterword to Rebecca Harding Davis' little-known novel, *Life in the Iron Mills*. Part II lets the writers speak for themselves. Through an accretion of anecdote, diary entries, letters and lists we see the everyday struggle of writers (some as great in achievement as Joseph Conrad and Virginia Woolf) to get to their work, complete and deliver it to the world in its envisioned form. Part III includes excerpts from Davis' *Life in the Iron Mills* and Baudelaire's *My Heart Laid Bare*.

Some of the book's richest moments come as Olsen examines at length the silence of a writer whose life and work, like Davis', she has recovered from decades of neglect. Here she offers a rare look at what one writer most cherishes in another. She discovered *Life in the Iron Mills* as a magazine serial when she was 15, and had bought some old volumes of *Atlantic Monthly* in an Omaha junkshop. Olsen recognized some of herself in the working-class characters: "To those of us, descendants of their class, hungry for any rendering of what our vanished people were like... *Life in the Iron Mills* is immeasurably valuable. Details, questions, Vision, found nowhere else—dignified into literature." It helped shore up the writer's belief that she had something important to say, and the first chapters of a novel then called *The Iron Throat* were published in a 1934 *Partisan Review*, when Olsen was 21 years old. Forty years later she ended one of her own silences, when she recovered that book's unfinished chapters, completing and publishing them



Tillie Olsen explores a writer's unnatural silences.

as the novel *Yonnondio*.

Although Olsen writes that *Silences* is intended to "rededicate and encourage" writers, and by extension their partners, readers, it achieves something more: A de-mythologizing of the creative process of a starving writer in a cold garret—that essential misery of the working writer who must suffer to create. "Blight never does good to a tree," she quotes William Blake, "...but if it still bear fruit, let none say that the fruit was in consequence of the blight." The experience in these writers' words is one of consistent struggle for concentration, time and money; a stroking of the spirit against self-doubt and the indifference of the unexpected world. In her words:

"The attitude: nobody owes you (the writer) anything; the world never asked you to write. My long ago and still instinctive response: What's wrong with the world then, that it doesn't ask—and make it possible—for people to raise and contribute the best that is in them."

There is a special section on the writer-woman, testimony of the writing wives, mothers and single women to their special obstacles: a history of prejudice, restriction, and the sad ambuscade of love:

"The oppression of women is like no other form of oppression

(class, color—though these have parallels). It is an oppression entangled through with human love, human need, genuine (core) human satisfactions... How to separate out the chains from the bonds, the harms from the value, the truth from the lies."

It's a human as well as a writer's task, Tillie Olsen reminds us in a footnote. For those who have read her prize-winning novella, *Tell Me a Riddle*, *Silences* will be familiar in its repeated quotes and phrases that echo the most resonant parts of what she wants to say. And though some might find a book chapter headed "Acerbs, Asides, Amulets, Exhumations, Sources, Deepenings, Roundings, Expansions" a bit unwieldy, remember this non-fiction book is first of all the work of a fiction writer; her "deepenings and roundings" convey a richer truth than a national conference on creativity (from which she also quotes) can hope to deliver alone.

All Tillie Olsen has assembled here of writers' feelings on their work and working circumstances hint there is much more to be heard on this subject. She has begun generously, in her writer's voice, to speak some of the silences of literature.

—Barbara Bedway
Barbara Bedway is a free-lance writer in New York City.

A feminist view of global catastrophe

LUCIFER'S HAMMER

By Larry Niven & Jerry Pournelle
Fawcett Crest, New York, \$2.50

WALK TO THE END OF THE WORLD

By Suzy McKee Charnas
Ballantine Books, N.Y., \$1.25

Global catastrophe and what happens after is a recurring theme in science fiction. It offers authors a chance to show what they believe is basic in human nature once civilization's slate is wiped clean.

Too often, what emerges shows the cautious conservatism with which many science fiction writers view society. *Lucifer's Hammer*, by two of the field's ablest and best known authors, is a case in point.

Niven and Pournelle have produced a fast-moving action novel. When a comet strikes the Earth, earthquakes, tidal waves, windstorms and massive flooding bring down civilization as we know it. Survivors in a small area of California, including refugees from Los Angeles, struggle to keep alive and rebuild.

As the plot develops, the authors give free rein to their prejudices. Environmentalists take a particularly hard bruising, even before the comet strikes. One of the main characters, a television reporter, is thrown into sudden rage by a chance meeting with a spokeswoman for the "People's Lobby," who expresses concern about fluorocarbon contamination of the ozone layer. After the catastrophe, environmentalists become a mindless source of opposition to salvaging what technology is left.

Women, however strong or independent, all "instinctively" attach themselves to the strongest male available after the disaster.

How will the world of *Lucifer's Hammer* differ from ours after the survivors have rebuilt? Not much—except it will be purged of what the authors plain-

ly see as faddish, soft-headed liberalism.

The conservatism of *Lucifer's Hammer* is clearer next to *Walk to the End of the World* by Suzy McKee Charnas.

Walk is almost a world built by carrying Niven's and Pournelle's prejudices to extremes.

The world of *Walk* is the Holdfast, a precarious foothold created by the descendants of high officials who sat out a nuclear war in shelters. Unable to face their guilt for the disaster, they blame all who once challenged their power: wild animals, the colored races, rebellious youth, "and most of all the men's own cunning, greedy females." Of these "unmen" only women and the young remain. Society is built around their rigid subordination.

A group of rebels against these rigid patterns sets out across the length of the Holdfast. The central man in the group is Eykar Bey, a son who has learned his father's identity and is thereby doomed by the beliefs of the Holdfast to a deadly confrontation with him. Along the way the men pick up Aldera, a "fem" content to use the men while she seeks to guarantee the survival of the subjugated women.

During the course of the journey, Charnas uses Aldera's viewpoint to question accepted images in science fiction. Raf Maggomas, Bey's father, is a brilliant, rebellious inventor-turned-ruler, a familiar figure in the work of classic science fiction authors such as E.E. Smith and John W. Campbell. He is also, when his victims are accepted as persons, a callous, ruthless mass murderer.

It would be easy for such a book to become overstated and shrill. Charnas avoids this pitfall, and uses good writing, vivid imagination, and fully-developed characters to question conventional thinking about sex roles and male superiority.

—Bob McMahon

Can a new left emerge and grow in the United States in the 1970s and '80s?

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MOVIES

Sgt. Pepper submarines to new lows

Peter Frampton sings with a bottle of murine in each eye.

SGT. PEPPER'S LONELY HEARTS CLUB BAND

Screenplay by Henry Edwards
Directed by Michael Schultz
Produced by Robert Stigwood
RSO film, a Universal release

I walked into the theater ten minutes late, with the slightest of expectations, but quickly realized I had not set my sights low enough and that I should have come two hours late instead. This film has everything: sure-draw headliners backed by star-studded cameos, an already-proven score, with gimmicks lifted from *Star Wars* should all else fail. It has everything, that is, except a reason to exist.

Not content with ripping off what little plot there is in this blithering embarrassment from the unpretentious film *Yellow Submarine*, the people responsible have also seen fit to pillage and plunder some of the finest popular music of our time. It's impossible to believe the Beatles' music could be made to sound so unrelievedly bad until you hear the Bee Gees' version of "A Day in the Life," or Peter Frampton—with a bottle of Murine in each eye—doing "Long and Winding Road."

As for acting, well, Frampton and the Brothers Gibb (together, the Lonely Hearts Club Band) worked up through the ranks of the hard way—by selling millions of

records. To call their performance catatonic would be kindness. Robin Gibb, in particular, reacts to every situation with a look of stupefied bewilderment that makes you want to reach up onto the screen to shake him out of it. Still, this is to be expected. The real mystery is why an actor of Donald Pleasence's calibre became embedded in such a piece of cement, and why he seems no more out of place here than the other zombies. The only ones who deliver themselves with any grace are Steve Martin, who has all-too-brief a scene as the demented Dr. Maxwell Edison, and Aerosmith, who plays the Future Villain Band. Perhaps "grace" is not *le mot juste*, but whatever Aerosmith has separates them from the Bee Gees, who sing "I Want You" as if they were addressing a cheeseburger.

Which brings us to the whole question of interpretation. "Strawberry Fields Forever," one of the most haunting evocations of alienation ever recorded, is here a romantic ballad. Alice Cooper transforms "Because," a song of spacious wonder, into something like his own "Dead Babies." Even the title song has been tampered with. By arranging and directing the music in this film, George Martin has besmirched his entire history of collaboration with the Beatles. He will never be able to live it down.

Producer Robert Stigwood need not worry, since he has more or less made a career out of bad taste, while director Michael Schultz (whose previous credits include the immortal *Car Wash* and *Cooley High*) is just doing what comes naturally. We

must single out writer Henry Edwards, though, for having concocted the emptiest grab-bag of a script since *Star Wars*, from which he borrows heavily. The Future Villain Band is a sort of collective Darth Vader, Mean Mr. Mustard's "Computerettes" could be second cousins to C3PO, and there is even a "silver hammer" fight between Dr. Maxwell Edison and one of the Gibblets that parallels the now-famous swords of light. And oh, yes, the story: *a la Yellow Submarine*, bad guys steal magic instruments, good guys get them back, music saves the world—and I am the Sheik of Araby.

Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to turn off the lights, put on my copy of *Sgt. Pepper*—the original—and try to forget.

—Kurt Luchs

Kurt Luchs is a free-lance writer and one-third of the Luchs Brothers, a comedy group from Wheaton, Ill.



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