



**MEDIA**

## Amerika's afterword: a TV state of mind

By Jeremiah Creedon

**W**ORD REACHED ME RATHER late that Ted Koppel and ABC were staging the final chapter of their miniseries *Amerika* in my own hometown. I'm talking about Koppel's *Viewpoint* program, which aired live from an auditorium on the University of Minnesota campus here a night after the actual drama had ended. It seemed that every journalist in the Twin Cities was invited to both the show and an earlier party (where Ted dedicated the local journalism school's new Silha Center for Media Ethics and Law). I, however, was not.

That morning I called ABC's field office to report the oversight. I assumed naively that someone in Ted's harem of associate producers would slip me on the guest list. I explained how the juncture of media ethics and Ted and the issues raised by *Amerika* resonated with ironic possibilities. The line went dead as the young woman helping me apparently stopped to consider them. "Forgive me for not knowing," she said finally, "but what sort of paper is it exactly that you're writing for?"

"Socialist," I said.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, "we're absolutely out of tickets. There's just no room! I suggest you watch our show on television and write about it that way."

**Conceptual protests:** Minutes before showtime I panhandled a ticket on the auditorium steps. The woman who gave it to me worked for the state League of Rural Voters,

one of three or four small groups that had shown up to criticize the miniseries. The league's flyer argued that a farm crisis already existed in this country, so why blame it as *Amerika* did on an imaginary Soviet invasion? Someone else's leaflet warned that *Amerika* was meant to prepare us for a war in defense of "non-union Coors Beer, Life Insurance and Jello." Two people wandered about wearing cardboard televisions on their heads—art students, I figured, disgruntled with the medium as a concept.

I stood in the cold long enough to express a vague solidarity and then hurried inside to hobnob with my colleagues. I was shocked to find a crowd dressed for the opera. There were also more than a few empty seats, and I was suddenly angry—at myself, for not asking a date along like most everyone else. It was dawning on me that the debate over *Amerika* was just an excuse to go out on the town. No one had watched much of the show anyway. The real allure was to see Ted and perhaps to ask an inane question if civic concern (or a big ego) so compelled you.

The alpha male himself was sitting onstage behind a long low desk. With Ted were Donald Wrye, who wrote and directed *Amerika*, and Brandon Stoddard, ABC's entertainment chief. The others were only present as images via hookups to Washington, Moscow and so forth. They included Ted Turner of Turner Broadcasting; Jeane Kirkpatrick, the former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations; Theodore Sorensen, a former JFK man

serving as the U.N.'s lawyer; and Gennadi Gerasimov, a spokesman for the Soviet foreign ministry.

The bank of video monitors on which we could see them reminded me of the set from *Hollywood Squares*.

**Walking on air:** "Ten seconds," someone said. We were all cringing beneath the brilliant lights that had been thrown on to illuminate us. I noticed that a roving cameraman who was kneeling beside me in the aisle had broken into a sweat. His job was to pan for crowd reaction. Several staff women (the harem) were moving around with the prim self-possession of flight attendants. Their job was to select those questioners who best represented the

**Our problem in addressing the story went beyond the fact that no one had seen it. I saw that most people didn't know what fiction was.**

nation's great diversity. They seemed to be saying with body language that going on the air was just another facet of their routinely exciting lives, not the thrill of a lifetime I was feeling as a member of the masses.

The next 90 minutes were a mess. The token Russian kept hearing the echo of his own voice, and Jeane Kirkpatrick's opinion could only be appreciated by a small elite—

perhaps nothing new, except in this case her following was further reduced to those who could read lips. Technical matters aside, content was a problem as well. The debate took on the dreaded quality of those classes in school when it was obvious to all except the teacher that no one had read the assignment. Discussion was reduced to the exchange of generalities between those who least feared revealing how little they knew.

Afterward, I talked to several people who were concerned that the nation would think less of Minnesota now, having seen the sort of individuals who were chosen to speak for us. I assured them otherwise but quickly fell silent. It was like that moment when you first see a friend's bad haircut—easy to say you like it, but very difficult to explain why.

My second reaction was to blame the harem. They, after all, were culling through the questions and deciding which people would be allowed to approach the microphones. Watching them was to see what those observers of power like Shakespeare and Hugh Sidey were always talking about. Ted's view of reality, like King Lear's or Ronald Reagan's, could be altered on a given night by the way his underlings presented it to him. When they fared poorly, so did he.

My third reaction was to assault the medium as a concept, which the art students outside had shown me meant simply holding a glass up to its own image. A live "discussion" like *Viewpoint* could never rise above its initially ridiculous premise: that such a spectacle might

foster the lively and equitable exchange of ideas. Those intrepid or foolish enough to challenge the experts, with their credentials and forensic advantage, were doomed to be crushed like peasants pitting shovels against tanks.

**Beyond ignorance:** The image of a futile grassroots revolt leads us finally to consider *Amerika* itself. Our problem in addressing the story went beyond the fact that no one had seen it. I realized while listening to the debate that most Americans didn't know what fiction was, let alone how to talk about it. Even if someone had a point to make about the show, no common terms existed for doing so. Fact was fact, but fiction varied in its meaning from superfluous fantasy to heinous lie. Few granted the word its more positive connotations.

We're dealing here with a deep cultural prejudice against the imagination. I once asked Minnesota's Republican Sen. Rudy Boschwitz whether he ever read novels; he more or less told me that life was too short, and I sensed he viewed the genre with profound distrust. He was, however, reading a biography of Lyndon Johnson, or at least planning to—which as his constituent gave me a sense of security I would not have felt had he been lost in *Moby Dick* or *Tolstoy* or *Lord Jim*.

Some would like to believe this genteel illiteracy is limited to the New Right, but it just isn't so. Our exposure to fiction is now largely through television and film, both of which radically alter the nature of fictional characters—and thus the way we address them. The old literary idea that fiction is among other things a way to understand atypical beings (or typical beings in atypical situations) is rejected by the mass media and its mass audience. Every character becomes a composite of a special interest or demographic block, and we worry how their reception at large will affect our lives. An example is *The Color Purple*, which as a movie was debated for its negative portrayal of black men. Transposing the work to film destroyed the intimate experience offered by the book, and along with it went the sense of the reader's generosity that is crucial to completing a fiction.

The sad result, as we saw on *Viewpoint*, was our inability to engage in a civilizing sort of play.

The monologue is a distrusted genre as well, and by now I was quite alone on the auditorium steps. Below me on the plaza was a broken television cracked in half like a big egg. I suddenly remembered how my mother spent years telling me to "get a job in TV." And the funny thing was for the first time ever I had this crazy notion that maybe she was right. ■

Jeremiah Creedon is a Minneapolis-based freelance writer.



## Your Native Land, Your Life

By Adrienne Rich  
W.W. Norton & Company,  
113 pp, \$6.95

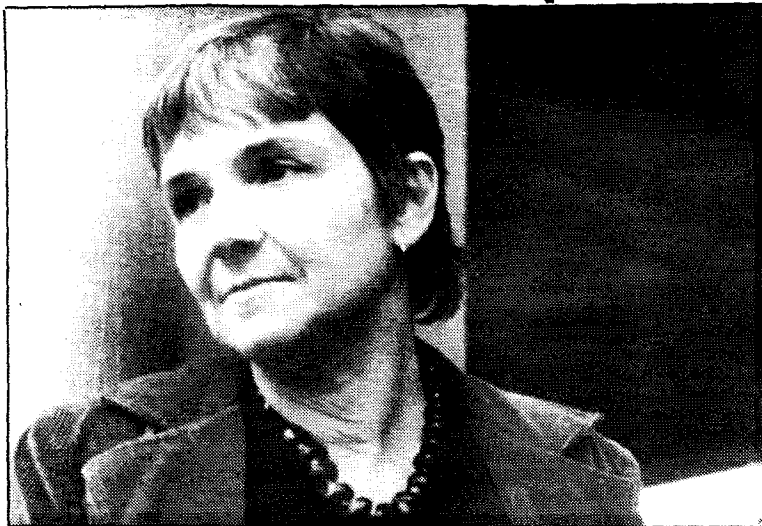
By Maggie Garb

**A**DRIENNE RICH, REBELLIOUS woman, lesbian activist, distinguished poet, has reached middle age. In a mid-life crisis peculiar to a lesbian poet, Rich has begun to reckon with her past—the politics, culture and education that created her—and to rename and redefine herself in the present. This act is celebrated, examined and anguished over in Rich's most recent collection of poems, *Your Native Land, Your Life*.

Because Rich's poetry is so apparently social and opinionated it is tempting to review its arguments, to applaud the poet's courageous defiance of what have been the acceptable and expected activities for women and for artists. But such a review would be necessarily incomplete. For Rich, politics, poetry and personal life are forever intertwined. To speak of one and not the others is to misstate the facts.

In this, her 12th collection of poems, Rich has attempted to pull together the many strands of her life, to reshape the personalities, places and inner forces that have affected her. The poet becomes one of her favorite, and often repeated, metaphors: the hands of a woman "turning in her lap" absently braiding "bits of yarn, calico and velvet scraps."

The book is divided into three parts: "Sources," "North American Time" and "Contradictions: Tracking Poems." In them Rich explores her struggle in coming to terms with her roots and the ongoing process of becoming in the life of a white North American woman. The



Adrienne Rich: weaving together the many strands of art and life.

## Life's Rich pageant through middle age

language here is more sparse and the poems more concise than some of Rich's earlier works, as if she has eliminated the extraneous emotions and words in an effort to expose only the dark undercurrents of her life. There is little melody, only the spoken word or the searching mind, as in the third section of "Sources," where she looks into her childhood for the origins of her power.

*From where? the voice asks coldly.  
This is the voice in cold morning  
air*

*that pierces dreams. From where  
does your strength come?*

*Old things...*

*From where does your  
strength come, you Southern  
Jew?*

split at the root, raised in a  
castle of air?

The images, and certainly the questions, are stark, almost frightening.

But at times, like a woman who is often lost in the vague messages of memory, Rich seems to lose her concentration and lapse into saccharine sentimentality. While these poems are welcome relief in the book's stark atmosphere, they are weaker and less finely honed; but, as she explains, the concrete images don't always tell the whole story:

*the body's pain and the pain on  
the streets*

*are not the same but you can  
learn*

*from the edges that blur O you  
who love clear edges*

*more than anything watch the*

edges that blur.

With *Your Native Land, Your Life* we confront a woman who has returned to her sources, who has studied her progress from then to now. She begins to understand her confused Southern childhood. Then she moves on to recognize herself as the frustrated '50s wife, mother and polite imitator of Auden and Yeats. Her life and work, which have always been intimately

## LITERATURE

linked, progressed from young widow to disenchanted formalist through spiritual convalescence to feminist leader, lesbian and the voice of a new, powerful, womanly language. As Rich has often said, throughout her many changes she has always been primarily a poet.

And while the passage of time and the lifeline of change may seem a linear progression, Rich has discovered the circular rhythm in these events. *Your Native Land, Your Life* presents the thoughts of a woman in her 58th year, yet it is also a response to the younger woman Rich once was. In one of her first published poems, a description of her feelings about being young entitled "The Middle-aged" and written in 1955, Rich wrote:

*They were so kind,  
Would have given us anything; the  
bowl of fruit*

*Was filled for us, there was a room  
upstairs*

*We must call ours: but twenty  
years of living*

*They could not give.*

*Your Native Land, Your Life* presents a woman who now possesses those 20 years, and can see her struggle with remarkable clarity.

This book also offers proof that change is never complete and rev-

olution is never a full break with the past, but demands recognizing and coming to terms with an entire heritage. Throughout the book's first section, Rich travels through the places and emotions of her childhood and the early years of her marriage. The eldest daughter of a Jewish father and a Protestant mother, she begins to challenge and ultimately understand her father's desire for assimilation, her mother's striving for propriety and her husband's loneliness.

"Split at the root," she defines herself, continuing "white-skinned social christian/ neither gentile nor Jew/ through the immense silence/ of the Holocaust/ I had no idea of what I had been spared." In poems that seem like sections stolen from a diary she speaks directly to her father and her husband, describing her anger and confusion over what they had said and what they stood for. But she concludes with sympathy:

*I think you thought there was no  
place for you, and perhaps there  
was none then, and perhaps there  
is none now; but we will have to  
make it, we who want an end to  
suffering, who want to change the  
laws of history, if we are not to give  
ourselves away.*

Rich has always been a poet struggling to find a place for herself, to find a language devoid of patriarchal domination and heterosexual assumptions. Sometimes her language swells with such political fervor that didacticism obstructs artistic integrity, but Rich's "search for a common language" has not been in vain. As anyone who has followed her work from its formalist beginnings knows, Rich has found a voice that is vulnerable, honest and speaks to the inner turmoil of being a woman, a lesbian and an outsider. ■

## A poet's prose: not prosaic

### Blood, Bread, and Poetry

By Adrienne Rich  
W.W. Norton & Company,  
238 pp., \$7.95

By Maggie Garb

**B**ECAUSE POETRY CAN BE SO dense and abstruse you often feel like you have discovered a hot gossip magazine when you open a book of prose by a favorite poet. But Adrienne Rich's most recent collection of prose, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry*, contains few surprises. Her poems are so honest and accessible that they need little explanation. Rich is an eloquent writer and a profound intellect; her prose serves as an expansion of previously stated ideas and includes a type of spiritual autobiography of a woman who is constantly questioning her politics, beliefs and society.

*Blood, Bread, and Poetry* is a

selection of lectures and articles written from 1979 to 1985 and, as Rich says in the foreword, "a timeline of [her] travels since 1978." The lectures, mainly addressed to college women, have a conversational tone. The dense essays are more informative, with lengthy footnotes and references to the people and publications that have influenced Rich's thought. Both essays and lectures serve as clear statements of Rich's politics, and all are thought-provoking.

Throughout the book Rich is constantly defining and redefining herself and, as always, searching for new language to clarify her issues. Whether examining compulsory heterosexuality, racism in the women's movement, the erasure of women's history or feminist criticism, Rich is explaining herself. She approaches each phenomenon from a position of overt self-consciousness, attempting to acknowledge who and where she is

as she examines her society. As she says, "My essay is founded on the belief that we all think from within the limits of certain solipsisms—usually linked with privilege, racial, cultural and economic as well as sexual—which present themselves as 'universal,' 'the ways things are,' 'all women,' etc., etc. I wrote it equally out of the belief that in becoming conscious of our solipsisms we have certain kinds of choices, that we can and must re-educate ourselves." She identifies herself—a white, Jewish, North American lesbian feminist—over and over as if to remind us that no idea is objective, no individual life separate from work, politics or culture.

This is obviously what Rich is calling for in feminist criticism, that the writer have the courage to write in a highly personal tone, always recognizing who she is and her cultural limitations. As Rich says, the feminist critic "has a responsibility

not to read, think, write and act as if all women had the same privileges, or to assume that privilege confers some kind of special vision. She has a responsibility to be as clear as possible about the compromises she makes, about her own fear and trembling as she sits down to write; to admit her limitations when she picks up work by women who write from a very different culture and source, to admit to feelings of confusion and being out of her depth."

Among the central themes, and probably the most disturbing question, running throughout the 15 essays in this book is the issue of free choice. As Rich speaks of education, sexuality, history, government, geography, the recurrent questions are, did we choose any of these for ourselves? How limited were our choices? In the provocative essay "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence," Rich argues that heterosexuality is a "political institution which disempowers women," and that heterosexuality is a choice that is never free, but always easy.

She does not condemn heterosexual relationships, but states, "Within the institution [of heterosexuality] exist, of course, qualitative differences of experience; but the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality, and in the absence of choice, women will remain dependent upon the chance or luck of particular relationships and will have no collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives."

Choice is again the theme of "Resisting Amnesia," a lecture about the lack of a history that includes women, or the distortion of the role of women in history. The choice here is of becoming "consciously historical" or allowing ourselves to rest in the comfort of nostalgia and the ease of accessible mainstream history. She argues that stories in history books see "only certain kinds of human lives as valuable, as deserving of a history at all." And she challenges us to choose, to search out the rest of the story, to recover that which has been lost or erased. ■