

By Lawrence Weschler

EARLIER THIS MONTH, THE *NEW YORK Post*, recently purchased by millionaire real estate developer Peter Kalikow from billionaire media tycoon Rupert Murdoch for a cool \$37 million, had itself a real scoop. Its March 10 final edition featured a full-page cover photo of a black woman, bundled in a plain winter coat, plain white plastic shopping bag tucked under her arm, standing in front of a boarded-up storefront and staring, somewhat contemptuously, at the camera. "BOGGS BEGS" proclaimed the boldface headline, under which a caption, in breathless italics, went on to elaborate: "This exclusive *Post* photo shows Billie Boggs panhandling on a midtown sidewalk. As a beggar, Boggs puts on a different face than she displays in her public appearances. She's been a celebrity since she was picked up in the city's drive to take the mentally-ill homeless off the streets. She said she took to the street on Sunday near her Times Square hotel—cursing at those who recognized and harassed her—because she had run out of money. Boggs said she collected \$10 in about an hour and pledged it 'will never happen again.'"

A few pages in, another large photo of Boggs on the street showed, in the words of its caption, "Billie Boggs panhandling. She said she 'needed \$10 to eat.'" "Billie Boggs confesses she was begging," ran the smaller-face headline above that photo; "I NEEDED \$10 TO SURVIVE" blared the much larger headline above the accompanying article. That article in turn resumed the theme of guilty knowledge: "Billie Boggs admitted yesterday she was panhandling over the weekend...."

What's the point? At first we had a hard time figuring out what precisely the story was here, the exclusive, the scoop. The fact that a once homeless woman, who the city had tried to have committed to a mental asylum but who had successfully fought off such incarceration in court, proving her sanity to the satisfaction of several expert witnesses and a presiding judge—that such a woman, though now admittedly housed in a single residence occupancy hotel, was still poor and hence still needed to panhandle: *that was a story?* That was news? As we examined the photos and the article more carefully, however, we began to realize that we weren't so much dealing with a fact here as a slant, not so much a text as a subtext. Key in this context was the choice of words—*confesses, admits, puts on a different face*—as if this woman's behavior were dark and secret, as if she'd somehow been attempting to veil that shameful behavior and it was only thanks to the *Post's* brilliant detective work that that veil had now been shunted aside, revealing her for what she always really was: a panhandler!

In this context, the business about her "pledging" to "never do it again" was particularly telling. It was as if Boggs had once more been caught engaged in some sort of recurring compulsive perversion, like drug-taking ("Billie, how many times do we have to tell you? *Just say no!*"), or even more like sexual exhibitionism. There she was again, exposing herself in public, and now, caught, she was once again offering up one of those pathetic, lame promises never to do it again. (Of course, panhandling *does* have a certain structural relationship with exhibitionism



Billie Boggs, who was thrown into a mental asylum for being homeless on the streets of New York—and later released after proving her sanity—has again become a center of attention.

New York media exposes shame of being homeless

—anonymous strangers opening themselves out before other passing strangers—only, it's not the panhandler whose dirty secret gets exposed in the interaction, but rather the passing citizen's, whose relative wealth and indifference is suddenly laid bare.)

The question of what business the *Post* (or we) had demanding or expecting that Boggs pledge never to do it again was never addressed in the piece. (Now, if Kalikow had announced that he was pledging a donation, an endowment, such that Boggs would never want for \$10 and therefore never *need* to do it again—that might have been news.) The reason the piece offered for Boggs' assurance that she'd never do it again was that she'd in the meantime secured a nest egg, "amounting to between \$8,000 and \$9,000," 18 months' worth of Social Security checks that her sisters had been withholding from her during the period they'd been trying to get her committed. The *Post* made it sound like the \$8,000-9,000 was some lavish sum, further undercutting her claim on our sympathies or even her right to have been out there panhandling (though, if you think about it, \$9,000 over 18 months is hardly going to keep anyone in New York City off the streets).

We thought about all that for a while and then set our thoughts aside, assuming that this had just been one more quirky and idiosyncratic instance of coverage on the part of a journal never particularly notorious for its sobriety. But then, to our surprise, virtually all the local television news programs that evening took up the *Post's* scoop—or else generated parallel scoops of their own—in many instances leading off their telecasts with this latest and most momentous development in the Boggs case, this *scandale*. Again, the subtext in virtually all these reports was that the true nature of this woman whose plight had been obsessing the city for weeks had now somehow shown through. She was shown to be a duplicitous back-slider, or else, perhaps, just crazy after all. "I feel sad," Mayor Koch was quoted as saying, "absolutely sad [about] someone who left the hospital against the will of the examining doctors—who, had she stayed there, would have received medical treatment that might have stabilized her on a permanent basis." To hear the mayor tell it, it wasn't \$10 Boggs needed to survive but rather psychotropic drugs.

The suspicion that panhandlers are either crazed or dissembling, of course, has

a rich heritage. In the midst of this recent flare-up, we were reminded of at-that-time presidential counsellor Edwin Meese's comments just before Christmas in 1983 when he was asked whether he thought people were going hungry voluntarily. "Well," he replied, "I think some people are going to the soup kitchens voluntarily. I know we've had considerable information that people go to the soup kitchens because the food is free and that's easier than paying for it."

They're crazy, they're lazy—the onus, at any rate, is on them.

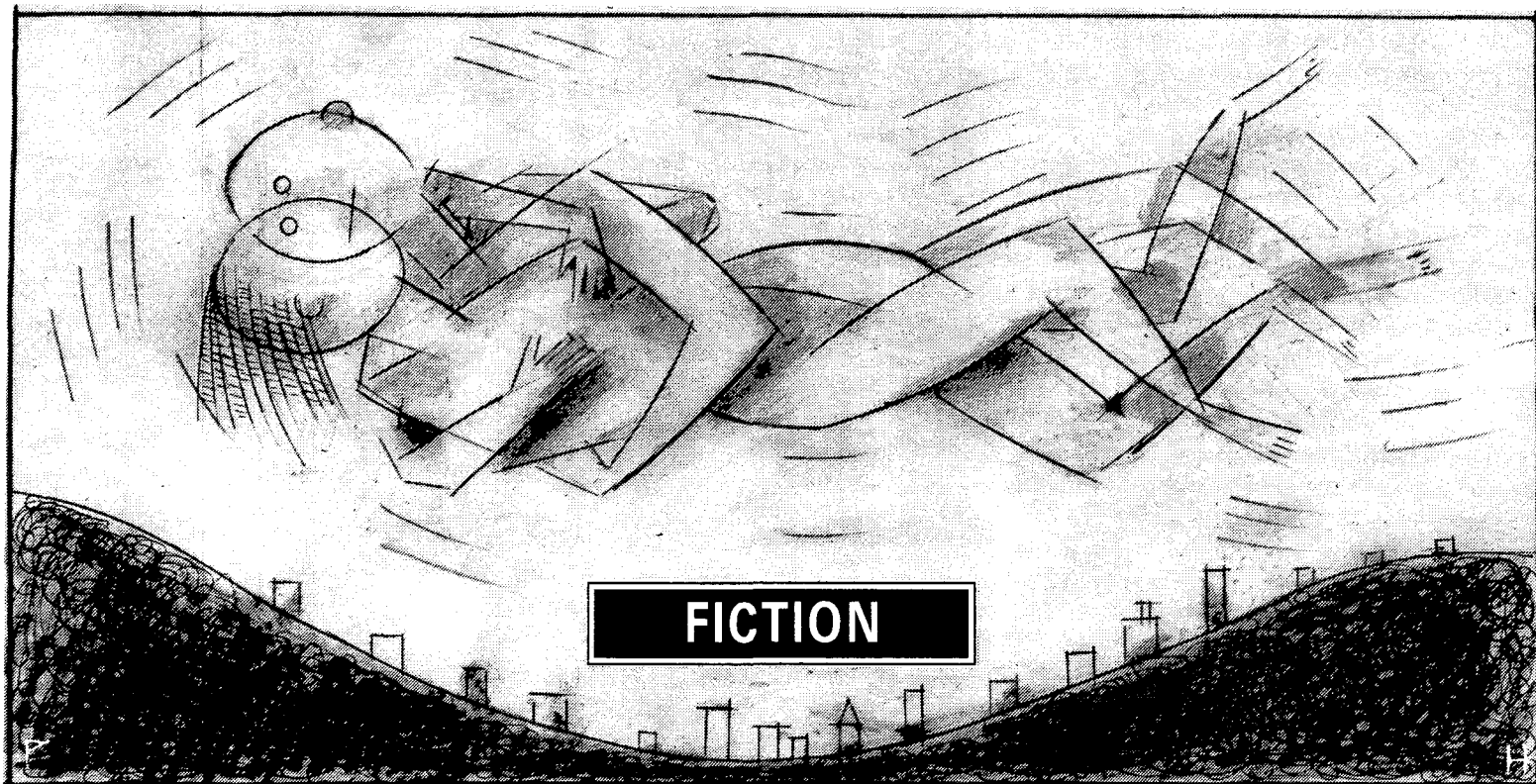
Something shameful: This most recent Boggs incident, however, also reminded us of something else: a passage in *Good Morning, Midnight*, Jean Rhys' extraordinary 1939 novel of life down-and-out in Paris during the Depression. At one point in that story, Rhys' narrator, Sasha Jansen, is confronted by the manager of the boutique where she has briefly been employed, overworked and underpaid as a sales clerk. "He looks at me

When Billie Boggs got caught panhandling by the *New York Post*, they played it up as if it were a crime to be poor.

with distaste," Rhys has Jansen record. "Plat du jour—boiled eyes, served cold.... Well, let's argue this out, Mr. Blank. You, who represent Society, have the right to pay me 400 francs a month. That's my market value, for I am an inefficient member of Society, slow on the uptake, uncertain, slightly damaged in the fray, there's no denying it. So you have the right to pay me 400 francs a month, to lodge me in a small, dark room, to clothe me shabbily, to harass me with worry and monotony and unsatisfied longings 'til you get me to the point where I blush at a look, cry at a word. We can't all be happy, we can't all be rich, we can't all be lucky—and it would be so much less fun if we were. Isn't it so, Mr. Blank? There must be the dark background to show up the bright colors. Some must cry so that others will be able to laugh all the more heartily. Sacrifices are necessary.... Let's say that you have this mystical right to cut my legs off. But the right to ridicule me afterward because I am a cripple—no, that I think you haven't got. And that's the right you hold most dearly, isn't it? You must be able to despise the people you exploit."

For a bracing moment, reading Rhys' story one imagines that her character Jansen is actually saying these things to her employer. But Rhys quickly upends the fantasy: "Did I say all this? Of course I didn't. I didn't even think it." Half a century later, however, that silent tirade rose up at us once again as we gazed at that exclusive photo on the *Post's* front page and endured all those other exclusive exposés on the television news.

There is indeed something shameful about all the homeless beggars panhandling the mean streets of New York this bitter winter. Utterly shameful. But it's not the beggars. ■ Lawrence Weschler is a staff writer for the *New Yorker*.



Showdown

By Jorge Amado
Translated by Gregory Rabassa
Bantam, 422 pp., \$18.95

By Pat Aufderheide

JORGE AMADO, WHOSE LATEST novel *Showdown* has been given a splashy promotion by Bantam, may now finally become a literary household word in the U.S. Elsewhere, especially in his native Brazil, he has been a vastly popular novelist since the '30s.

Amado's reputation has been given a buffing by all the critical hype around the Latin American literary "boom," but he's an uneasy fit in the halls of great literature. He's more like an exuberant, improbably tropical mix of Howard Fast and Danielle Steele.

His early literary career was considerably more sober, and less lucrative. In the '30s Amado, son of a cacao plantation owner in the state of Bahia, was a staunch supporter of the Brazilian Communist Party. He wrote self-consciously "proletarian novels," with plots drawn along ideological lines: *Cacao* (1933), about exploitation of black and

Despite his formidable talents, Jorge Amado is an uneasy fit in the halls of great literature.

mulatto plantation workers; *Sweat* (1934), about the world of urban dockworkers and prostitutes of Bahian capital Salvador; *Jubiaba* (1935), which shocked racist literati with its black hero. His popularity was unpopular with Brazil's Vargas regime, which banned his books in 1938.

By the time he returned from roving exile in 1943, Amado had mel-

Amado's Brazil: sprawling epics for a sprawling land

lowed—not in his populism, but in his literary style. *The Violent Land*, about plantation politics in the cacao zone, may still be his masterpiece. In *The Violent Land* Amado also found the tone that made his novels more than political schemas: it is thick with sex, battles over honor, and local ritual.

Soft porn and populism: Amado was part of an intellectual movement that asserted heretically and progressively for the time, that mixture of the races was a positive force in forming the Brazilian nation. Today, however, that position is often used by conservatives to resist acknowledging racial discrimination in Brazil. His work forms a fiction analog to the historical sociology of Gilberto Freyre, whose work also has undergone harsh criticism by later sociologists finding his melding-of-the-races vision romantic.

Amado's later novels have threatened at times to make him not the popular storyteller but the soft-pornographer of Brazilian popular literature. *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon* and *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands* feature heroic mulatas whose sexual exploits are the novels' narrative road, and *Tereza Batista: Home from the Wars* is a paroxysm of sexual excesses. The rich detail of Bahian black culture, the violence of daily life, the passions of people unsung in high literature are there in all three novels, but their heroines are goddesses carved in the image of Brazilian machismo.

Showdown is a second look at the terrain Amado covered in *The Violent Land*. The story is the founding of the interior Bahian town of Tocaia Grande, or "Big Ambush," which gets its name when one cacao lord runs

another off the land. The victor's henchman Natario decides to settle in the beautiful valley that he first saw as the victor of an ambush.

The settlement slowly fills with the kind of people who have settled Brazil's interior: a Lebanese merchant, various whores, a family of squatters thrown off their land in the neighboring state, a blacksmith, a black man who abandons life as a semi-slave and falls in love with an adoring white girl. There's one of everybody, including a village idiot.

For hundreds of pages, the miracle of life proceeds, propelled by lust,

dreams and folk religion. Babies are born in profusion, all of love, licit and illicit; and no one dies. Then the plagues begin: first flood, then epidemic disease and, finally, the worst and most inevitable curse of all—a land-rights battle. The son of the plantation owner who had magnanimously bestowed Tocaia Grande on his henchman returns from sybaritic city life. In a fit of pique, the fat little lawyer-planter decides to wage war again in the lovely valley.

Warm and wet: *Showdown* isn't just a frontier epic. It's revisionist

popular history. It portrays the conquest of the Brazilian frontier as the work of those who were rejected by or who escaped the agricultural elite. And it shows their work stolen, again and again, by the powerful who seize it when it's ready to harvest. That revisionism doesn't reflect only Amado's political past, but some of the best recent research by Brazilian social historians. The story continues in real life: landowners on Brazil's northwest frontier are today pitting lawyers and gunmen against squatters who have carved out productive enterprises in unmarked lands.

The fleshing out of that message, however, is fleshy indeed. We know the look and smell of the genitalia of nearly all dwellers in Tocaia Grande, as well as the texture of their beds and hammocks. Translator Gregory Rabassa, who has done another superlative job, must have strained his thesaurus for genital synonyms. In the Amado tradition, men are men, and women are mothers and (happy) whores. Fecundity is the primal metaphor of the people's vitality.

Also in the Amado tradition, there are no mean emotions among the poor; they have limitations of viewpoint, but their emotional and symbolic lives are rich. Not for Amado the probing of impoverished lives—spiritually as well as economically—that Brazilian writer Clarice Lispector, and later filmmaker Suzana Amaral, offered in *Hour of the Star*.

Showdown may not be great art, but it's a lusty, satisfying read, and a vigorous retelling of Brazilian rural history. You could give *Showdown* to someone as an introduction to a slice of Brazilian reality and know that they'd get to the end. ■

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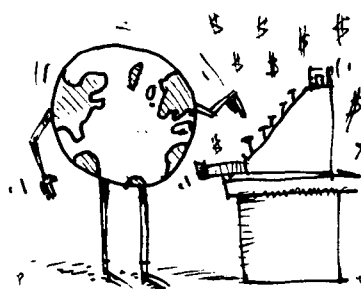
NOTEBOOK

The Global Marketplace

By Milton Moskowitz
Macmillan, 708 pp., \$24.95

Journalist Milton Moskowitz calls his new book, *The Global Marketplace*, a guide to "102 of the most influential companies outside America." But many of these companies are rapidly expanding multinationals with a presence inside America. And they may not only sell to customers in the U.S. Increasingly, with the cheaper dollar making U.S. properties look like a bargain, they are buying U.S. corporations and real estate or expanding their production in the comparatively low-wage U.S. As Moskowitz notes, Americans might be surprised to learn that companies such as Baskin-Robbins or upscale California wineries like Chateau St. Jean are foreign-owned.

This 708-page encyclopedia offers a glimpse of the corporate powers behind the new boss in town, the new products on the



shelf or the foreign takeover bidder in the business page headlines. Here are relatively familiar names like Nestle, Toyota and Sony, as well as the more obscure—Bridgestone (the Japanese bidder for Firestone Tire), Saatchi & Saatchi (world's largest advertising firm), BASF (the German chemical firm still locking out its Geismar, La., factory workers), or Daewoo (Korean makers of those Hyundai cars that Dick Gephardt loved to hate).

There are even such unexpected foreign entries as Hard Rock Cafe, the comparatively small London-based company that is

nevertheless the largest international sit-down restaurant chain, and Club Med, the vacation village empire founded by a French Communist that is now the world's 11th largest hotel chain.

Moskowitz insists that the simple tag "multinational corporation" obscures the variety among these far-flung companies. He seems ambivalent about the ultimate virtues of expanding multinational capitalism, but in nearly all the profiles he does a creditable job of highlighting corporate irresponsibility where it has surfaced—such as anti-union and anti-worker practices, environmental and consumer safety depredations and financial sculduggery.

It's a handy, eye-opening and briskly written guide that provides a convenient point of departure for more serious research.

—David Moberg