

gas, Carter wasn't able to make his magic formula politically popular, either. All he succeeded in doing was alienating the constituencies of the federal government's innumerable social welfare programs without attracting the support of their critics, and creating anxiety among foreign-policy hawks without satisfying doves. Tsongas's new liberalism suffers from exactly the same flaws. It would not reverse the economic decay of the 1970s, nor reduce the growing risk of war. Carter showed how well the new liberalism works when it comes to running the country or attracting electoral support. Nothing in Tsongas's book suggests that his revised version would work any better. ■

**RABBIT IS RICH, by John Updike. Alfred A. Knopf, 467 pp., \$13.95.**

## Exquisite plenitude

ROBERT TOWERS

THE DOCUMENTARY impulse has persisted strongly in the Western world since the latter decades of the eighteenth century, when reformers, inspectors, and travelers began to record, in thick detail and for various purposes, the phenomena of their own times. The street life of Paris, the poor of London, the domestic econ-

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omy of the Laplanders—whether native or foreign in its focus, this documentary concern has figured largely in the development of the social sciences and, since Balzac at least, in the fluctuating popularity of the realistic novel. Sometimes the documentation has been superficial, designed to give a sheathing of verisimilitude to melodrama (Balzac) or to pseudoscientific demonstrations (Zola, Frank Norris); at other times it has served the purposes of satire, social protest, and even comedy. In a few notable instances, the documentary mission has become almost an end in itself—so central to the novelist's aim that character and plot seem to exist primarily as vehicles to display the manners, morals, and (above all) the material objects most representative of the author's era.

In recent decades in America the rage to record has burned most passionately, perhaps, in two novelists who grew up—a long generation apart—within a few miles of each other in eastern Pennsylvania. The late John O'Hara was extremely proud of his role as a social historian and insisted rather belligerently upon his ability to make fine discriminations concerning the social status of cars, neckties, clubs, and lovers. But of course in a novelist the documentary impulse is never pure. For all his show of ruthless objectivity, O'Hara's observations were in thrall to his private, tormented fantasies of rejection by his social betters—fantasies which his actual success (and acceptance) did little to allay. John Updike's impulse strikes me as sweeter, less self-serving. He is a recording angel, not a malcontent or snob. His voice is more celebratory than discriminatory, and as such it comes close to lyricism—even when, as in his latest novel, the recorded facts might seem hardly an occasion for song.

*Rabbit Is Rich* is, of course, the third of the Rabbit Angstrom novels, each separated by a decade; a fourth is promised

ten years from now. Less personal in its drive than *Rabbit, Run* (with its portrait of a failed young man blindly bolting towards an illusory freedom), less stridently public than *Rabbit Redux* (so late-sixtyish in its preoccupation with angry blacks, hippies, and Vietnam), *Rabbit Is Rich*, set in 1979, is a rather mellow book, more quizzical than outraged in its depiction of a society far gone into chaos.

Harry (Rabbit) Angstrom, once a high school basketball star, later an overweight cuckold and dupe, still lives in the middle-sized, declining city of Brewer (Reading), Pennsylvania. But now, at 48, he is prosperous, having been placed in charge of the Toyota agency founded by his late father-in-law. He is bemused, amazed even, by the amount of money streaming in—and going out. Their fires tamed but not quenched by middle age, Harry and his wife Janice live with Janice's mother, old Bessie Springer—an arrangement that has lasted since the burning of the Angstroms's former house near the end of *Rabbit Redux*. They have joined a country club, the Flying Eagle, not by any means the most exclusive in the area but a place that caters to the new "class of the young middle-aged that had arisen in the retail businesses and service industries and software end of the new technology and that did not expect liveried barmen and secluded card-rooms, that did not mind the pre-fab clubhouse and sweep-it-yourself tennis courts of the Flying Eagle; to them the polyester wall-to-wall carpeting of the locker rooms seemed a luxury, and a Coke machine in a cement corridor a friendly sight."

There the Angstroms spend time with their new pals, the Ronnie Harrisons, the Webb Murketts, and Buddy Inglefinger and his girlfriends. Janice drinks more than she should, but she has kept her looks, along with a certain sexual



CHRIS HANSEN

confidence dating from her affair in *Rabbit Redux*, and maintains with Harry a weathered but serviceable marriage. She would like to make love more often than he proposes, for Harry's desire for Janice has been largely replaced by a sense of duty reluctantly acted upon; it seems to him "a melancholy falling that an act so glorious has been dwindled to this blurred burrowing of two old bodies, one drowsy and one drunk." (In one very funny scene Harry tries to read *Consumer Reports* in bed while Janice creates a "commotion" below his waist.) His sexual fantasies, however, occupy many pages of the novel—fantasies that center increasingly upon the lovely Cindy Murkett, whose bikinied body Harry ogles by the poolside of the Flying Eagle. Everything is fairly cozy, except that the world is going to pot.

The chief disrupter of Harry's own comfort is his son Nelson, a Kent State dropout who returns to the parental nest with a girl-pal, Melanie, and is soon revealed to be in flight from still another girl, Pru, whom he has made pregnant. Pru arrives and Melanie leaves. Relations between Harry and his resentful crybaby of a son could hardly be worse, and they do not improve as the novel goes on. Nelson, who has reluctantly agreed to marry Pru, demands a place in the Springer Agency and enlists the help of his mother and grandmother (who has inherited a half-interest in the dealership) to bring pressure on the reluctant Harry. Harry has to agree, even though the hiring of his supposedly in-

competent son means the firing of his associate dealer, Charlie Stavros (who was once Janice's lover). Nelson wrecks cars, treats Pru badly after their marriage, and runs away before the birth of his daughter. In short, he is a shaving off the paternal block and, as such, intolerable to his father.

**T**HIS UNRESOLVED OEDIPAL conflict moves the novel along, at a fairly relaxed pace, and provides many links to its predecessors, in which poor Nelson is presented, first as a small child and then as a prepubescent boy, in a far more amiable light. There are subplots too: Harry's need to find out whether an 18-year-old girl who comes into the agency with a boyfriend could possibly be his own daughter (by Ruth—remember?—from *Rabbit, Run*), and his intensifying preoccupation with Cindy Murkett—can something come of it? But these elements of plot serve mainly as a framework upon which Updike can mount his intricately assembled and lovingly detailed account of what it is like to be a member (white) of the new, mobile, and post-industrial middle class in Jimmy Carter's America.

Double-digit inflation, inner-city decay and the beginnings of gentrification, the soaring crime rate, the fecklessness of the young, speculation in gold and silver, the energy crisis, national humiliation at the hands of the Ayatollah—all these flicker through Harry's consciousness as he jogs, not runs, through the novel, his responses conditioned by the

slogans that bombard him from newspapers, television talk shows, and poolside conversations. Above all, he is aware of the Sexual Revolution: the porno-mags openly displayed, the strip joints and X-rated movies, the Polaroid snapshots (not intended for the kids) that he finds in a bedside table drawer at the Murketts's. Harry even becomes a participant, frolicking naked with Janice in a golden shower of Krugerrand coins in which he has invested, joining in the fun when, toward the novel's end, an evening of mate swapping with his country-club pals takes place at a Caribbean resort—an evening that concludes for Harry and his partner (not Cindy, alas!) in golden showers of another sort. It's enough to make the ghost of George F. Babbitt (of whom Harry, sixty years later, is a reincarnation of sorts) pop its eyes and say, "Golly!"

*Rabbit Is Rich* is a novel of splendidly constructed scenes—set pieces, really—that are at once funny and melancholy, faintly menacing and absurd. I particularly enjoyed the episode in which Harry and Janice, loaded down with seventy-four pounds of silver dollars (for which Harry has traded in his Krugerrands) make their way from the coin dealer's through a threatening downtown neighborhood to the safety of the bank, where "Christmas carols are pealing within the great vaulted interior." The wedding of Nelson and Pru is another small miracle of empathetically imagined and narrated action that incorporates a disparate collection of characters (old Bessie Springer and her fellow biddies, the homosexual minister and organist and usher, the Murketts, and, of course, the unhappy bride and groom) into a breathing, moving whole. Updike's awareness of the human comedy is here given wonderful scope. And though the expected metaphoric excesses do occur and sometimes repel, the verbal touch through most of the novel seems delicate and sure. Not for the first time Updike strikes me as more truly a poet in his prose fiction than in his published verse.

I do not, however, think that he excels as a creator of memorable major characters. (The minor characters are considerably more successful.) In each of the *Rabbit* books, the image of Rabbit Angstrom himself is so diffused as it passes through the screen of Updike's sensibility that it becomes a shimmering mass, lacking contours. The same is true of Janice. Each is meticulously observed, there are no false notes in what they say or do, but in neither is there

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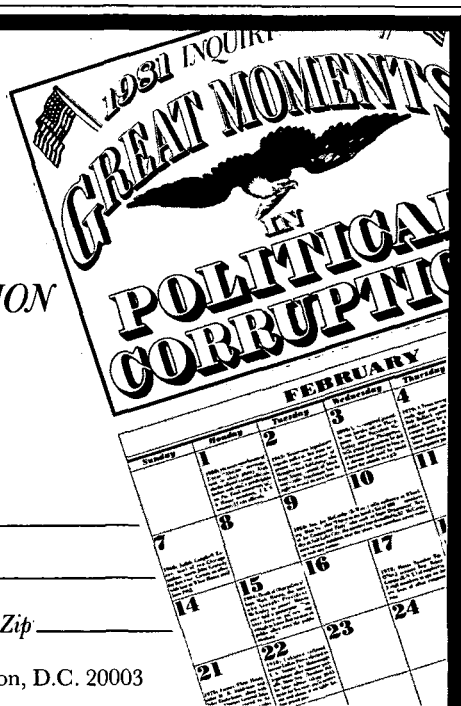
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such a palpable center of personality as to make one inclined to say of an acquaintance, "Oh, he's a regular Rabbit Angstrom type. . . ." Though Rabbit is obviously conceived as very different from his creator, Updike's focus on him is so myopically close that the very differences which are most interesting become blurred. Nor do I think, as some critics seem to do, that Updike is saying something profound about the quality of our lives or about the hidden operation of divine grace through the recalcitrant clay of human confusions and desires. Never mind. The exquisite rendering is more than enough. We can enjoy the plenitude that Updike provides without demanding greatness as well. □

**THE TEN THOUSAND DAY WAR: Vietnam, 1945-1975, by Michael Maclear. St. Martin's Press, 368 pp., \$16.95.**

**VIETNAM, A History in Documents, edited by Gareth Porter. Meridian Books, 496 pp., \$8.95.**

## Timely reminders

WILLIAM SHAWCROSS

VIETNAM TODAY IS A SHAMBLES. For its continued occupation of Cambodia it is being "bled" by China, which is supported (more or less) by the United States, Europe, Japan, and southeast Asia. The bleeding is having an effect. Vietnam is one of the poorest countries in the world—in per capita income, according to the World Bank, it ranks somewhere between India and Bangladesh. Official rations are now down to thirteen kilos of rice a month, two kilos less than the minimum recommended by the World Health Organization. Among the poorest people are government officials, and a third of the sick and malnourished children in one Saigon clinic are children of government workers. A visitor to Vietnam today cannot fail to notice the way in which cynicism and corruption (albeit sometimes of a mild kind) are

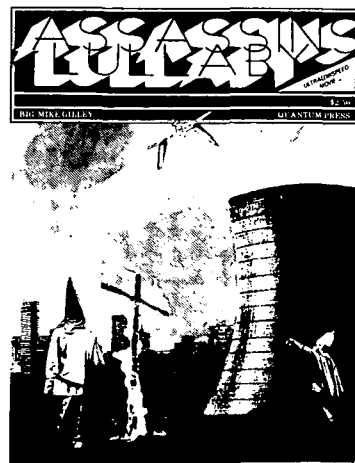
WILLIAM SHAWCROSS is a contributing editor of *INQUIRY* and the author of *Sideshow: Kissinger, Nixon and the Destruction of Cambodia*.

beginning to infect government and even party officials. The official radio and press are filled with minatory stories about crime and despondency.

Many thousands of people—no one knows how many—are still in the euphemistically named "reeducation" camps in which at least 200,000 people have been confined without trial since 1975. By no means all of these people were officials of the former Thieu regime. The system has been condemned by Amnesty International, which was allowed to visit Vietnam, but although considerable batches of prisoners have recently been released, the system still exists. It is a symbol of the lack of reconciliation between north and south six years after the direct American effort collapsed in 1975.

Vietnam has 200,000 troops in Cambodia and has regularly denounced all international attempts—like that by a UN conference in July—to permit an international settlement of the issue. As a result, China, Thailand, and the West have rebuilt the repulsive Khmer Rouge into a force of some 40,000 men, well armed and well fed, who are increasingly tying down the Vietnamese troops. Their renewed strength gives some justification to the continued Vietnamese presence, for although the occupation of Cambodia is illegal, it was for the Cambodians a liberation from a tyranny unprecedented in recent history. Life today in Cambodia is far better for most people than it is in Vietnam. Given the shortages at home, Vietnamese troops in Cambodia have exhibited remarkable self-discipline in not carrying off the aid that the West has poured into Cambodia while denying it to Vietnam itself. There is no end to this dismal deadlock; for the people of Indochina the war did not end in 1975—it took different forms.

These two books deal with the earlier phases of the war, those in which the United States had more direct involvement. Both books are valuable. Michael Maclear, the author of *The Ten Thousand Day War*, is a Canadian television journalist. His book was written along with a television series on the war. A good deal of work, particularly on interviews, was contributed by Peter Arnett, the legendary and excellent Associated Press reporter who worked for years and years in Vietnam. Gareth Porter's *Vietnam, A History in Documents* is a condensed version of a two-volume book he has already published. As he points out, any such slim volume must be highly selective, and the selection is a task of individual interpretation. Porter brings



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