

Styles

Women's Fiction:

WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?

by Elizabeth Fishel

With feminist critiques proliferating almost faster than porn these days, it may seem surprising that there hasn't also been a new brood of feminist novels. Apart from Doris Lessing, Simone de Beauvoir (whose latest work is not fiction, anyway, but a sociological study of old age), and several short story writers whose work has appeared in *Ms.* and in the feminist literary journal, *Aphra*, few women novelists have yet set out to explore those feminist issues which preoccupy their more politically and socially minded sisters: the patterns and nuances of sexist exploitation, the rigidity of roles, and the necessity for radical re-examination and change.

It is, to be sure, almost a truism of literary history that writers with a political ax to grind tend to lose the edge on their literary efforts. Still, this does not seem to have daunted the likes of Philip Roth and John Updike, both resourceful and politically outraged novelists whose most recent works are marked by a strong anti-Establishment insistence. So isn't it too facile to presume that women novelists are abandoning feminist ideology for artistic purity, that they are refusing to "come out" as feminists for fear that their creative choices will be too severely circumscribed? Could it be, then, that revolutionary feminist novels are piling up in manuscript, waiting to be published, or are they not being written at all? Why this black-out on feminist fiction?

Nearly half a century ago, Virginia Woolf posed questions eerily like these about her own contemporaries in two

papers delivered at Cambridge and later published as *A Room of One's Own*. What conditions, she asked, are most likely to encourage women to write fiction? And why are men especially hostile when that fiction turns out to be feminist? ("That arrant feminist," she quotes a gentleman on reading Rebecca West. "She says that men are snobs.")

Woolf's answer to the first question was straightforward and incisive. "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." Her response to the second bristled with indignation:

Why was Miss West an arrant feminist for making a possibly true if uncomplimentary statement about the other sex? [His exclamation] was not merely the cry of wounded vanity, it was a protest against some infringement of his power to believe in himself. Women have served all these centuries as looking glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size. . . . If she begins to tell the truth, the figure in the looking glass shrinks; his fitness for life is diminished.

Woolf's words remain pertinent today, for the would-be woman novelist is still hamstrung by the socio-economics of a woman's place in a man's world. If married, she's still expected to keep her house shipshape, take care of the kids, hold the family together. If she wants to follow her muse, she must do it on the sly, while baby is napping or husband is on the golf links. Significantly, she lacks assistance, someone to type for her, bring her a stiff drink, smooth her ruffled feathers. In short, she lacks a wife, that spineless, but all-nurturing presence lauded in the dedications of men's books from time immemorial—"without the constant etc. of my darling etc., this book would never have etc." (The dynamics are, of course, complicated in marriages that are partnerships of writers. I am tempted to think—although admittedly without statistics—that for every patient Leonard Woolf willing to lend a hand to his wife Virginia in her times of

madness, there are several Scott Fitzgeralds jealously, recklessly pushing their Zeldas over the deep edge.)

For the unmarried and struggling novelist, the social pressures may be less tangible than the pile of dirty diapers but hardly less restrictive. She is still dogged by the dilemma of how to find money for a room of one's own (take a job as a barmaid? a fellowship? write jingles for greeting cards?). But even having eased that particular bind by her wits and the grace of God, she does not necessarily fly to her typewriter on the wings of inspiration. Some unnamed but many-armed enemy (nagging stereotypes? "the motive to avoid success"? a crucial failure of confidence?) is somehow able to detain her. Subtle psychological warfare, but I have seen it happen over and over again among friends who dream of being writers. The men are able to seize the time as their own, lock themselves oblivious in their rooms, and keep going on booze and TV dinners to churn out page after page of the novel that will surely rock the world. But the women—equally talented, smart, and dedicated—will somehow refuse to focus, dissipating their energy on a hairwash, a new soufflé recipe, a love-affair or an abortion. Again, how eerie to hear Woolf's talk reverberate, her tale of Judith Shakespeare, William's long-forgotten sister, who, every bit as promising a playwright, fell in with the same troupe of players, was knocked up by the same Nick Greene who became her brother's patron and, finally, killed herself on a winter's night to hide her shame.

Nevertheless, over the last half century, some intrepid souls have managed to keep the flame of Judith Shakespeare alive within them. And though their names don't trip off the tongue like Mailer and Malamud, most who care about the past and future of the novel have read them at some point: Woolf and Edith Wharton in college, perhaps, Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor a little later on, Mary McCarthy or Katherine Anne Porter for something

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more relaxing, Doris Lessing and Sylvia Plath, thought-provokers for a women's group.

But what of the soon forgotten and the never widely known? What of the women who struggled against all kinds of odds and finally fell silent?

I think first of the fate of Kate Chopin and her novel, *The Awakening*. This book, published in 1899, tells the story of the awakening of Edna Pontellier, the 28-year-old wife of a wealthy and tightlaced New Orleans business man. With a lover she meets at a summer resort, Edna first becomes aware of her own capacity for sexual pleasure and, gradually, of her inde-

pendence as a human being. She begins to lose interest in the traditional wifely and motherly tasks, but she is not ready to commit her life to her lover. In the end, because "there was no one thing in the world that she desired," she walks into the sea and drowns herself.

Ripe with sensual detail and frankly antagonistic to social convention, *The Awakening* was so ahead of its time that Chopin's contemporaries were scandalized. In St. Louis,

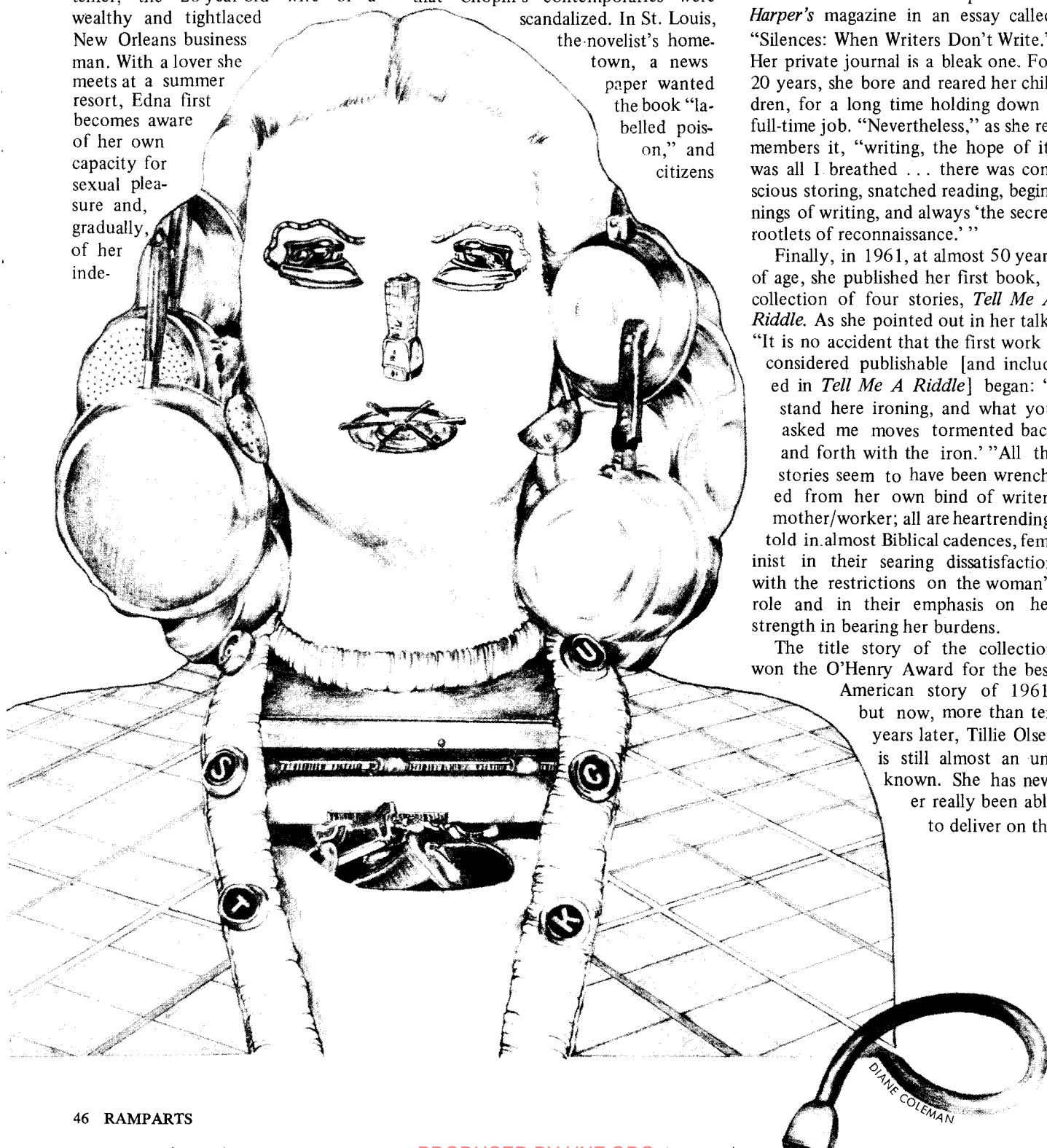
the novelist's hometown, a newspaper wanted the book "labelled poison," and citizens

demanding that it be removed from the library. Traumatized by these bitter attacks, Kate Chopin withdrew from society and never wrote again. She died a few years later, and her novel was forgotten for decades, until finally reprinted in 1964.

A more recent literary tragedy is the story of writer Tillie Olsen. Several years ago, Olsen recounted her own struggle in a speech at the Radcliffe Institute and she later adapted it for *Harper's* magazine in an essay called "Silences: When Writers Don't Write." Her private journal is a bleak one. For 20 years, she bore and reared her children, for a long time holding down a full-time job. "Nevertheless," as she remembers it, "writing, the hope of it, was all I breathed . . . there was conscious storing, snatched reading, beginnings of writing, and always 'the secret rootlets of reconnaissance.'"

Finally, in 1961, at almost 50 years of age, she published her first book, a collection of four stories, *Tell Me A Riddle*. As she pointed out in her talk, "It is no accident that the first work I considered publishable [and included in *Tell Me A Riddle*] began: 'I stand here ironing, and what you asked me moves tormented back and forth with the iron.'" All the stories seem to have been wrenched from her own bind of writer/mother/worker; all are heartrending, told in almost Biblical cadences, feminist in their searing dissatisfaction with the restrictions on the woman's role and in their emphasis on her strength in bearing her burdens.

The title story of the collection won the O'Henry Award for the best American story of 1961, but now, more than ten years later, Tillie Olsen is still almost an unknown. She has never really been able to deliver on the



brilliant promise of those four stories, never published a novel, or even another book of stories. Again and again, as she tells it, financial constraints forced her back to "the world of work, someone else's work, nine hours, five days a week." And gradually the flame refused to burn. "A time of anesthesia," she calls it, "No fever, no congestion, no festering. I ceased being peopled, slept well and dreamlessly. . . . The few pieces which had been published seemed to have vanished like the not-yet-written."

The feminist literary journal *Aphra* has published both Kate Chopin and Tillie Olsen and is dedicated to preventing sagas like theirs from recurring. "As long as male editors hold all the power," says Elizabeth Fisher, *Aphra*'s founding editor, "women will not be free to publish as they wish. We have tremendous identification with the timidity of women writers and sympathy with women writers who have been rejected over and over again. It's not paranoia if the persecution is real."

Named for Aphra Behn (1640-1689), the first woman known to have earned her living by writing, the quarterly had its own bout with persecution before it could even hit the stands. One distributor begged to handle the first issue, then suddenly changed his mind because he found one of the stories "too shocking." (The story, Elizabeth Fisher's "My Wife," is a self-congratulatory confessional told by a husband about his herculean sexual escapades with his wife. The raucous tale comes to a stunned end when the narrator overhears his wife admit drunkenly to a stranger that she's never had sexual happiness and has been faking orgasms for years.) The second issue faced similar hassles. A Pennsylvania printer refused to handle the magazine, because Helen Neville's poem, "Epithalamion" ("his small and semen-drained prick/sleeping against his thigh/as a toy sleeps in the dark") was likewise "too shocking." The same press, it seems, had had no compunctions about printing Allen Ginsberg as well as outright porn.

Fighting the male publishing elite has, if anything, been fuel for *Aphra*'s feminist fire. "*Aphra* stands for the strength of women," Fisher explains.

"The Establishment Media doesn't mind seeing woman as victim or woman as monster, but if she's strong, upstanding and a rebel, that's not acceptable." Fisher announced *Aphra*'s goals in a letter soliciting charter subscribers:

We will offer the illumination and identification only art can give. We promise stimulating reading shedding light from inside on what it means to be a "Jewish mother," "black matriarch," "spinster artist," not to say daughter, sister, mistress, wife, or any other limiting category so fliply castigated and caricatured in the mass media.

Despite the constant financial squeeze (the staff mostly works without pay), *Aphra* has made it out four times a year since the fall of 1969, each issue with a different theme—"Mothers and Daughters" or "Woman as Artist," for instance—and a sampling of relevant stories, poems, plays, photographs and critical pieces.

By and large, the magazine still seems to promise more than it has yet been able to produce. Almost always careful to be ideologically on base, *Aphra* has been more erratic in meeting its esthetic goals. Most of the stories struggle to find the voice that will blend feminist politics and artistry. Those that raise this voice are stunning: Susan Griffin's "The Sink," the fantasies of a 40-year-old wife cleaning out a drain; Sheila Ballantyne's "They Call Me Mummy," the diary and unmailed letters of another mad housewife; Marge Piercy's "Dynastic Encounter," the not-so-glamorous adventures of a young woman making it as a poet. But the stories that never manage to find the right voice tend to fall embarrassingly flat, tripped up sometimes by self-pity, sometimes by the sappiness of the too-obvious and overstated ("The country in the summer," writes May Swenson in "The Power and the Danger." "Country and summer: do they not equal my mother's two hands? or her two breasts?")

Unfortunately, several of the more stilted stories made their way into *Women*, a recent anthology of feminist stories by nine new authors (New York: The Eakins Press, 1972). The anthology selection was independent of the magazine, though all but two

pieces first appeared in *Aphra*. Several of the authors (Susan Griffin, Margaret Lamb, Irini Nova and Mary Rouse, among others) are published there in book form for the first time. For a supposed vanguard, however, these writers are notably undaring in technical experimentation. Most of the writing is plain, almost too plain, and lacks rhetorical surprises. Still, all the writers have the authority of the insider, detailing woman's struggle in a world of men, showing her caginess in coping, her terror in breaking down and her courage in pushing on.

In addition to this anthology, *Aphra* also served as an incubator for a feminist novel, Alix Kates Shulman's *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*. The novel, like the stories, is illustrative of the perils and triumphs in hammering out a new art form, and here again the first difficulty is finding the right voice. Shulman acknowledges this dilemma (she published one installment in *Aphra* in 1970 under the name of her heroine, Sasha Davis, and the other section, two years later, under her own name), but she does not really solve it.

To begin the novel, Shulman takes the pose of young malcontent Sasha Davis, a wife and mother just past 30 who has decided to set down her memoirs to share what she's learned and at the same time to keep herself busy while her children are in school. But for the novelist, beaming on the jacket photo beside a shelf of feminist paperbacks (herself the author of two on anarchist Emma Goldman and a radical marriage contract in the Preview Issue of *Ms.*), this pose is, of course, disingenuous. Her feminist sophistication and the prom queen's naiveté are at odds with each other from the opening paragraphs of the book, which ring uncomfortably with literary déjà vu. (Compare, for example, Shulman's words, "I have learned to mistrust symmetry and the decimal system . . . I am suspicious of reasons and hostile to dares," with Joan Didion's, "To look for 'reasons' is beside the point . . . I try not to think of dead things and plumbing," in the first section of her bestseller, *Play It As It Lays*.)

But where Didion quickly switches from first-person confessional to third-

person narrative, thus distracting herself coolly from her heroine, Shulman clings doggedly to the confessional and lets it get the better of her story. She has Sasha Davis trace her own career, beginning with the break-up of her first marriage and flashing backward and forward at will: from tom-boy to teen-ager, virgin to hoyden, prom queen to philosophy major to chief cook and bottle-washer for two husbands and two kids. Plus an awesome number of dalliances on the side.

The chain of events ultimately settles a little too neatly into an archetypal pattern, a case study which, though passed off as autobiographical, is too clearly ideological. Shulman never quite manages to fit the sociological skeleton—"The Question Girls Ask" ("Does your hair swing loose? Are you a good listener?"), the advice from Dr. Spock ("If the breast-milk supply is insufficient at all feedings, you will need a bottle . . .")—into the body of the novel.

The narrative voice is constantly skittering between the novelist's shrewdness and the heroine's bubble-headedness. One minute we read how "boys are taught it is weak to need a woman, as girls are taught it is weak to need a man" (obviously a gem of Shulmanian analysis); and the next minute we are told about the heroine's "love-affair with philosophy," tempered by a little skepticism used "like dusting powder" (just as obviously a pearl of Sasha's homespun wisdom). The narrator can never quite decide whether to take herself seriously or give way to pure corn.

There are certainly a few wonderful moments when feminist and prom queen speak with the same voice (notably the inclusion of Sasha's recipes for her husband's favorite dinners: "Chicken Supreme Tarragon" and "Veal Scallops Marsala"). But a few deft touches, alas, do not make a feminist literary revolution. (Even so, Elizabeth Fisher believes the book "may well be the first present-day feminist novel [because] Sasha is no victim; she is tough and resilient and will land on her feet.") At the least, Shulman's novel has broken some ground for others to sow. For "masterpieces," as Woolf pointed out, "are not single and solitary births [but] the outcome of many years of thinking in

common."

This, then, seems to be a transitional time for those who care passionately about the future of the Women's Movement and the novel. For committed readers, a time to give support to feminist presses and journals who have been shouldering the responsibility by themselves for too long. For publishers, a time to overcome their "wounded vanity" and listen with sympathy to the rage around them, so that feminist writers

won't be ghettoized any longer and will find the audience they deserve. And for these feminist writers, a time to continue sorting out faddishness and conviction, stereotypes and believably human characters, still never abandoning invention in pursuit of dogma. This could be the beginning of a new era of women's fiction, a potentially revolutionary moment in American literature but it remains to be seen whether or not the conditions are ripe. ■

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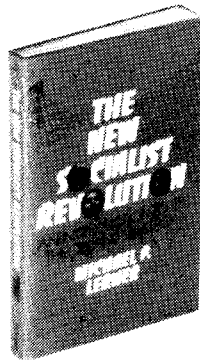
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THE ALMANAC

by Derek Shearer

There is an old American political saying, "You can't beat somebody with nobody," which is being taken to heart by the left. A debate is beginning on what we want—what concrete vision we have of a good society and what programs and strategies are necessary to achieve that vision. This current revival of interest in domestic politics is being assisted by a number of new publications.

Working Papers for a New Society, possibly the most important new left publication to appear in a decade, is published by the Cambridge Policy Studies Institute—a radical think tank—and edited by John Case, Allen Graubard, Mary Jo Bane, Nancy Lyons, and Christopher Jencks. The first issue includes articles on the **commune movement**; **food co-ops**; **land and utilities** programs for Berkeley and Oakland political campaigns; and a report by **Staughton Lynd** on working with **steel workers** around health and safety issues. It will appear four times a year; subscriptions cost \$8 a year; \$15 for two years. (Write: Working Papers, 123 Mt. Auburn St., Cambridge, Ma. 02138, Tel (617) 547-4474.)

Michael Harrington, author of **The Other America**, which helped start the War on Poverty, and of a recent book, **Socialism**, has founded the **Newsletter of the Democratic Left**. It will appear ten times a year and carry articles "on the theory and practice of transforming the nation." Subscriptions cost \$5 a year; student rate \$2.50; sustaining subscription \$10. (Write: Newsletter of the Democratic Left, 125 W. 77th St., New York, N.Y. 10024.)

Coming out of **Atlanta** is a new journal, **Southern Exposure**, published quarterly by the Institute for Southern Studies. It will include exposés of southern corporations, reports on organizing in the south, and articles on programs and strategy for the region. Subscriptions cost \$8 a year. (Write:

Institute for Southern Studies, 88 Walton St., Atlanta, Ga. 30303.)

Working in the mountains of **West Virginia**, the Peoples Appalachian Research Collective (PARC) publishes the quarterly report **Peoples Appalachia**. The Winter 1972-73 issue deals in depth with the struggle for democracy within the **United Mine Workers**. The current issue, Spring 1973, explores **economic alternatives for the region**, including a proposal for a community-owned Appalachian TVA. Subscriptions cost \$5 a year; back issues \$1.25 each. (Write: PARC, Rt. 3, Box 355B, Morgantown, W. Va. 36505.)

Up north in **Vermont** a college economics teacher and former Washington Editor of RAMPARTS, Lee Webb, has compiled a packet of material on that state. The packet, which costs \$1, includes studies of colonialism and underdevelopment in Vermont, absentee ownership of utilities and the ski industry, and the swindling of the average Vermont taxpayer. (Write: Lee Webb, Goddard College, Plainfield, Vermont 05667.)

In the **Midwest**, the Hyde Park chapter of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union has written a significant position paper titled **Socialist Feminism: A Strategy for the Women's Movement**. Copies cost 50 cents each plus 15 cents postage. (Write: Chicago Women's Liberation Union, 852 W. Belmont, Chicago, Ill. 60657.) Some Chicago movement women have started **The Midwest Academy**, a school designed to offer instruction in **women's rights** and **community organizing**. This summer, classes will be offered on building new organizations for **working women**. (For details, write: Midwest Academy, 817 W. George St., Chicago, Ill. 60657.)

Two new paperback books provide a national perspective on political options for the left. In **The New Socialist Revolution** (Delta, \$2.95) **Michael Lerner**, a professor of philosophy at Trinity College, Connecticut, argues that the left must adopt a program of democratic socialism. Similar arguments are put forward by **Staughton Lynd** and **Gar Alperovitz** in their book **Strategy and Program** (Beacon Press, \$2.95). Alperovitz defines the society he wants as a "pluralist commonwealth"; Lynd argues that the left must be up-front with its politics, but

not sectarian.

For help in doing political work around economic issues in your community, check out the valuable handbook **Getting the Straight Dope: A handbook for Action-Research in the Community**. Compiled by students at the University of California at Davis, it is based on their own work in surrounding communities. Copies cost \$1.50. (Write: Isao Fujimoto, Dept. of Applied Behavioral Sciences, Univ. of Calif. at Davis, Davis, Calif. 95616.) Also helpful is the **North American Congress on Latin America (NACLA) Research Methodology Guide**, which includes sections on corporations, the media, the military, and banks. Copies cost \$1.25 each. (Write: NACLA, P.O. Box 226, Berkeley, Calif. 94701 or NACLA, P.O. Box 57, Cathedral Station, New York, N.Y. 10025.)

Two recent publications offer analysis of current economic trends which ultimately affect day-to-day organizing. **Kapitalistate** is a journal which deals with the increasing role of government in the economies of advanced capitalist countries, particularly the U.S. Subscriptions cost \$8 a year. (Write: Prof. James O'Connor, Dept. of Economics, San Jose State College, San Jose, Calif.) O'Connor is the author of the important forthcoming book **The Fiscal Crisis of the State** (Random House, 1973). **Jeremiad** is a monthly newsletter of economic affairs, written by economist Jerome Shuchter, who takes an independent left view of the American economy. Subscriptions are \$10 a year; a complete file of back issues is \$10. (Write: Jeremiad, P.O. Box 36496 Wilshire-La Brea, Los Angeles, Calif. 90036.)

In the area of immediate struggles, the **Highway Action Coalition** (Room 731, 1346 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036), acts as a communications center for the anti-highway forces and publishes an informative free newsletter, the **Concrete Opposition**. And the Nader-affiliated **Tax Reform Research Group** publishes a monthly newsletter, **People and Taxes**, filled with information on tax organizing and tax loopholes. Subscriptions cost \$4 for individuals; \$6 for institutions and businesses. (Write: People & Taxes, P.O. Box 14198, Ben Franklin Station, Washington, D.C. 20044.) ■

News of political work, including publications, films, slide shows, etc., should be addressed to Derek Shearer, Ramparts magazine, 2054 University Ave., Berkeley, California 94704.