

A Death In Theory

ROBERT SKLAR

DEATH KIT, by Susan Sontag. Farrar, Straus & Giroux. \$5.75.

Death Kit is neither a memorable novel nor an exceptionally good one. But it is good enough to read through, enjoy, and forget. One can feel certain that this is precisely the kind of novel Susan Sontag wanted it to be. Miss Sontag has astonishingly and triumphantly (from her own point of view) written a work of fiction that vindicates her most controversial critical themes: *Death Kit* deliberately defies interpretation.

A year ago, in her book of essays *Against Interpretation*, Miss Sontag proclaimed that interpretation of art works was stifling and reactionary. Once it may have been useful to probe for the latent content of a work, but now it was a cowardly impertinence to do so; the manifest content, what the everyday reader or observer sees, is all that a work should be.

Interesting as her aesthetic theory was, it was weakened by tactical errors at several points. Miss Sontag was all too sweeping in condemnation of her peers, generalizing from the worst. And in her own critical essays she managed to break all the rules of her theory. Clearly art is too diverse to be captured by any single theory; so Miss Sontag has produced a work expressly tailored to her own.

Death Kit, then, is an experiment. It succeeds as an experiment principally because it succeeds in telling a good story. A young advertising man, Dalton (Diddy) Harron, works

in a firm that manufactures microscopes. Traveling by train to a sales meeting, he believes he kills a workman while the train is stopped in a tunnel, then makes love to a blind girl in a washroom. Miss Sontag's suspenseful tale unfolds from there. She has carefully calculated her effects—an apparent murder and amateur detection, sex and courtship, business problems, family tensions, even an unjustly treated dog. Miss Sontag's first novel, *The Benefactor*, was written for avant-garde tastes, but *Death Kit* is accessible to tired businessmen and housewives. If all that sex and murder turns out to be a dream, should they care?

The symbol sniffers and the inveterate interpreters will hunt for the real story behind Miss Sontag's elegant soap opera. For them she has laid so many spoors, so thickly and in so many obvious paths, that

The Bachelor

The crab squats in his shell.
He dreams on vertebrae
and tries to hide his eyes
with barnacles for lids.

If he thinks of himself
as a cripple, no one
guesses; no agencies
solicit his welfare,

and when he takes a walk
he is surreptitious
about destinations
and his desire for them.

That he is devious
is no serious charge.
Medallion on the beach,
he knows his own value.

At night he shines, the moon
picks him for her bauble,
in and out of the sea
he sidles like onyx

or a black horoscope.
The gulls brood over him,
the ledges wait for him.
He is headed somewhere.

—ROBLEY WILSON, JR.

the interpretive bloodhounds may never stop baying. Every "now" in the novel comes out "(now)." Here and there paragraphs are indented for no reason. Deliberately the narrative voice is made ambiguous—sometimes an omniscient author, sometimes a mysterious participatory "we." Freudian symbolism pervades the novel in an almost mocking fashion, and for interpreters unsympathetic to psychoanalysis, there are intricate hints and clues on the theme of vision—the blind girl and the microscopes, for a start.

In case some dauntless critic ponders Norman O. Brown and Marshall McLuhan long enough and ends up making sense of *Death Kit*, Miss Sontag undercuts her story on the final page. She implies . . . it was a last dream before death? . . . the mind's last impulse after death? It is clear only that she prefers to diffuse the reality of her story, to destroy by surprise whatever emotional catharsis the reader may feel. She wants the reader to leave her book behind when he puts it down. If he is not content with the story and unmindful of her purpose, then he will still be too confused and exasperated to interpret it.

THIS NOVEL defies interpretation, then, not by denying interpretation but by providing a surfeit of phony hints and false leads, by killing the interpreters with kindness. There may be other and better ways to write uninterpretable fiction, but undeniably Miss Sontag has succeeded with her own. *Death Kit* destroys itself in the mind, if not in pages, print, and binding. It is not a window on the world, not a transformation of reality. It is self-enclosed, leaving no emotional traces and no mental reverberations. The physical book remains, like an empty stage after the players have gone off.

One could argue with Miss Sontag about the nature and destiny of fiction, but it would be foolish to generalize from *Death Kit*. Miss Sontag is not likely to repeat an experiment, and she is capable of infinite surprise. She has an extraordinary mind, and *Death Kit*, on its own terms, is a brilliant success—but it succeeds no better than the interpretive criticism she justly condemns in liberating fiction or clearing the air.

The Learn-in.

Today, just trying to keep up with the world around us means that nobody can afford to drop out of the educational process. And that's where television comes in... helping fill in the information gaps. For example, this month's programs report on electronic medicine. Ecumenism and modern theology. The problems of mental retardation. The dilemmas of the aged. And the facts behind political crises.

The listing below may suggest dates for your family's Learn-in.



Discovery—The Declaration of Independence; The Constitution; Where the Sea Begins; The Island People; When the Circus Comes to Town, Sunday, Oct. 1, 8, 15, 22 & 29 (11:30-12 Noon)

The 21st Century—The Computer Revolution; The Four-Day Week; Bats, Birds and Bionics; Medical Electronics, Sunday, Oct. 1, 15, 22 & 29 (6-6:30 pm)

The Fighting Prince of Donegal—Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color; From the historical novel on Ireland's 16th Century struggle for freedom, Sunday, Oct. 1, 8 & 15 (7:30-8:30 pm)

Andrew Wyeth—Who, What, When, Where, Why; Examination of the outstanding American artist's appeal, Tuesday, Oct. 3 (10-10:30 pm)

World Series—Full coverage of the classic, Starting Oct. 4 (time TBA)

Raymond Burr Visits Vietnam—The actor's impressions of Vietnam, Friday, Oct. 6 (10-11 pm)

Three Philosophers-Theologians—Visual imagery interprets the writings of modern thinkers of three faiths: Buber, Bonhoeffer, Teilhard de Chardin, Sunday, Oct. 8 (10-11 am)

Barbra Streisand Special—Barbra Streisand in a special from New York City, Wednesday, Oct. 11 (10-11 pm)

Duke Ellington—Bell Telephone Hour; A study of the jazz innovator on tour, Friday, Oct. 13 (10-11 pm)

Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night—CBS Playhouse; Original play about an aging man's dilemma, starring Melvyn Douglas, Shirley Booth, others, Tuesday, Oct. 17 (9:30-11 pm)

American Profile—A study of Canada and the question of a "mosaic state" vs. a melting pot, Friday, Oct. 20 (10-11 pm)

Johnny Belinda—Poignant drama of a deaf-mute girl, starring Mia Farrow, Barry Sullivan, Ian Bannen, David Carradine, Sunday, Oct. 22 (9-11 pm)

The Long Childhood of Timmy—Updated documentary of a retarded child and his family, Monday, Oct. 23 (10-11 pm)

Kismet—Armstrong Circle Theatre; Jose Ferrer, Anna Maria Alberghetti, Barbara Eden, George Chakiris and Hans Conried in an adaptation of the Broadway musical, Tuesday, Oct. 24 (9:30-11 pm)

With Love...Sophia—Sophia Loren with Jonathan Winters, Peter Sellers and Marcello Mastroianni in a musical produced in Rome, Wednesday, Oct. 25 (10-11 pm)

Regularly Scheduled Programs—Monday through Friday: Captain Kangaroo/Today; Sunrise Semester

Tuesdays: CBS News Hour; Who, What, When, Where, Why with Harry Reasoner

Thursdays: Good Company

Fridays: NBC News Special; Bell Telephone Hour

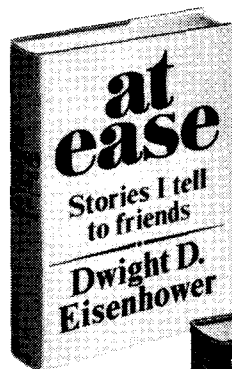
Saturdays: Captain Kangaroo; Sunrise Semester; G-E College Bowl; Wide World of Sports; ABC Scope; The War in Vietnam

Sundays: Lamp Unto My Feet; Look Up and Live; Bullwinkle; Camera Three; Discovery; Directions; Face the Nation; Meet the Press; The Catholic Hour; Issues and Answers; The Frank McGee Report; The 21st Century; Walt Disney's Wonderful World of Color

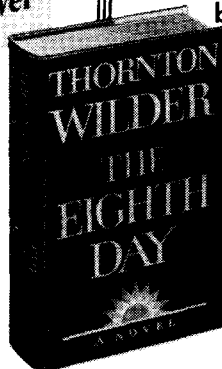
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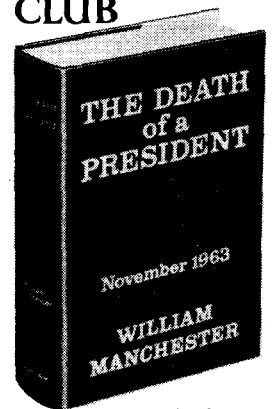
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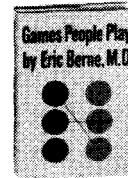
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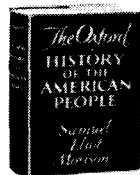
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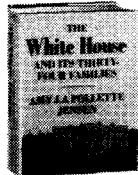
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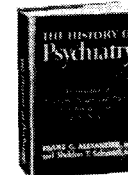
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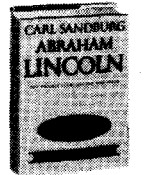
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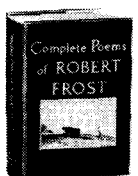
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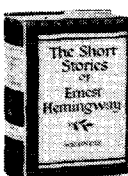
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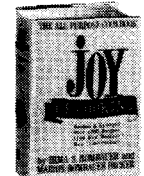
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