

Books in Brief

THE OLD MAN AND LESSER MORTALS
by Larry L. King
Viking, 300 pp., \$8.95

Most of the essays in this collection are reprinted from various periodicals. The best and the worst of them come from *Harper's*, from that green time when, as Mr. King tells it, Mr. Willie Morris and his editors passed their days and their nights in creative activity, when they were not playing funny, wholesome jokes on one another. One of Mr. King's essays to come out of that period is indeed memorable. It is "The Old Man," the title essay and a strong, affecting portrait of a man and a father. There is a difference—a powerful one—between feeling and sentimentality, and Mr. King appears to know it far better in this piece than in any of the rest of those collected here, most of which suffer from hoked-up feelings in such exotic variety as to stun the mind. The altogether tellingly titled essay "Blowing My Mind at Harvard" is one of those works whose ailments are specifically of its time. Its fashionable conviction that the Black Panthers were the victims of police genocide, its idealization—in the guise of criticism, now and then—of the young, of their special honesty and straightforwardness, are all familiar. "Whatever Happened to Brother Dave?" is a more complicated and interesting piece, and its sensibility, too, is wholly of its time. Mr. King goes to a bottle club in Charlotte, North Carolina, and in the fact that the *maitre d'* is annoyed because his customers do not cover their whiskey bottles with the obligatory

brown paper bags Mr. King can detect at once the South's capacity for self-deception. The belief that sociological perception is made up of such things has always been a hallmark of the school of personal journalism to which Mr. King belongs; it is, and it has always been, a grandiose idea.

One of the strengths of personal journalism might have been that it was eccentric and interesting, as a man's mind is always interesting. When that journalism began to take itself for truth and, worse, for goodness (of a political sort), there was hope neither for eccentricity nor for mind. Mr. King is a good writer; there is an intelligence in him that makes itself known throughout, but it is an uphill climb here: For there is a war on in Mr. King, between the instincts of the ideologue and those of the eccentric, and in these times it is, not surprisingly, the former that gets the upper hand most of the time.

FALLING BODIES
by Sue Kaufman
Doubleday, 288 pp., \$7.95

Mrs. Kaufman has written a novel about marriage and motherhood that gives every sign it is about to follow the tedious path worn by similar novels. Indeed, Mrs. Kaufman comes very close to that tedium a number of times: This novel has its full measure of thwarted ambition, poetesses destroyed by male psychiatrists, and nervous breakdowns induced by marriage and domesticity. On the other hand, there is a humanness in the characters, a readiness on the author's part to keep defining them—and not always predictably—till the end, which makes this novel about an educated, upper-middle-class housewife far superior to anything in its genre. The faults evident here are the major sort, the sort for which other novels are put down for good: The characters are defined not by personality so much as by their response to contemporary events. Often, the interior monologues read like political tracts, and not very advanced or subtle tracts either. But Mrs. Kaufman does have a gift for making her story move, as well as a wry ear for accents; nor is she afraid of the latter, which forwardness results in one of the best char-

acterizations in the book: the remarkable and doubtless insane South American maid Maria. So tradition-bound (in the worst way) is the novel in its basic assumptions, it is a wonder to see it work; and it does, through sheer exercise of the comic imagination, work well enough to be called diverting and an eminently good read.

LAST RIGHTS
by Marya Mannes
William Morrow, 150 pp., \$5.95

Marya Mannes's book is likely to be misunderstood on a number of counts, despite the evident pains she has taken to be clear about her position. There is no way to write about euthanasia without running into trouble, and Miss Mannes has here written in defense of euthanasia of a carefully defined sort. It is "the ability to die with dignity at a moment when life is devoid of it" or "the alternative to the prolongation of a steadily waning mind by machines." The difficulty with Miss Mannes's book is not with her thesis, but with the route to its construction—with the broad strokes by which, for example, the old and the terminally ill are run together in the category of the dying. There is much that is facile here, much that appears to be the result of haste to get to the point. Like any number of essayists, Miss Mannes is rather better when she has arrived at her point than she is en route to it, the former being the condition for which all the rhetorical intensity and focus have been primed to flow. That intensity is considerable here, and it will have its impact, for, wound up, Miss Mannes is a straightforward and intelligent rhetorician. Her point is that death as an idea—as a fact of life—has been unnaturally rooted out of our consciousness; that men have the right to choose death, in certain conditions; that there is a good death and a bad death, and that one of the conditions of the former is that man's will has had a hand in it. Miss Mannes is forthright in her antagonism toward those who claim the sanctity of life for every life, including, for example, children who are born mongoloid or retarded. It is a sober book and, in its astringent way, a moving one.

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Sex Among the Sea Squids

If you know my shameless hang-up about odd facts—any old odd facts—you will realize how mesmerized I am by a description I've just read of the mating habits of the sea squid. This cousin of the octopus is silvery blue, has luminous eyes and tentacles, and—all in all—looks like a bad dream by Picasso. Compared with the sea squid, the octopus is a thing of beauty and a joy forever.

Before I initiate you into the hair-raising sex life of the squid, I should tick off the most conspicuous aspects of this mollusk's appearance and habits, which cause constant embarrassment, if not downright shame, to its cousin. Sea squids are much larger than octopuses, most of whom are under eight inches long; but some squids reach sixty feet in length (!) and boast tentacles fifty feet long (!!) and weigh over a ton (!!!). The squid has an enormous reach—and ten "arms," of which two are longer than the other eight; these two snap out to catch a victim, who is then pulled into the nest of sucker-rings on the other eight tentacles. *Yech!*

Octopuses *rarely* attack anything, despite the vile canards of sailors, but sea squids are among the most ferocious predators to inhabit the sea around us. (I assume you are reading this in a rowboat.) Very swift, very strong, and very voracious, a sea squid will head with murderous intent for anything from a canoe to a submarine. Should you ever go skin diving and have to choose with whom to cozy up, I beseech you to select the octopus and flee from his cousin. This is not easy, since the sea squid zooms around the deep via jet propulsion; that is, it takes in water, which it then shoots out, from near its head, in a powerful squirt—which rockets the squid through the water backward. That baffles other pisces.

The squid's eyes are *most* unusual for a creature that looks like an invertebrate glob, for the orbs have a pupil, an iris, and a mobile lens that can zero in on objects quite far away.

Sea squids are exceptionally versatile: They change color, for instance, like a chameleon; and when pressed (or just depressed) they shoot out a balloon of inky goo, which conceals them from enemies. In an extremity, a squid even emits a brilliant flare, which lights up

the whole area around him: That astounds any enemy long enough for the squid to make a regressive getaway.

Little squids are gobbled up by larger squids; and whales and sharks eat young squids by the millions. So do men. Anyone who has "done" Greece, Italy, or Spain knows that the sea squid tastes delicious—if it has been severely pounded, before frying, to diminish the pristine toughness of the meat.

And *now* I am ready to tell you about the squid's mating habits. This creature's romantic ritual differs most dramatically from the courtship patterns of other forms of marine life. The male squid shows off a good deal to attract a female and—like sea lions—fights off his rivals ferociously; then, without even a wink, shimmer, or other gesture of amour, he grabs his inamorata and, like the boor he is, proceeds to "have his way," as the Victorians put it, with the squidess. So far, so good.

But (and what a "but" that is) a sea squid Romeo often forgets what it was he was so intent on doing when he snatched the broad, and, in the middle of his concupiscent thrashings, begins (oh, God!) to eat his partner. That is not conducive to sustained romance; nor does it promise a happy life together with little squidettes to make the couple happy. It is a grisly, sobering fact of life—a fact we all must face without flinching—that some male sea squids completely consume the ladies on whom they have just lavished so much attention, to say nothing of energy.

OH, I KNOW there are many cases of cannibalism in the world of nature—including cannibalism that follows coitus, thus precluding connubiality. But there is something especially horrifying in the image of all those frantic, waving tentacles enveloping a bride; and there is something especially startling in the un-Freudian conduct that causes the powerful instinct of sex, in the middle of the very protocol of seduction, to surrender to a sudden yen for lunch.

I think I am safe in reassuring women's libbers that post-prandial bliss (even among our finned or feathered fellows) does not often follow a menu on which the *pièce de résistance* was your loved one. Still . . . □

