

New Books

Obituaries

by Bernard Kaplan

Grossman/Viking, 168 pp., \$8.95

Bernard Kaplan writes about people obsessed. Each of the protagonists in these six stories lives (and some die) in the power of a fixed idea, generally an immense idea that resolves the ambiguity and apparent irrationality of life. Jews move in the shadow of persecution, men with spirits ravaged by war brood over all-inclusive pseudo-scientific theories, a woman graduate student uses herself as a laboratory to test a Manichean hypothesis about human relations. Indeed, Kaplan himself, a gifted storyteller, seems obsessed with the idea of obsession. The reader is led through its maze from inside, trapped by its abstract logic and pulled to its violent conclusions. Kaplan guides this trip extremely well, in quiet, confident language; where he errs frequently is in going too far, in complicating his tales with affected endings that dilute the pure terror so painstakingly created. But *Obituaries* is well worth reading; fascinating and ambitious, though uneven, it is the work of a serious, engaged author.

LYNNE SHARON SCHWARTZ

A Very Human President

by Jack Valenti

Norton, 402 pp., \$9.95

The Vietnam War cut the arteries of the Lyndon B. Johnson administration in the spring of 1968, ending a meteoric political career not with a bang but a whimper. What happened in the stirring years before that dramatic March night when LBJ took himself out of the Presidency? After reading Jack Valenti's warm memoir, we have a better idea of the reasons why.

Was Johnson the 20th-century President "most reeking of human juices," as David Halberstam characterized him? On that point, this volume is very persuasive, written as it was by the White House aide who perhaps knew him best of anyone except Lady Bird.

The most telling chapters about this very human President are those dealing with the Kennedys, with the way the Johnson administration was staffed and organized, his relations with the press, his gradual sinking into the quicksand of Vietnam. Less propitious are the author's

unending encomiums, his total recall of each and every word uttered by the President, and a tendency to forget conveniently certain facts about the biographee and his time. All the same, it's fascinating history and as close as we've had so far to an accurate if partisan view of a highly talented congressional wheelhorse thrust into the White House by a sniper's bullet.

RICHARD L. TOBIN

The Dying of the Light

by Arnold A. Rogow

Putnam, 384 pp., \$10

Standard exercises in doomsday prophesying here, as Arnold Rogow piles on rather less than vigorously adduced evidence to support the charge that rapacious, vulgar America has brought itself and the rest of the world to the brink of the apocalypse, from which plight only the author's own prescriptions for the new New Jerusalem can save us. The recitation of America's sins is familiar enough—the deadly legacy of the Puritans, callousness toward the poor and the blacks, topsy-turvy priorities, urban violence and disintegration, squandering of natural resources, and so forth. The standard with which the reader is bludgeoned throughout this irresponsible book is that of "equality" (of condition, not opportunity), the implicit villain of the piece being the whole complex of values and assumptions associated with the concept of liberty. Everywhere fulminating against American imperfection and offering up utopian remedies that range from the outlandish to the totalitarian, Rogow litters his argument with superficial and distorted social observation, extravagant statisti-

cal extrapolations, and wrongheaded judgments of value. Not the best among them, Rogow is yet another of those architects of the future who, impatient with the workings of a liberal democracy, map out blueprints for change that run roughshod over any world worth the having.

JANE LARKIN CRAIN

A Brief Life

by Juan Carlos Onetti

Translated by Hortense Carpentier

Grossman/Viking, 291 pp., \$10

An intense and arresting novel that frequently threatens to bog down in its own intricacies but somehow never does. One of Latin America's leading writers, Onetti maintains unwavering control here—a complex narrative is safeguarded against any taint of tricksterism by the author's unfailing seriousness and agility. The protagonist is one of those losers in his 40s driven to violent panic by the paltriness of his life and of his options; the course his tortured actions and imaginings take as he becomes increasingly overwhelmed by pointlessness and isolation is the novel's primary investigation. There is a harsh and haunting immediacy to Onetti's delineations; toying with nihilism can be a self-indulgent business indeed, but something in the tone of the author's voice forbids any easy dismissal of the vision he articulates. Originally published in Spanish 25 years ago, *A Brief Life* is concerned with literary and cultural themes that have become rather shopworn in the time that has intervened, and it is no small measure of Onetti's artistry that in his hands they can still command our attention.

J.L.C.



"How can we have a meaningful relationship if you don't want to talk about anything but tax-free municipals?"

Seventy-Five Under 40

The ubiquitous Daniel Halpern has just turned up again on the poetry scene with *The American Poetry Anthology* (Avon/Equinox, paper, \$5.95). Five hundred and six pages, 75 poets, all of whom are under 40—a lot of poetry for the money. Halpern's anthological method was to write some 250 poets, asking to see what they considered their five best poems. Poets don't always know which of their poems are best, so when Halpern disagreed with a selection, he substituted another—with the poet's consent. Result: you'll know what's going on in American poetry today. Some of the poets are well known: Erica Jong, Diane Wakoski. I was delighted to discover two fine ones, unknown to me: Rita Dove and Heather McHugh. But I was annoyed that the best young poet in this country, Ted Kooser, wasn't included. And pleased to find a favorite, Lucille Clifton's "Good Times":

My Daddy has paid the rent
and the insurance man is gone
and the lights is back on
and my uncle Brud has hit
for one dollar straight
and they is good times
good times
good times

My Mama has made bread
and Grampaw has come
and everybody is drunk
and dancing in the kitchen

and singing in the kitchen
oh these is good times
good times
good times
oh children think about the
good times

Life in the Slammer

In, out, in, out . . . that's Malcolm Braly's story as told in his fascinating autobiography, *False Starts: A Memoir of San Quentin and Other Prisons* (Little, Brown, February 26, \$9.95). It's the best prison book I've ever read: taut, informative, even profound. The man is a writer. Braly came from a messed-up family and started his criminal career as a juvenile-delinquent cat burglar. He then became a wanderer, every kind of thief, and found himself in Nevada State Prison after a very funny car chase in the desert. Then out, a crook again, caught, and to San Quentin. Then to Folsom, then to San Quentin again . . . and again. I've lost count. He just couldn't keep his hands off other people's property. In prison he wrote, he painted, he observed. Now he's out, straight, "retired," and living happily on a farm. A sampling:

The hardest part of serving time is the predictability. Each day moves like every other. You *know* nothing different can happen. You focus on tiny events, a movie scheduled weeks ahead, your reclass., your parole hearing, things far in the future, and slowly, smooth day by day, draw them to you.

There will be no glad surprise, no spontaneous holiday, and a month from now, six months, a year, you will be just where you are, doing just what you're doing, except you'll be older.

This airless calm is produced by rigid routine. Custody doesn't encourage spontaneity. Walk slow, the Cynic says, and don't make any fast moves. Each morning you know where evening will find you. There is no way to avoid your cell. When everyone marched into the block you would be left alone in the empty yard. Each Monday describes every Friday. Holidays in prison are only another mark of passing time and for many they are the most difficult days. Most of the outrages that provide such lurid passages in the folklore of our prisons are inspired by boredom. Some grow so weary of this grinding sameness they will drink wood alcohol even though they are aware this potent toxin may blind or kill them. Others fight with knives to the death and the survivor will remark, "It was just something to do."

Crabbers

"Ain't nobody knows nothing about crabs," he says, using traditional triple negative favored by Eastern Shoremen for scoring a strong point. "Might think they do, but they don't. Just have a feel for it is the best what you can do."

That's a professional crabber speaking in *Beautiful Swimmers: Watermen, Crabs, and the Chesapeake Bay* by William W. Warner (Atlantic/Little, Brown, February 17, \$10). I never thought a whole book about crabbing could hold my attention, but it did. In all but the coldest months, thousands of men are out there dredging, scraping, scooping, seine hauling for blue crabs, hard and soft. The author went out with them, usually at four in the morning, and shared their grueling labor with good nature. The watermen address their fellow men as "honey," and call oysters "arsters," and turtles "turkles." One of their favored baits is bull noses, bought from knackeries at \$17.50 for 75 pounds. You learn about picking, packing, shipping. Do they get bit?

Indeed they do. Maine lobstermen can safely remove the much smaller numbers of lobsters found in their pots with bare hands, seizing them from the rear. Chesapeake crabbers cannot do this. Unlike the lobster, the blue crab has excellent rear vision. There are too many crabs in each pot in any case for such individual seizure. You simply plunge in with both hands and separate the tangling masses as best you can, suffering an occasional bite from a big Jimmy that will make even the most hardened crabber wince. Between such bites and the constant handling of pot wire the fabric-lined "Best" rubber gloves last no more than two weeks during periods of heavy catches. "You get a hole in them," Grant adds. "The crabs will find it." □

