

Books in Brief

Zip: A Novel of the Left and the Right
by Max Apple
Viking, 224 pp., \$8.95

Some novels seem to start with a pistol shot, as if their end was a mere 60-yard dash away. Remember Budd Schulberg's unscrupulous Sammy Glick on the make in Hollywood? Sammy ran. From page one. And Schulberg's prose kept pace with his hero to the finish line.

Max Apple's first novel has this same breakneck narrative drive, with the added embellishments of quick wit and a runaway imagination. But times change, and so do our heroes. Apple's Ira Goldstein, Sammy's latter-day counterpart, is a nice Jewish Detroit boy on the make in the mid-1960s. Unfortunately for him, these are radical, angst-ridden years, when America's image of success is muddied up with politics, social awareness, and self-discovery.

Ira is decent, likable, hopeless with women, a daydreamer. He cares for his widowed mother, toils dutifully in his father's junk business, and according to his crusty, outspoken grandmother lacks even the zip to produce for her the Jewish grandchild buried in his loins. Still, Ira seizes opportunity when it jumps at him in the form of Jesús Martínez, a flashy Marxist Puerto Rican prizefighter whom Ira befriends and then manages until the boxer is ready for an important bout.

What happens next defies summary and should not be taken seriously. Two years ago in his collection of stories *The Oranging of America*, Apple displayed a bizarre talent for setting off realistic cultural references against pop fantasy, and he uses this technique again at midpoint in *Zip*. Suddenly, Ira is informing to J. Edgar Hoover, who is later kidnapped by Fidel Castro. Jesús propositions Jane Fonda in front of Tom Hayden. Enter Howard Cosell, as abrasive as ever. In a climactic scene, Jesús fights Tiger Williams in Havana while Hoover is suspended from a cage above the ring. The issues? The world's middleweight championship and a final decision between capitalism and communism.

In this outrageous wedding of sports and politics, as in everything else, Apple has no strong convictions. He makes entertaining happenings, not statements. Up to now his forte has been fictional playfulness. Predictably, some will call for a more critical per-

spective from him, but meanwhile it is refreshing to frolic with so brisk a writer.

—ROBERT MAURER

Better Times than These
by Winston Groom
Summit Books, 411 pp., \$10.95

For the men of Winston Groom's infantry company engaged in search-and-destroy missions early in the Vietnam War, political squabbles between hawks and doves back home resound dimly, like the chatter of distant birds heard during battle lulls. Even in a figurative sense, Groom's are ground troops; their viewpoints, limited and personal. From the time of their embarkation at San Francisco to the pointless annihilation of their outfit on an indefensible hill less than a year later, theirs are the concerns dominating American war fiction since *The Red Badge of Courage*: onerous duties, military stupidity, an incomprehensible enemy, their costly metamorphosis from raw troops to seasoned fighters, fear, the unlikelihood of survival. By the end, some prove cowardly; a few commit an atrocity. But their values remain steady—those of good soldiers, not of a good country.

Perhaps it is the familiarity of these concerns that makes Groom's account seem so deliberately fashioned and unresonant and that melds the distinctive, ghastly debacle that was Vietnam into a oneness with all wars. To his considerable credit, a wealth of authentic reportage has gone into *Better Times than These*. Working squarely in the tradition of James Jones, to whom he dedicates this first work, Groom is deft at catching the feel of military life, skillful in limning a unit's composite portrait while also depicting the robust, down-to-earth vitality of individual soldiers in

a world turned malevolent.

Though written with no illusions, little bitterness, and immense compassion, *Better Times than These* is not the long-awaited novel that will encompass all the complexities of Vietnam. For a precedent-shattering war, new fictional forms must still be imagined.

—R.M.

Sakuran: A Novel of Medieval Japan
by Edward Tolosko
Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
273 pp., \$9.95

Edward Tolosko has pulled off an unusual feat in his first novel: total immersion in an ancient civilization to which he surrenders his own voice. His *Sakuran* seems less like an original work than a translation of a thirteenth-century Japanese manuscript, or a silk-screen painting set to motion.

The scene is formal, two-dimensional, ceremonious. Foreground, the peaceful fiefdom of Ikoma: its castles, fields, pottery kilns, trading caravans. In a courtyard, a venerable teacher trains Prince Jujiro and his friend Tasuke in the samurai code of swordsmanship. A tearoom, where the young lords visit their beloved princesses. A forest, where they hunt deer. The landscape, dotted with court retainers, soldiers, a traitorous villain, a mendicant healer.

When this historical set piece is animated, spinning out its leisurely saga of national honor, extraordinary battle deeds by samurai warriors, and bitersweet romantic love, most Western readers will experience mild culture shock, conditioned as they are to expect realistic psychology and cause-and-effect plots in fiction. How long they stick with *Sakuran*, I imagine, will depend upon their curiosity and their tolerance for the strange.

—R.M.



FOR FAR TOO LONG, evidence of women's existence was absent from cultural history, even from much of literature. Like blacks, women were invisible. But the injustice is being corrected. Indeed, it sometimes seems *overcorrected*. We are now deluged with periodicals, letters, diaries, biographies, and autobiographies written by obscure women who have gained recognition primarily (sometimes entirely) because they are female.

Lella Secor: A Diary in Letters 1915–1922 (Burt Franklin/Artemis Books, \$14.95 cloth, \$5.95 paper) is a case in point. Born in the Midwest in 1887, Lella Secor traveled to the West Coast, became a journalist, and then went east in 1915 to sail aboard Henry Ford's peace ship, the *Oscar II*. She was a convinced pacifist, and so she became one of "a body of unofficial delegates to Europe," joining "representatives of other neutral countries in a conference designed to establish continuous mediation of the conflicts in Europe."

In the letters in this volume, written to her sisters and mother, Lella tells of her sea voyage, the other "pilgrims," the activities in Europe for peace, and her later work against armed preparedness in the United States. Aboard ship she meets the publisher Benjamin W. Heusch, about whom she is very enthusiastic, but her feelings about her host are ecstatic: "Henry Ford is a prince among men."

Lella Secor is a mistress of the cliché and a writer of curious, uninformative, flat, superlative-laden prose. What is worse, she has a way of tantalizing us by mentioning exciting events and important ideas, then leaving them without further enlightenment. "Last night," she writes to her mother from New York, where she went to work as a freelance journalist in 1916, "I staid all night with Anne because Hiram was away. We got into a shooting fray down in the Italian quarter which was quite exciting. Both of us had all sorts of thrills from our experience." End of information.

Everyone she meets is "fine," every hour spent with these "fine people" is "perfect," every speech she hears is "peerless." She does not "go off on a suffrage tangent" because she is too involved in trying to stop the war. Later, Lella marries an Englishman, moves to Cambridge, and becomes active in the

birth control movement.

Dealing cursorily with great events and filled with trivia, the letters make this reader wonder if such insignificant chatter throws light on anything but the shallow mind of one letter-writing young woman. Burt Franklin & Co. promises five more volumes of diaries and first-person accounts in its American Women's Diary Series. I only hope the quality and interest of subsequent volumes improve.

The Feminist Press (Box 334, Old Westbury, New York 11568) on the other hand has recently put out a remarkable book of letters, *The Maimie Papers* (\$15.95 cloth, \$6.95 paper), written by Maimie Pinzer Benjamin, a young, half-Jewish girl from an unhappy family who became a prostitute for lack of money, training, or education.

Maimie was befriended by Fanny Quincy Howe, a Boston aristocrat, to whom she wrote these 24 letters between 1910 and 1922. They are indeed documents of the hidden life of women in those years, written by an extraordinary woman. Maimie gave up prostitution, became a secretary, went into business for herself in Montreal, and when she felt the hostility of the male business community, made her apartment into a halfway house for young would-be and actual prostitutes.

Maimie writes well. Her letters evoke from us an overwhelming sympathy and affection for her as a sensitive, talented woman caught in and yet able to rise above the exigencies of lower-class life. Herbert Welsh, a Philadelphia social worker, helped and advised her as she struggled through a series of afflictions—not least the loss of an eye to syphilis—to establish herself in a more respectable life, but even he exhibited a strong male bias. Maimie writes to Mrs. Howe:

I got a hat and turned it myself.... To me it does not look loud, as I haven't even drawn the ribbon all around the hat, but just made the bow. And I thought Mr. Welsh would like it.... But just as I was dressing, I decided to put on the little blue hat—but then didn't, as it seemed like petty conceit—and put on the large one.... Mr. Welsh remarked that I dressed too loud. So I said I had on only the dress you sent—the dotted one. Then he said the dress was all right, but the hat was frightful.... He told me he thought I ought

to go to a hospital and let them try to make it possible for me to wear a glass eye. Really, if I thought there was half a chance, wouldn't I be only too glad?—but it is impossible... for I have no eyelids, or lashes, or anything that looks like anything that generally holds an eye in place... and yet Mr. Welsh said I should go regardless of what I personally think, as long as he wanted me to.

Without ever complaining or crying out against the injustice of the patriarchal world in which she lives, Maimie gives us more than enough poignant detail to make us see vividly her world and the gallantry of her spirit. She was not trying to "make it" in the traditional American sense of attaining riches or power but turned her energies instead to helping other women like herself. Fanny Quincy Howe left these letters to her daughter, the novelist Helen Howe, who gave them to Radcliffe's Schlesinger Library. Ruth Rosen has written an informative introduction to them, and the text was edited by Sue Davidson. A work of genuine interest, value, and even—that nice, outdated word—edification. ●

