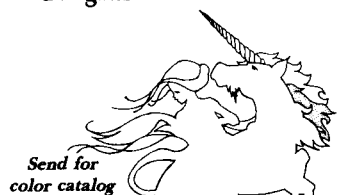


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Review**

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J9AM

Long the Train's Been Gone, Baldwin has used the life of a fictional performing artist to reveal the anguish of the black experience in America. And once again his invented crises fall short of the impact and immediacy of his own real thoughts and experiences, as described in *The Fire Next Time*, *Notes of a Native Son*, and his other collections of prophetic, profoundly disturbing essays.

—JAMES RAWLEY

W. H. Auden: The Life of a Poet
by Charles Osborne
Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
336 pp., \$17.95

CHARLES OSBORNE was one of a small number of friends attending W. H. Auden's funeral in the Austrian village of Kirchstetten in 1973. His account of the day, a fiction-like piece that conveys the grief as well as the human comedy of the occasion, was published soon afterward and now reappears as the conclusion of his biography of the great English poet. Throughout, Osborne is able to blend the distance required of a keen observer, critic, and scholar with the nearness and warm understanding of a friend.

He offers scores of gossip details and anecdotes about Auden, knowing that the art of gossip makes the literary biography something other than dutiful reading (one of the many delights of the book is an excerpt from Auden's radio talk in praise of gossip). The poet is here with all his gifts and eccentricities—the rumpled clothes that made him look, in his own words, like "an unmade bed"; the legendary mess in his apartments and houses; and his blinding wit, which ranged from impromptu remarks onstage at poets' conferences, to his private jokes for his gay friends, to his description, in his travel book on Iceland, of his attempt to ride a horse.

The book is an excellent introduction to the remarkable variety of Auden's creative achievement in prose, poetry, and theater. Included for the first time are some verses that Auden never intended to publish, such as the casual stanzas he read at a New Year's Eve party, and those for Christopher Isherwood scribbled into the prefatory pages of a D.H. Lawrence novel.

—JOHN FLUDAS

The Passion Artist
by John Hawkes
Harper & Row, 185 pp., \$9.95

A TRUE SON of Kafka and Hesse, with a propensity for the macabre that might make Edgar Allan Poe shudder, John Hawkes here delves once again into the subconscious, lifting fears and nightmares, secret lusts and hates to the gray light of day. *The Passion Artist* will not disappoint partisans of such novels as *Second Skin*, *The Lime Twig*, and *The*



JERRY BAUER

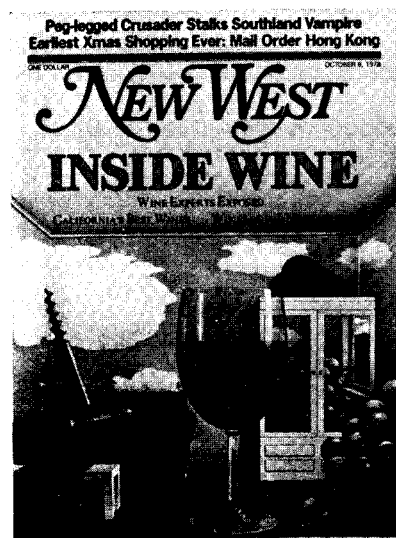
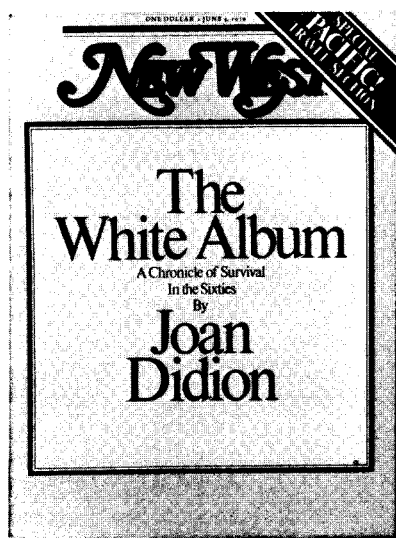
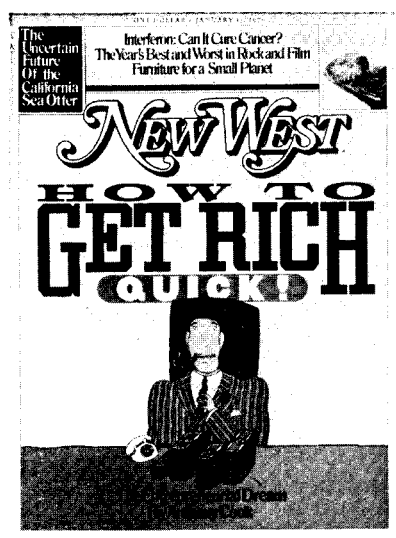
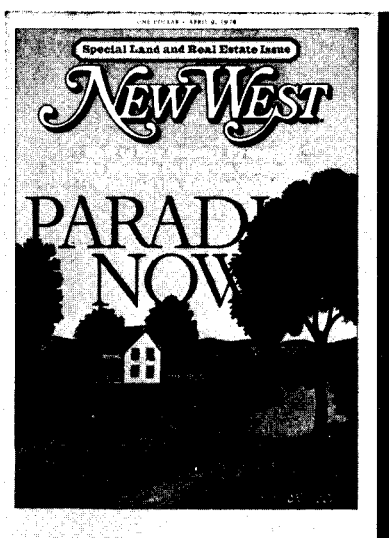
Hawkes—His prose is exquisite, but empty.

Blood Oranges, which established Hawkes as a writer's writer, a strict avant-gardist. His prose is undoubtedly exquisite, but the question arises—to what point?

In an ugly imagined Slavic city, widower Konrad Vost, a clerk in a pharmacy, cares for his adolescent daughter (secretly a prostitute), and spends his spare time in a cafe across from La Violaine, a women's prison in which his mother has been held for some time. One day the prisoners riot, and their male relatives are sent in with clubs to quell the disturbance. Overcoming the men, who act with a horrible and unexplained vengeance, the women imprison them. In dreams, Vost wanders in a past full of terrors (imaginary and real) as his mother and a seductive friend visit his cell and witness his breakdown. He recalls a boyhood attempt to have sex with a horse, embarrassingly interrupted by the woman in whose care his mother had placed him. The woman, a grotesque drunkard, later offered herself to him. A potentially lovely tryst with a fellow orphan was disrupted by wasps. And so on. In this externalized landscape of Vost's soul where women are evil, men more so, and love pathetic, shouldn't we have sympathy? Impossible. There's not a recognizable person or emotion in the lot.

In the past Hawkes put more meat on the bones of his plots, was less didactic. Images meshed with character. Unfortunately, in his latest novel the surrealistic elements—Vost's silver hand, dreams of dogs emerging from an egg—are like twinkling lights framing an empty stage. The only sound is a voice philosophizing from the wings, and the empty stage, unfortunately, is what stays in the mind.

—VALERIE BROOKS



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