

## Fiction Briefs

### **Baby Love**

by Joyce Maynard

Alfred A. Knopf, 224 pp., \$10.95

JOYCE MAYNARD'S first book was the strangely wistful *Looking Back: A Chronicle of Growing Up Old in the Sixties*. Published in 1973, when she was a sophomore at Yale, the memoir was suffused with a precocious, if not premature, world-weariness. Maynard went on about unfulfilled expectations, alienation, and lost innocence—the very same spiritual plagues that afflict the characters in her first novel.

In *Baby Love*, Maynard's female protagonists feel that something is lacking in their lives. They turn to motherhood (or to men) to achieve "total passionate devotion," the only antidote, they think, for their elusive malaise. These young women from an

insular New England town are an unliberated lot. Sandy, a newlywed Total-Woman-in-training, believes that happiness comes to those who can bake a moist devil's food cake. Sixteen-year-old Tara, whose daughter, Sunshine, was fathered by a peripatetic teenage tomcat, tells herself, "Once you have your baby, nothing else matters." And Jill, a dreamy, headstrong high school senior, expects her boyfriend to marry her when he discovers she's carrying his child. In Maynard's world, however, there is a considerable gap between what is supposed to be and what is.

Maynard's prose is sparse, her characters are deftly drawn, and her pacing is brisk. But there's a queer hollow quality about the book, as if the author became alienated from her own work. Maynard holds her fecund females at arm's length. At times, it's difficult to tell whether she's mocking them or asking us merely to take note of their foibles. Add to this an ill-conceived and

premature conclusion, and the result is a curiously misshapen novel.

—MICHELLE GREEN

### **The Luck of Huemac: A Novel About the Aztecs**

by Daniel Peters

Random House, 688 pp., \$16.95

THIS EXPANSIVE, demanding, fascinating novel, a sort of blend of James Michener and Carlos Castaneda, details the 100-year rise and fall of the Aztec empire. Peters comes to Aztec civilization without preconceptions. Human sacrifice is seen as merely a part of a stern religion. It is neither criticized nor defended, but accepted along with the other rituals of a dynamic society.

Classic historical narrations have documented Cortez's encounter with Moctezuma, but no history has viewed the confrontation with Mexican eyes. Here, the Spanish invaders are the barbarians, bringing destruction and pestilence. This is the epic story of four generations of a noble family; it centers around Huemac, "Eagle Warrior, ball player, sorcerer"—to quote the 13-page directory of People, Places, and Gods (it's not needed to follow the plot but fun anyway).

It would insult this work to call it anything other than an historical novel. But if the purpose of an historical novel is to bring the dead to life and illuminate important aspects of the human experience that were heretofore only dimly imagined, then this novel succeeds brilliantly where most history has failed.

—CHARLES NICOL

### **Pretender to the Throne: The Further Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin**

by Vladimir Voinovich

Farrar, Straus & Giroux  
368 pp., \$12.95

IN 1976, Russian dissident Voinovich published *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, a satire on Soviet life and institutions set on the eve of World War II. Chonkin, the anti-hero of the saga, was a bum-



bling, obtuse but dutiful soldier who liked to build mounds of peeled potatoes and do embroidery. In this sequel, Chonkin is transformed into a helpless victim who has so lost the will to defend himself against a series of fabricated accusations that even his creator abdicates responsibility. "The author," writes Voinovich, "himself disillusioned, doubts whether it is worth his while to continue the biography of this person. Why disillusioned? Because the author himself had not expected this."

Like Chonkin, each character in the book is caught in a senseless web of intrigue; the world that emerges is one of paralysis, devoid of irony. But by taking potshots at everything and everyone, Voinovich raises the question of just how nihilistic a comic novel can become before it loses its impact. If *Pretender to the Throne* is, as its publisher suggests, the Soviet *Catch-22*, then perhaps one advantage a democratic society has over a totalitarian one is that it serves up better material for satire.

—ANN GENEVA

### The Birds of the Air

by Alice Thomas Ellis

The Viking Press, 156 pp., \$10.95

SINCE THE DISSOLUTION of the British Empire, the English have specialized in an inward-looking domestic comedy of manners. At first glance, *The Birds of the Air* seems to belong to this genre of small expectations. But in fact, this novel embodies an unexpectedly radical rejection of the cozy middle-class values of a debased civilization. It's about a family Christmas in a claustrophobically respectable suburb. The characters—the obsessively neat widow, Mrs. Marsh; her matronly daughter, Barbara; Barbara's philandering husband, Sebastian, an Oxford don who is both stupid and cruel; their rebellious son Sam; and their obnoxiously precocious daughter Kate—treat one another deplorably. The "ghost" at the feast is Mrs. Marsh's other daughter, Mary, who has suffered a breakdown following the death of her son. Mary

offends the life-must-go-on values of her mother by refusing the analgesic offered by everyday busyness, preferring instead to wait for the death that will reunite her with her son.

At the heart of the story is an imagery that evokes a more primitive and more religious Britain (with the bird as symbol of the Holy Ghost). As in Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale*, there are the mysteries of birth, death, and resurrection. But it's only half a winter's tale—with the human folly and cruelty intact, but without the magical healing. There are no easy reconciliations in this novel, which sparkles in the cold light of a brilliant and pitiless comedy.

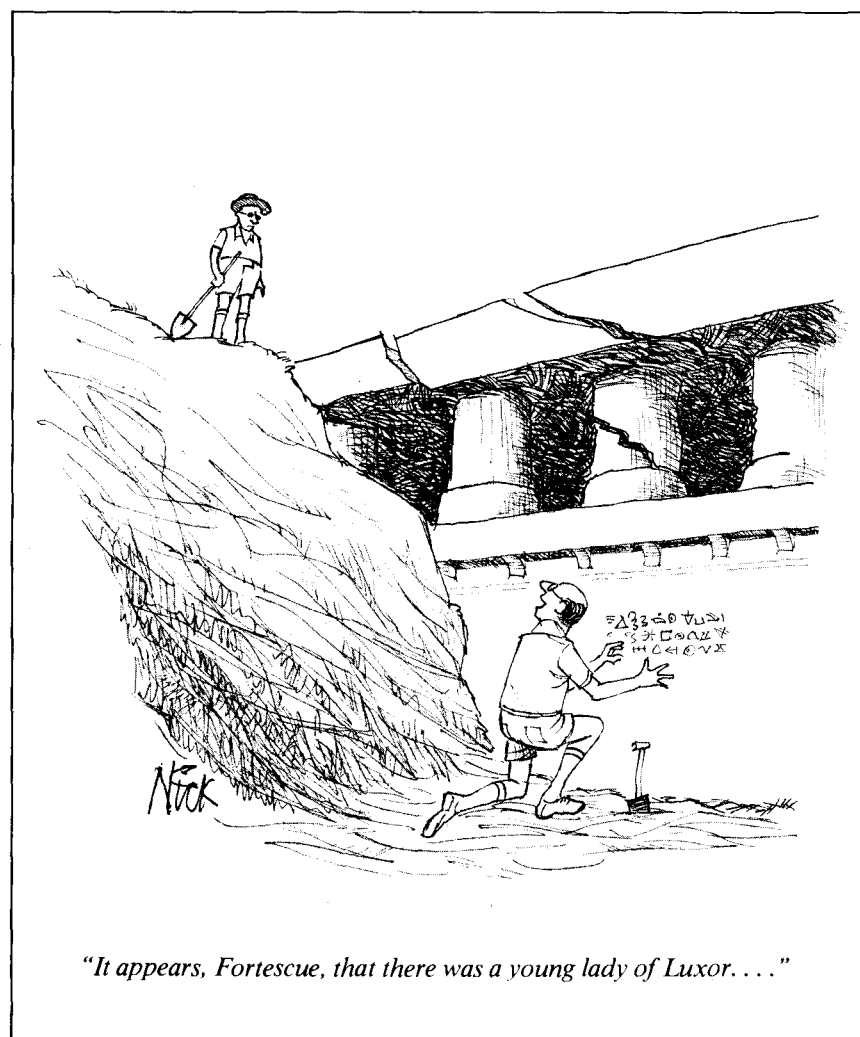
—RONALD NEVANS

### Shannon

by Gordon Parks

Little, Brown, 352 pp., \$14.95

RESPECTED BLACK photographer-writer-film director (*The Learning Tree*) Gordon Parks's historical novel, *Shannon*, is not the distinguished work his admirers had hoped for. On the up side, it's a strong panorama of Irish Catholic life in New York during World War I and the Jazz Age. It falls somewhere between Howard Fast's socialist fictional musings and Irwin Shaw's ponderings of the ways of the rich. There will be 50 novels just like it this year—swift, safe, mildly sexy stories without a single original phrase



"It appears, Fortescue, that there was a young lady of Luxor. . . ."