

Chicago who arrives in Hinckley a day before the town disappears. Keegan provides the needed outsider's point of view, in this case with equal measure of courtesy and sarcasm.

Somewhat less successful are the scenes of small-town domestic rancor. The portraits of ordinary townspeople struggling under an oppressive summer sun betray a misplaced nostalgia. But Snow's descriptive powers and his unerring feel for the coming holocaust make *The Burning* an engrossing novel.

—TOM SCHMIDT

Nonfiction Briefs

Social Studies

by Fran Lebowitz

Random House, 146 pp., \$9.95

AT THE ONSET of this collection of 26 satirical essays, Fran Lebowitz describes the human race as "a group that in my opinion has always attracted an undue amount of attention." As her first book and 1978 surprise best seller *Metropolitan Life* suggested, the quick-witted, quick-tempered Lebowitz may be the funniest chronic complainer on the scene. "I myself find many—even most—things objectionable," she announces here. "Being offended is the natural consequence of leaving one's home."

Chronicling the baroque customs and bizarre behavior of the American species near the end of the 20th century, Lebowitz sounds like Dorothy Parker in Gomorrah, or Emily Post in hysterics. From cafe society to the coffee-klatzsch crowd, no social set or disorder escapes her infectious wrath. In the world according to Lebowitz, "Twenty-four-hour room service generally refers to the length of time that it takes the club sandwich to arrive." At dinner parties, "Polite conversation is rarely either." And Los Angeles—"a large city-like area surrounding the Beverly Hills Hotel" as well as the object of the book's best barbs—encompasses a population

of some 2.8 million, "1,650,917 of whom are currently up for a series."

This book suffers from the same deficiencies that afflicted her previous collection: redundant gags, occasional clumsy phrases, a dependence on gimmicks such as lists and outlines, and a woeful inability to sustain her jokes throughout a long essay. It's an uneven mix of material. But fortunately, Lebowitz hits more often than she misses, and considerably more often than she did in *Metropolitan Life*. For the most part, *Social Studies* is a textbook example of astute, acerbic social comedy.

—SCOT HALLER

The Next America

by Michael Harrington

Holt, Rinehart and Winston

160 pp., \$15.95

TWO DECADES after *The Other America*, his influential study of poverty in the United States, Michael Harrington meditates on the plans of America's resurgent right: "They recognize the same crises I do, yet the future they project is a past that never worked." His forthright new essay—twined with Bob Adelman's striking documentary photographs—is a ruthless critique of the recent past. Yet it is remarkable for its evenhandedness.

Faced with the cultural decadence of the Seventies, fashionable critics of the "me-generation" often rush pell-mell to the Ancient Verities. Harrington, on the other hand, shows how the hedonism of the Sixties was not just the product of a flaw in our character. "Hedonism," he writes, "became an essential dictate of public policy." Conspicuous consumption was a patriotic act; "dropping out" was a rebellion dependent on the fantasy of eternal prosperity. When the Seventies' recessions came, everybody suffered.

This socialist analysis of our recent crises makes excellent sense. What distinguishes the book from mere polemic, however, is its personal, almost intimate tone and its lively, quirky commitment to certain American successes. Trade unions, social security, even Disney World—phenomena usually dis-

missed by the revisionist intelligentsia—find a sympathetic commentator in Harrington. Though his optimism occasionally cloys, Harrington has something of the rare talent once claimed for another social critic, Alexander Pope: He shows common sense in strong, beautiful, uncommon lights.

—WILLIAM B. LOGAN

The Oil Game

by James McGovern

The Viking Press, 312 pp., \$12.95

THERE IS little in *The Oil Game* that excites praise and much that arouses suspicion. It purports to tell us how the oil industry works, but McGovern's examination is, if not downright disingenuous, at least lopsided. The author spends pages describing the colorful characters, past and present, who helped discover and produce America's oil, but he devotes only a paragraph to the Teapot Dome scandal and Exxon's alleged wartime dealings with the Nazis. In fact, no matter how tough McGovern talks, his bottom line matches that of the industry: There is, indeed, an oil shortage; oil's seven sisters are helpless, if willing, pawns of the Arabs; oil companies do not work in concert to control prices and supply; their profits may not be as obscenely high as they appear; and the only way to increase America's energy supply is to drill everywhere but the Grand Canyon.

Well, maybe. But considering that McGovern was once a publicist for Shell and that he produces no new documentation to support his claims, there's little reason to believe every word he says. *The Oil Game* may not be a whitewash, but it's a soft-soap job on a very dirty business.

—ANDREW KLAVAN

The Nation Comes of Age

by Page Smith

McGraw-Hill, 1,264 pp., \$21

IN THIS FOURTH volume of Page Smith's mammoth narrative of the American experience, he brings vividly and expertly to life "the disorder, the



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