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# BOOK BRIEFS

genes shone like stars in the living sky of flesh . . .") and lifeless prose ("The engagement party was a beautiful one."). Schaeffer's rapid shifts in time and narrative voice often fail to give her characters' lives the intended kaleidoscopic effect. When she is at a loss for drama, she kills off another member of the family.

Schaeffer knows what ingredients insure a novel's commercial success. *Love* captures Jewish family tradition, celebrates the lives of the hardworking and the obscure, and is punctuated with wry anecdotes about daily domestic crises. Still, Schaeffer's glimmers of wit aren't enough to sustain one throughout this overwritten and carelessly edited novel.—DOROTHY WICKENDEN

## The Sirian Experiments

by Doris Lessing

Alfred A. Knopf, 288 pp., \$11.95

WHEN A MAJOR contemporary writer turns from delineating our immediate civilization to creating a vast science-fiction epic, one expects greater success than Doris Lessing has had so far with *Canopus in Argos: Archives*, of which this is the third volume. *The Sirian*

*Experiments* returns to the cosmological melodrama of the first book, *Shikasta*, wherein the history of Earth (Shikasta) had been dictated by the struggles and compromises of three galactic empires. (The second volume was more modest, almost a fairy tale.) *Shikasta* was a lumpy paste of ideas; here, some of those ideas have been rolled and shaped, but Lessing still wants her reader to interpret the message rather than eat the fortune cookie.

Earlier, we had seen documents compiled over many thousands of years by the good empire of Canopus. Now Lessing's scheme has been considerably enriched: Subtitled "The Report by Ambien II, of the Five," *The Sirian Experiments* retells much of this history through the eyes of a Sirian woman leader who has over eons come to respect the Canopeans. She never does find out what the evil planet Shammat drains from Earth—readers of the first volume know it to be our community identification, our "substance-of-weakness"—but she does find herself increasingly alienated from her fellow Sirians. No wonder: With her blonde hair and blue eyes she seems far too human to trust.

Neither good Lessing, alas, nor good SF. Fanatics only. —CHARLES NICOL

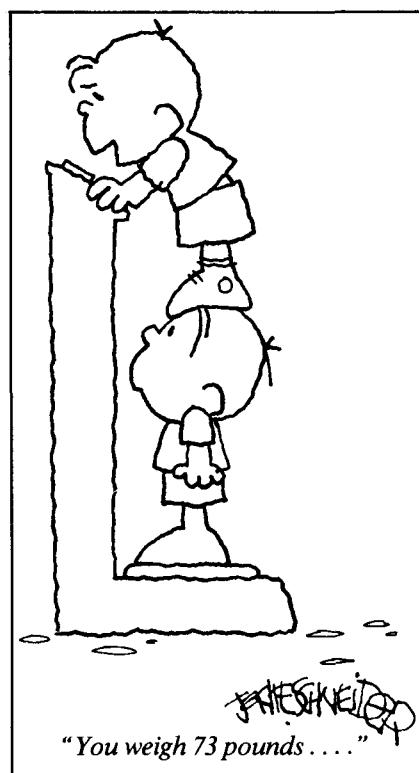
## A Sentimental Education: Stories

by Joyce Carol Oates

E.P. Dutton, 196 pp., \$11.95

THE CRITICS' EFFUSIONS over *Bellefleur* notwithstanding, much of Joyce Carol Oates's recent prose output has been an unpruned orchard of high gothic romance. The tales collected in *A Sentimental Education* are her newest transplants from the genre. Here, in tones of lamentation, is the stuff of soap opera—murder, adultery, and impotence, with their attendant furies.

All six stories are plotless rambles through emotional terrain as bleak and autumnal as the settings in which they are cast. "Queen of the Night" prudishly chronicles the sexual acrobatics of a middle-aged woman and her young husband, then ends on a iarring note of supernaturalism. In the title story, "A Sentimental Education," an erotic initiation on a windswept shore turns



"You weigh 73 pounds . . ."

into an ordeal of revulsion and violence.

Sound, not sense, is Miss Oates's strength; yet, frequently, her hypnotic cadences are shattered by a crescendo of unblushing hyperbole ("His blood surged, pulse upon pulse, in waves of clarity." "In his arms she was immortal."). Furthermore, there is no logical development or web of inevitability in the movement of her narrative. Each story seems to have been distilled from the subconscious effluvia of the moment. Wordy and vague, they are, at best, accessible only to the most indulgent and empathetic of readers.

—DAVID BELL

### **Rhine Journey**

by Ann Schlee

Holt, Rhinehart & Winston

178 pp., \$10.95

IDENTITY CRISES are a dime a dozen in the pages of first novels. Lest we forget how poignant they can be, Ann Schlee has given us a small but well-crafted portrait of a 19th-century British woman in the midst of a life change.

Thirty-eight-year-old Charlotte Morrison has always existed "in houses built of the deep accretions of other people's lives." As a young girl she lived in the house of her brother Charles, a domineering, humorless pastor whom she faithfully served until he banished her for falling in love with an unsuitable man. Reunited with Charles and his family on a steamboat cruise along the Rhine some 20 years later, Charlotte is plunged into frightening disequilibrium after encountering a passenger who reminds her momentarily of her old, lost love. Emotions long condemned to exile overtake her; she now feels herself to be a stranger in the narrow confines of her brother's world and questions the wisdom of returning to his home, as he has suggested.

Schlee's juxtaposition of Charlotte's deteriorating defenses with the institutionalized repression of Prussia in 1851 is somewhat labored, as is the contrived similarity between her own adolescent love affair and her niece's infatuation with a Prussian soldier. Schlee's taut, elegant prose is ample compensation for the plot's lack of subtlety. It carries us easily through the pathways of Char-

lotte's mind as she projects dormant erotic fantasies upon this unsuspecting fellow sojourner, and, ultimately, reclaims for herself the deed for an identity—if not a house—of her own. *Rhine Journey* is a fine adult debut from this author of children's books.

—SUSAN OCHSHORN

## **Nonfiction**

### **Ambition: The Secret Passion**

by Joseph Epstein

E.P. Dutton, 320 pp., \$12.95

THE FIRE OF LIFE. A vulgar drive. Life's gall. Ambition is all of these. And to Joseph Epstein it is more. Ambition signifies a culture's idea of itself, describing as it does the well-lived life and giving the name to failure. Epstein's subject is not just the desire to succeed; his subject is the character of American culture as revealed by the career and sorry fate of that desire.

Yes, sorry fate. For Epstein believes ambition has fallen into "bad repute" during recent generations as its rewards—wealth, social status, power—have grown tarnished in the glare of adverse criticism and egalitarian morality. This is not to say that Americans no longer desire these rewards; they

simply deny the fact, often devoting themselves publicly to other ends, like service, sincerity, or contentment.

Who can deny that Epstein has found some truths here? Yet that is not all he had done. Mingling graceful, learned meditations on the cultural emblems of ambition (money, success, failure, society, work) with jabs at contrary social critics like Christopher Lasch and biographical vignettes of people who have lived for or died from or could not make up their minds about ambition's costs (e.g., the Rockefellers and Kennedys, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Wallace Stevens, Adlai Stevenson), he has given us the image of our own entangled wishes and fears. To have so rich an intellectual fare so pleasurably served is rare. Read *Ambition*, and feast—savoring the spice of well-told tales and reasoned admonitions.

—JAMES SLOAN ALLEN

### **Three Mile Island**

by Mark Stephens

Random House, 233 pp., \$11.95

FEW AMERICANS will forget Walter Cronkite's opening words on March 30, 1979. "Good evening. The world has never known a day quite like today. It faced the considerable uncertainties and dangers of the worst nuclear power plant accident of the atomic age. And



"'Damned if I know' is not my favorite expression. It's just that you keep asking me questions to which 'damned if I know' is the appropriate answer."