

won't find that delicate issue discussed in Blitzer's book.

Blitzer is also wary about making strong judgments about American officials. The book closes, for example, with an odd anecdote about President Reagan telling reporters that he supports both Israeli security and defensive weapons for the Arabs. Remarks Blitzer: "There seems little doubt that Reagan actually believes what he says." Now what is that supposed to mean? The reader assumes that Blitzer regards Reagan's view as mistaken or naive or ill-informed. Or something! But he never says what he means.

Journalists shouldn't write memoirs unless they are prepared to offend people. They shouldn't pretend to stand back and tell the full story about events they have covered until they have the emotional distance and the intellectual perspective to do so usefully. Blitzer coyly calls his book "A Reporter's Notebook." Perhaps that means he has another book in him—a book that will be worth waiting for—in which the raw material of the notebook will be organized more thoughtfully.

—David Ignatius

Amusing Ourselves to Death. Neil Postman. *Viking*, \$15.95. With 1984 safely past, along comes someone to remind us of that other modern nightmare, *Brave New World*. Huxley envisioned a future in which culture becomes not a prison but a burlesque. Neil Postman, a professor of communications at New York University, believes that this vision has been largely realized. Television, he argues convincingly, has reduced our public discourse to "a sea of irrelevance...preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy."

Now it doesn't take much insight to trash American TV. Postman's thesis is to claim that "the best things on television are its junk...television is at its most trivial and, therefore, most dangerous when its aspirations are high, when it presents itself as a carrier of important cultural con-

"From ineffective secretaries of agriculture to congressional leaders who do not understand the issues...a shocking account of politics and bureaucracy at their shabbiest—a sad litany of events and consequences."

—*Publishers Weekly*

THE POLITICS OF FOOD

Joel Solkoff

A compelling and timely analysis of America's questionable agricultural policy, and its role in the rise of agribusiness and the decline of the family farm.

"Reveals how the public's vast mineral holdings have been given away at fire-sale prices... This book should be required reading for local, state, and national officials involved in public land policy."

—Rep. Jim Weaver
Member, House Interior and
Insular Affairs Committee

PUBLIC DOMAIN, PRIVATE DOMINION

A History of Public Mineral Policy in America
Carl J. Mayer and George A. Riley

This authoritative history of our public mineral policy describes how private interests have triumphed over the public good and calls for long overdue reforms.

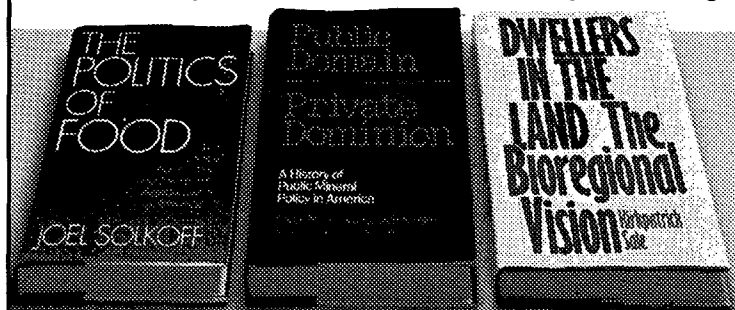
"[Sale] wants to see the bioregional vision flower into a bioregional movement, a non-partisan version of contemporary Green politics that can win the loyalty of liberals and conservatives alike." —*The New York Times Book Review*

DWELLERS IN THE LAND

The Bioregional Vision
Kirkpatrick Sale

One of the newest concepts in ecological thought, bioregionalism posits the inherent biological and natural organization of the planet and expresses this fact politically and culturally.

LAND OF PLENTY?



At your bookstore now **Sierra Club Books.**

versation." Though he devotes the second part of his book to fairly routine TV-bashing, Postman's real theme is the supplanting of an epistemology based on the printed word by one grounded in electronic media.

His analysis takes off from McLuhan's perception that any means of communication—oral legends, books, newspapers, TV—is not simply a conduit of information but implicitly shapes the meaning of the message it conveys. Postman asserts that "from its beginning until well into the nineteenth century, America was as dominated by the printed word and an oratory based on the printed word as any society we know of."

In fostering what we think of as patterns of rational thought, this typographic tradition was essential to the development of American democracy. Postman points to the Lincoln-Douglas debates as a preeminent example of American political discourse that, while oral, was rooted in the tradition of the written word.

The invention of the telegraph, photograph, radio, and film hastened the onset of what Postman calls "a peek-a-boo world" of fleeting, disjointed images, offering "fascination in place of complexity and coherence." This world has reached its apotheosis—and *reductio ad absurdum*—in television. The boob tube's hegemony is essentially complete, Postman feels, though he holds out the "desperate answer" of the public schools as a forum for "de-mythologizing media."

The author's obvious zeal occasionally leads him to overstatement. At times Postman comes off like an apostle of the Age of Reason, inveighing against the vagaries of modernity. For example, he appears to identify the value of what he calls the typographic mind—"detached, analytical, devoted to logic, abhorring contradiction"—too closely with the actual practices of book-reading societies. Surely our ancestors had their fill of irrational quirks despite having been deprived of TV.

Likewise, he is too quick to dismiss the advantages of the "global village" created by elec-

tronic media. No doubt we are inundated by more news than we can process. But there's something to be said for knowing about riots in South Africa or famines in Ethiopia, distant though these events may seem. Far from trivializing them, TV imbues these stories with an impact no other medium can approach. And at its best, TV can inspire viewers to respond constructively to far-flung crises, as they have in sending aid to Ethiopia and protesting U.S. support for South Africa.

—David W. Stowe

American Pictures: A Personal Journey Through the American Underclass. Jacob Holdt. *American Pictures Foundation*, \$14.00. With *American Pictures*, Jacob Holdt unabashedly follows in the footsteps of muckraker Jacob Riis, who, like Holdt, left Denmark to travel among America's dispossessed and expose their misery. But this book, which was released recently to accompany a multi-media show the author has presented on college campuses, also raises some questions about how much the muckraker can contribute to the pain he documents.

Over five years, Holdt, a high school dropout and devout leftist, managed to travel 113,750 miles and visit 434 homes in 48 states. A camera his parents sent him captures what he saw in chance run-ins with Senators Jay Rockefeller and Edward Kennedy, the Indians at Wounded Knee, bank presidents, and denizens of migrant slave camps and urban shooting galleries. A short-hair wig gained him access to rednecks who otherwise might have distrusted him.

The success of Holdt's campus road show lies partly in the challenge he poses his often well-off audiences: why does slavery continue unchallenged by, even unknown to, most of American society?

At times, he means literal slavery. By befriending an armed guard he managed to slip into a Florida migrant camp where men live apart from their families and ride in trucks from behind barbed-wire fences to work in fields. His photos

show child labor and dead bodies along roads. Later in his travels Holdt encountered "slave catchers" from such camps in the deep South rounding up winos in a black bar in North Carolina.

For the most part, though, Holdt depicts a figurative, though perhaps equally restrictive, slavery. He photographed one Louisiana sugar cane plantation whose owner pays families of six \$3,000 a year, then lends them money to live in one-room shacks that have no electricity or running water. The planter owns the only store around and charges inflated prices. Few people ever work their way out of debt, of course, and the landowner's guards make sure nobody leaves without paying what they owe.

Holdt's book inadvertently poses a second uncomfortable question: when does the muckraker turn slummer? How much can a sincere middle-class white man crusade for the black poor before he, too, ends up exploiting the people he hoped to help?

In addition to misery, Holdt encountered the reformer's classic conflict between striving for a distant social goal and trampling on the individuals in the way. In his case, some of them died. Whites in one Southern town, angry over Holdt's affair with a black woman, firebombed her house, killing her brother.

You can't fault Holdt for associating with people of different colors in a segregated society in which "race-mixers" are attacked. But you can blame him for at times ignoring the consequences of his actions. Holdt himself recognizes that unlike the disadvantaged enslaved by their society, he had the freedom to escape to more comfortable homes when he needed nutrition and sleep.

—Paul Bass

The Untapped Power of the Press. Lewis W. Wolfson. *Praeger*, \$28.95. Wolfson's aim is to convince the press that it can make better use of its power. The way to do that, he says, is not more surprise and titillation, but more effective explanation of how government works. You have to hand it to Wolfson for