

up to and including the one with North, was "conducted in a precise, professional manner: at least one other person was present [a member of Meese's staff] and detailed, written notes were kept of what was said." But, after North, every interview was conducted without notes.

► Ronald Reagan *still* has not criticized Poindexter or North.

Ultimately, the most depressing thing about the Iran-contra affair was that it didn't seem to matter all that much. In a few months Reagan will be saying good-bye to a misty-eyed nation, Poindexter's

lawyers will be thinking of ever more creative ways of avoiding trial, and North will be getting higher lecture fees and longer ovations. Fundamentally, people value other qualities more than adherence to democratic principles. Someone *really* fighting for something he believes in is admirable even if he's running an illegal war. Cover-ups, lies, and obstruction of justice are okay as long as you later admit you lied and explain that it was for a good cause. That Americans still admire these men of zeal in spite of the Iran-contra hearings shows that the committee's failure was monumental. □

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*When Southern writers flipped through family photo albums, it was like seeing race, class, and their childhoods for the first time.*

## South Toward Home

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by Anna Quindlen

Those of us born and bred north of the Mason-Dixon line who have gone on to write for a living have a fantasy, based on an amalgam of Walker Percy, William Faulkner, Carson McCullers, Eudora Welty, and Tennessee Williams, that southern writers have an edge. There is always the suspicion they have had childhoods so rich in atmosphere, eccentricity, and the wryest sort of pain that from the beginning they have an advantage in the creation of fiction that those of us who grew up surrounded by heavy industry and Wonder Bread can only envy. This book\* only cements this fantasy.

Of course, that is not all it does. To begin with, it is a collection of pieces from some of the best southern contemporary writers, including Bobbie

Ann Mason, Barry Hannah, Padgett Powell, and Robb Forman Dew. And in their recollections we see the region not as the monolithic land of slow-talking and easy-living as northerners sometimes envision but in the fullness of its awesome class stratifications, social customs, and, above all, racial complexity.

Moreover, recollections are inspired by a device so stunning in its simplicity and absolute rightness that it is a wonder it hasn't been tried a dozen times before. Each writer was asked by Alex Harris, the director of the Center for Documentary Photography at Duke University, to use family photographs to inspire a piece of writing. "With this book, we move away from a traditional format of documentary publication in which a photographer looks at the world and a writer explains what the photographer sees," Harris writes in his introduction, a lovely bit of writing itself about the mesmerizing effect family

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*Anna Quindlen writes the "Life in the 30s" column for The New York Times.*

\**A World Unsuspected: Portraits of Southern Childhood.* Alex Harris, ed. University of North Carolina Press, \$16.95.

albums had on him as a boy. Instead, the writers have looked at the pictures and explained what they see in their mind's eye, with the pictures included.

As soon as you open the book you know the results must be inspired, for aren't those crowded black and white snapshots from a Brownie camera the most potent childhood referents? Buzz-saw haircuts on the little boys, neat little outfits with matching purses for the teenage girls, and a whole world is conjured up. Add to this the great skill of the contributors, and the results are wonderful.



Robb Forman Dew, second from right.

It is instructive to see the differences among approaches. Some confront the pictures directly. Josephine Humphreys offers a vivid rendering of her grandmother occasioned by a series of stiff Christmas portraits the old woman arranged each year. Padgett Powell composes a wry essay on the aspects of character found in early snapshots. "Surely the running-board leg is my own touch," he notes of himself at age five, surrounded by little girls with bare legs, his own hoisted like a matinee idol onto the side of the car.

James Alan McPherson's memoir about rootlessness, childhood insecurity, disappointment, and forgiveness centers on a picture of a young black man standing in front of a shanty. He is holding a comic book and wearing a down jacket. "This is the only picture I have of my father," McPherson begins. "It was taken sometime in the 1930s, at his mother's family home in Hardeeville, South Carolina, when he was a young man. I have known all along that he liked comic books. Someone has pointed out to me that he is wearing a down jacket. The wearing of down jackets did not become fashionable until many years after this picture was taken. But a down jacket would be most comfortable during the cool, rainy winters that settle into the coastal areas of Georgia and South Carolina. My

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James Allen McPherson Sr.

father's roots were in this region. Knowing its climate, he must have dressed with an eye toward comfort.

"Someone else has noted that he seems arrogant. I cannot remember him this way, although some arrogance, for him, was possible. But most likely his arms are crossed and his eyes are closed and his head is tilted because he is asleep. I have learned that he suffered from narcolepsy. . . ."

As you look from the prose to the photograph you agree: Yes, arrogant. No. Yes, not arrogant. Asleep. It is as though you are hand in hand with the author, not only in the place where he has taken you but on the journey he has made to get there.

Others use the photographs only as a starting point and do not refer to them directly. Still there is a complicity between the writer and the reader that is exhilarating and unexpected. In her painful recollection of her girlhood, "The Power and the Glory," Robb Forman Dew begins with the unforgettable sentence, "I had a wonderful personality until I was about fourteen when I was simply too tired to have it anymore." The opening is accompanied by a photograph of the Westdale Junior High Homecoming Court—the author is second from the right, 14, and wearing a corsage and a hat—and it is all there:

the personality and the strain. It *looks* tiring.

In the same piece, the pictures also work against the recollections. There is a photo of Dew's parents on their wedding day, two unusually handsome people smiling into one another's eyes. While her account of her father's descent into alcoholism is affecting enough, the newly minted optimism of the photograph gives it a special edge.

There are other points worth noting: The writing, ranging from Mr. Powell's rich meanderings to Ms. Mason's almost journalistic rendering of her time as a fan club aficionado, is uniformly first-rate. The pieces also illustrate strongly—the pictures too, for that matter—what northern writers sometimes forget: that the southern experience is wildly diverse. We get Dew's account of relentlessly nurturing her charm—"the lovely solipsism of southern girlhood," she calls it. By way of sharp contrast comes McPherson's recollections of moving from place to place and visiting his father with "a wire screen between him and us" in prison.

Both McPherson and Dew say a good deal about race. Dew's southern belle behavior is shaken one day on a routine ferry ride across the Mississippi river when, as she puts it, "I awakened to the whole world" and realized that the side of the boat marked "White" had only a handful of passengers and the side marked "Colored" was terribly crowded. "You know, this is ridiculous," she tells her girlfriends, in the sort of naive, knocked-over-the-head-by-truth tone that so often characterizes white discovery of racism. "We're all on the same boat."

McPherson's, too, is a child's consciousness, of reading all day at the colored branch of the library and going to the best colored school in Savannah. His father, a talented electrician, has his license revoked and his dreams of opening his own business blighted. But his family is never sure whether his problem is his color or his drinking. One day a retired county official comes to call: "My mother said he asked, 'Is this Mac's son?' Then he said, 'Mac was a brilliant man. That liquor just got to him.' Then he said, 'Mable, I never had anything against the colored. Now both of us are old. Can I come around sometime and sit with you?'"

There's also a heartbreakingly funny account by Al Young about trying to tote a too-large watermelon home from his grandfather's fields when he was four and an account by T.R. Pearson of going to the beach with his family that will be instantly familiar to anyone who's ever done it. The complexities of race and class, the awesome powers of memory, the right writers and a wonderful idea—it's all here. I'm trying to find something bad to say about this book, but I can't. □

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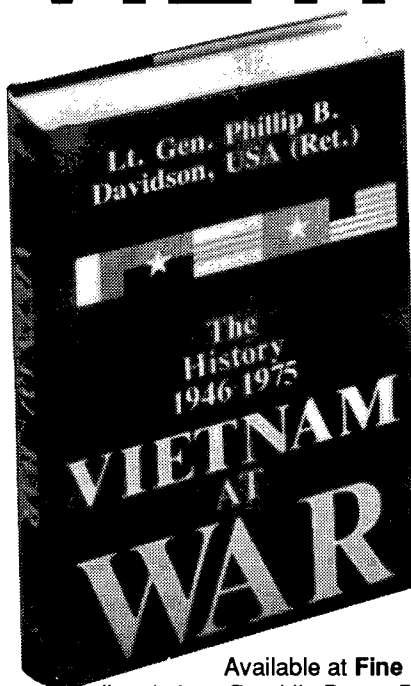
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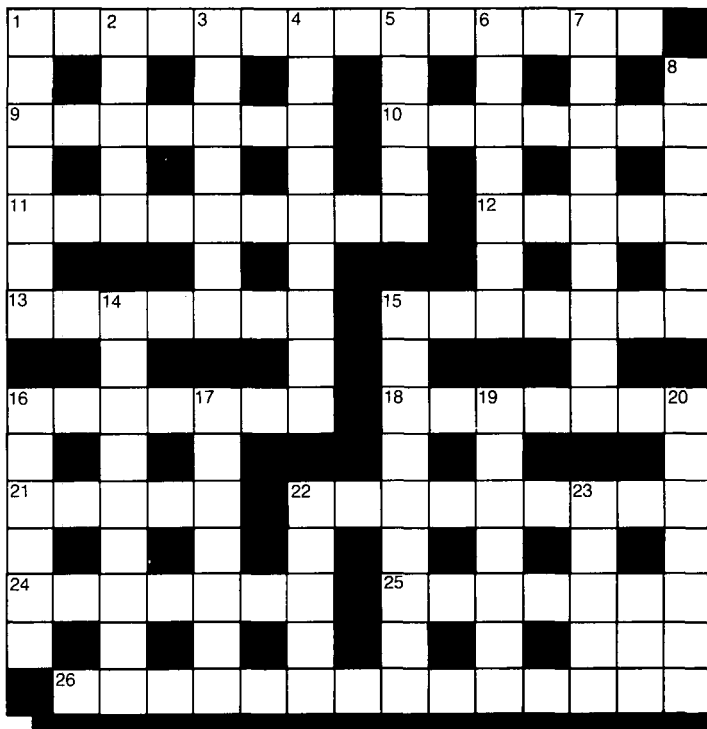
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# POLITICAL PUZZLE

by John Barclay

The numbers indicate the number of letters and words, e.g. (2,3) means a two-letter word followed by a three-letter word. Groups of letters, e.g. USA, are treated as one word.



## ACROSS

1. Then her big move set for campaign end. (8,6)
9. Henry, or George, for example. (7)
10. Much more troubling when wild racers surround one. (7)
11. Puff on Washington, for example. (9)
12. Twice-directed birds. (5)
13. Exclude essential moue, we hear. (4,3)
15. Mark a sitter savagely. (7)
16. Soon bashful about food waste and end of fowl. (7)
18. Slowly consumes crooked lines around projectile. (7)
21. First lady transportation system without exception. (5)
22. Moved aimlessly resolving dream need. (9)
24. Fixes signal in afterthought. (7)
25. Popular costume to possess. (7)
26. Way to entertain candidates' children in the hustings? (8,6)

## DOWN

1. Badly worn key state. (3,4)
2. Chopped veal takes you in for estimate. (5)
3. Intends to organize no teams. (5,2)
4. Strangely yell "agent" in style. (9)
5. Follow uranium in four directions. (5)
6. Larger fowl ingests last of fodder. (7)
7. Base storyteller coming back for power source. (5,4)
8. Island dweller as a matter of course. (6)
14. Little understood items raise cost deviously. (9)
15. Feeling about nose stain. (9)
16. Plain stage before physical education. (6)
17. Why photos developed into mall feature. (3,4)
19. Awkward bows had British put down. (3,4)
20. Artfully teased someone at first and puts him to sleep. (7)
22. African beginning march upset continent. (5)
23. Bird in flight tends to throb incessantly. (5)

Answers to last month's puzzle:

