

to turn anytime soon. The scope of business power increasingly is seen as beyond the purview of politics. Talk to young Democratic congressmen—even stridently progressive ones—and ask them what defines their liberalism. They'll tell you about the contras, about gay rights or civil rights. Few will answer, as their forebears would have, that their job is to stand up for the average citizen against today's economic royalists.

This political vacuum is doubly distressing since, as Vogel points out, improved regulation often resulted more from politicians responding to perceived public needs than from an organized public interest movement. He concludes, "Some day GM's management may look back with fondness to the 1960s, when its main worries were Ralph Nader and the United Automobile Workers rather than H. Ross Perot or Toyota." What both Vogel and business miss is that GM may need both Nader and the UAW to beat Toyota.

—Michael Waldman

Escalante: The Best Teacher in America. Jay Matthews. *Henry Holt*, \$19.95. These days almost any kind of educational success story out of an inner-city school invariably prompts an outpouring of superlatives. "Miraculous!" "Marvelous!" "Extraordinary!" To some extent, landing a teacher with the professional skills and personal determination of Jaime Escalante on the doorsteps of one of the worst schools in Los Angeles might be considered something of a miracle. But what the middle-aged Bolivian immigrant did there with a group of underprivileged, Hispanic students, while wondrously uncommon in the low-achievement world of public education, was by no means supernal.

What he did, taking 18 seniors from East Los Angeles's gang-ridden James A. Garfield High School through the successful completion of the Educational Testing Service's Advanced Placement Calculus Exams in 1982, has of course practically become legend. It has earned him well-deserved honors from the barrios of East Los Angeles to the White House and been the subject of a well-received motion picture called *Stand and Deliver*. But not until Matthews's fascinating, but rather unlikely, book

(How many books get written about real-life high-school teachers?), have we been offered a full account of this remarkable tale of modern-day life in a Latino ghetto.

Matthews, the Los Angeles bureau chief of *The Washington Post*, first heard of Escalante seven years ago through a newspaper article about 14 Garfield students suspected of cheating on the AP calculus exam. What struck him as unbelievable was not so much the report of cheating (later proven false) but that a school like Garfield—where the student body is 95 percent Latino, 85 percent poor, and mostly from families where their parents never graduated from high school—could produce even one student capable of passing the renownedly difficult test. Who was this man, Escalante, Matthews wanted to know, and how could he have accomplished so much with seemingly so little?

Matthews's search led him all the way back to Escalante's childhood in Bolivia. There he discovered an Horatio Alger story of sorts in the teacher's own life. As a bright but mischievous child, Escalante had been forced to overcome an abusive, heavy-drinking father on the way to becoming a celebrated, top teacher at some of the best schools in Bolivia. But when he came to America, looking to broaden his professional and personal horizons, he was told that his Bolivian degree was worthless. To support himself and his family, Escalante worked for 10 years as a janitor and then as a head cook at a Los Angeles restaurant while attending night school to re-earn his teaching degree. All the while, he never lost his gift for, nor his love of, teaching. But the sobering American experience reinforced in Escalante the unshakable determination and optimism that had made him, since childhood, always eager to take on a challenge. In fact, the bigger the challenge, the more it seemed to interest him.

One of Escalante's favorite challenges was shattering negative assumptions about the abilities of people from poor, ethnic backgrounds. As a little boy of eight, Jaime had bristled when his father whacked him across the face, after assuming he had stolen a pack of chewing gum that his friend had given him. As a new teacher at Garfield High, he was filled

with the same anger when his colleagues assumed students at the academically shaky school couldn't possibly learn calculus.

Matthews tells how Escalante silenced the cynics with a compassionate and nonjudgmental voice, providing a rare, virtually unfiltered look at life in a world most non-minority Americans know very little about. The story was particularly interesting for me. As a former resident of a South Side Chicago housing project who attended a rough-and-tumble school with a reputation for the worst of everything—much like Garfield, though not Hispanic—I felt a great kinship with Escalante and his students. The "ganas," or desire to learn, that Escalante instilled in his students was given to me and my classmates at Wendell Phillips High in Chicago by our own Escalante—a very special man named Leroy Lovelace. What Escalante did with logarithms, Lovelace did with language. Utilizing a no-nonsense teaching style, tempered by razor-edged wit, showmanship, and seemingly Herculean classroom standards, both teachers imbued their students with a love of their respective subject, the confidence to belie the conventional wisdom that a ghetto or barrio background is a barrier to high academic achievement, and the vision to see beyond the probabilities to the possibilities of their lives. "You can do it!" was a favorite Escalante phrase no matter how impossible the assigned task seemed. For Lovelace, my freshman English teacher, it was "Let's see what kind of guts you got!"

What Escalante, Lovelace, and countless unsung classroom heroes across the country know is that if you expect nothing, you get nothing. There's nothing really miraculous about it. Dedication, determination, and hard work, lots of hard work, are the keys, and they are reserved not just for a select few.

—Sylvester Monroe

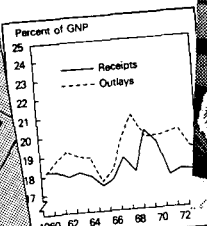
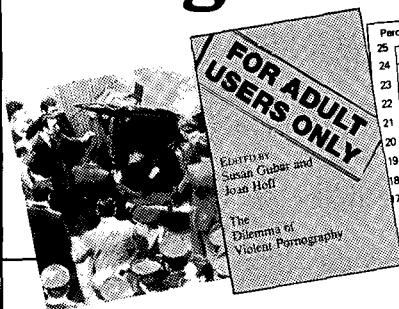
The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class. Loren Baritz. *Knopf*, \$19.95. Probably the best way to get to know a place quickly is to read the fiction that is set there. When my family moved to Westchester County, New York, a couple of years ago, I turned to the work of John Cheever, the

"Chekhov of Westchester," for help in understanding our new home. Cheever's publicity during the last few years of his life (he died in 1982), in which he was always portrayed as a contented suburban squire, had given me the expectation that his work would be a celebration of the life of the bourgeois, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestant commuter. Actually reading it for the first time was a shock—Cheever's vision is an unrelievedly dark one, in which almost all characters are profoundly alone, unable to find a rewarding connection either to the society or to other people. And now we know, thanks to the recent publication of Cheever's letters, his biography, and a memoir by his daughter, that his life was as melancholic as his work.

Cheever surprised me sociologically as well as temperamentally. We now have a picture of the suburbs in the fifties, Cheever's best-known setting, as having been prosperous and optimistic, if marred by excessive conformity, racism, and sexism. Yet the great economic theme of his work is downward mobility. A few peripheral characters are participating fully in the post-war boom, but most of the fully drawn, empathetic figures can't maintain the standard of living (Manhattan apartments, summer houses, private schools, servants) in which they were raised. The men have vague, unsuccessful careers. The women are oppressed by the burden of housework that their mothers didn't have to do. Bills go unpaid. Heirlooms are sold off. There is too much drinking.

Several of Cheever's stories have endings in which the protagonist, after having journeyed to the lower depths of despair, has a redeeming vision of the beauty and goodness of life in Westchester. These endings are supposed to demonstrate that Cheever's outlook was not entirely bleak—that he found it possible to make one's peace after all—but I find this theory unconvincing. For one thing, happy endings in Cheever always seem tacked-on and inconsistent with the body of the story. For another, consolation usually comes from the beauty of nature, rather than from the human world. In "The Country Husband," "The village hangs, morally and economically, from a thread; but it hangs by its thread in the evening

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