

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 supernatural.

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

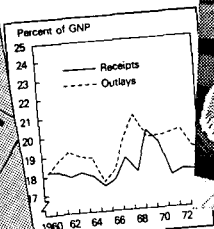
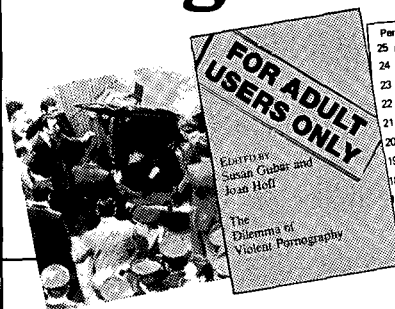
The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class. Loren Baritz. *Knopf*, \$19.95. Probably the best way to get to know a place quickly is to read the fiction that is set there. When my family moved to Westchester County, New York, a couple of years ago, I turned to the work of John 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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light." To use Philip Rahv's famous partition of American literature, Cheever is a Paleface in terms of his subject matter, but he is at heart absolutely a Redskin. His vision of the good is anti-order and anti-civilization, and most of his heroes deep down would prefer to follow Huck Finn's lead and light out for the territories, only they've got families and mortgages and it isn't clear where the territories are any more.

Some of Cheever's discontents can be traced to his own situation as a bisexual (and by late middle age, homosexual) man who had resolved to remain in the role of husband and father. But there is a more general point that his work illustrates, which is that even at this late date American literature and thought have not yet made their peace with middle-class life. The middle-class literary protagonists who are happy with their lot usually lack moral and psychological awareness. Works whose aim is the glorification of the middle class nearly always seem second-rate; think of the long-forgotten novels of James Gould Cozzens, which were lavishly praised when they were published.

A new book by Loren Baritz, a professor of history at Amherst, shows that at least as far as intellectuals were concerned, the middle class in this country has always been in a state of crisis. Because it tries to cover a vast subject in 300 pages, *The Good Life* has an all-over-the-place quality, but it is quite useful as what academics call "a review of the literature" on the middle class. No sooner did the middle class become securely established, which didn't happen until after the Civil War, than it began to feel culturally imperiled by the influx of non-Anglo-Saxon immigrants, whose own destiny in the middle class was unimaginable at the time. The immigrants themselves had to undergo the agonies of assimilation. After strict quotas put an end to the chaos of immigration, the development of a national consumer culture and the emergence of a generation of rebellious youth in the twenties caused further convulsions in the middle class's existence. Then came the Depression and World War II. Simply mentioning the names of the leading chroniclers of the supposedly paradisaic middle-class life of the fifties—C. Wright Mills, David

Riesman, Erik Erikson, Paul Goodman, William H. Whyte, Arthur Miller—ought to bring to mind how bad that time seemed to the thinking classes. Anyway, the fifties were, it's now obvious, an interlude, followed by a spirited attack on middle-class values.

American life since the sixties isn't yet far enough in the past for us to have gotten a good fix on it, but a few points are becoming clear. The OPEC embargo set off a period in which our faith in the perpetual rise in the standard of living evaporated. The emergence of the underclass has undercut an important part of the American twentieth century creed, the idea that poverty is a temporary condition usually lasting one generation at most. The excessive conformity that all the analysts of the fifties worried about has given way to an almost opposite problem, in which we have put such a premium on personal gratification that pulling together as a nation seems to have become impossible. The middle class, in other words, is still in the dock.

Baritz points out that in spite of its never-ending conceptual problems, the middle class has never had trouble attracting members. For decades, nearly all Americans have, when asked by pollsters, identified themselves as middle class.

So why, to judge from the evidence of books, are we discontented with the way most of us live? The easiest answer is to blame the "opposition culture" of intellectuals—that is, to say that the whole picture that we have of the woes of the American middle class is simply the result of a pose that American intellectuals decided to strike at around the time of World War I and have stuck to ever since. There is something to this, but it doesn't suffice as the entire reason. How to explain someone like Cheever or, going back a century, the first important Westchester County writer, Washington Irving, both of whom seem to have truly wanted to present a picture of a glowing, pastoral, contented America, but somehow couldn't?

Baritz notes in his introduction that "America has not yet found its Flaubert or Thomas Mann," meaning, I think, that our leading novelists have yet to accept the existence of the middle class as a given, so that in

American fiction there lurks the idea that middle-class discontents might be healed simply by leaving the middle class. Indeed, most middle-class Americans still have non-middle-class family memories; the existence of the middle class still seems like a development recent enough that intellectuals are required to take an editorial position on it. Also, the American middle class, more than the middle classes of other countries, is obsessed with the possibility of big-time success—of getting to some place high above the middle where life is defined by wealth, glamour, fame, or freedom. Because of this, comfortable middle-class life seems somehow pallid, compromised, and insufficient. Real-estate-industry propaganda to the contrary, the American dream is not ownership of a single-family home, but something more frustrating and unattainable.

The idea of an American culture that actively celebrated middle-class life seems pretty dreary, but if, instead, we learned merely to accept it, the operation of the country would become easier. At the level of everyday life, people would probably save more money, uproot their families less often, and spend less time at tanning salons and EST weekends. Intellectuals and artists could devote the efforts now expended on rebelliousness to something else. Makers of government policy could get away from the frontier-town tone that the debate over issues so often assumes. In exchange for this new civility we would surely lose some of the energy generated by a mobile society.

Would it be worth it? The question is academic. There is a tendency to interpret all of American culture as simply a function of how old the baby-boom generation happens to be. Therefore, it's common these days to hear that the national life is going to slip into a middle-aged mode in the 1990s, with everyone sitting at home with pipe and slippers. I don't believe it. The United States is extremely young compared to other industrialized countries, and it has just completed a period of rapid economic change, major internal population shifts, and heavy immigration. The Redskin is still at large in the culture; discontentedness with middle-class life will be with us for a long time.

—Nicholas Lemann

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