

Arts & Letters

FILM

[*The Devil Wears Prada*]

Hell on Heels

By Steve Sailer

PERHAPS YOU SHOULDN'T mention this around the feminist thought police, but women often hate working for other women. While men compete for status by including as many underlings as possible in their hierarchies, women gain prestige by excluding the maximum number from their cliques.

Running *Vogue*, the most celebrated fashion magazine, might be the ultimate in cliquishness, and Anna Wintour, who in 1996 became the industry's first million-dollar-per-year editor, is famously frosty toward anyone beneath her in celebrityhood.

English journalist Toby Young tells the story of a *Vogue* executive's teenage daughter interning at the office. Once, as the intimidating editor bore down upon the awestruck girl in a hallway, the stiletto heel of one of Wintour's Manolo Blahniks snapped, sending her sprawling at the intern's feet. The teenager had been warned by her mother that "under no circumstances was she to speak to Ms. Wintour—ever. Consequently, she gingerly stepped over Anna's prostrate form. As soon as she turned the corner, she sprinted to her mother's office... Had she done the right thing? Yes, her mother assured her. She'd done exactly the right thing."

Wintour has erected a persona for

herself that "glories in self-created aristocratic solitude," like a character in a Camille Paglia-directed revival of "The Importance of Being Earnest." Wintour resembles an earnest cross between Oscar Wilde's fashion-fixated duo, Gwendolen, whose motto is, "In matters of utmost importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing," and her Gorgon mother, Lady Bracknell, who observes, "Style largely depends on the way the chin is worn. They are worn very high, just at present."

Personally, I find Wintour's blatant snobbery refreshing compared to the faux egalitarianism of the high-tech world. When interviewing for a job at chipmaker Intel in 1982, I was told that no employee got an office, not even Vice Chairman Robert Noyce, the co-inventor of the silicon chip. Of course, I had to stand on my tiptoes and peek into the billionaire's cubicle, which turned out to be 600 square feet, with Impressionist masterpieces hanging on the gray fabric dividing walls.

Lauren Weisberger, a recent Ivy League grad hoping for a toehold in the writing business even if she had to associate with frivolous fashionistas, worked for a year as Wintour's junior personal assistant. Weisberger then wreaked revenge on her demanding boss by publishing a bestselling *roman à clef*, *The Devil Wears Prada*, about an evil editrix who demeans her idealistic, talented (and, let us not forget, Ivy League-educated) assistant by making her fetch her dry-cleaning.

Fortunately, the comic movie adaptation, with Meryl Streep as "Miranda Priestly" of *Runway* magazine and Anne Hathaway as the ingénue, is more enjoyable than the book, with both characters

rendered more sympathetically. Hathaway's scenes away from the office, where she must choose between her sous-chef boyfriend (Adrian Grenier) and a glamorous Jay McInerney-style novelist (Simon Baker), are lackluster, but the film wakes up whenever Streep is on screen.

Whether or not being high priestess of the fashion arms race is a job worth doing at all—former *Vogue* editor Diana Vreeland defined her role as giving "them what they never knew they needed"—Streep's character clearly does her job well. She uses her prodigious recollection of every layout ever published to decide imperiously whether the hamster wheel of couture has spun far enough around that it's time, say, to "reinvent the drop waist dress" all over again.

At the Condé Nast building in Manhattan, nobody dares share an elevator with Wintour. You let her ride up in splendid isolation while you wait for the next one. The film allows you to understand why, showing Streep making her daily grand entrance to the office while rattling off long lists of must-dos for her assistants to get hopping on. The social awkwardness of a communal elevator ride would distract her as she gathers her thoughts for the day's work.

Rather than rant like Cruella De Vil, Streep underplays, dropping lines like "Tales of your incompetence do not interest me" as softly as only the truly feared dare. The downside to Streep's understated performance is that diminishing returns set in. Brilliant as it is in initial conception, Miranda's lack of dynamic range makes the second half of the film less exciting. ■

Rated PG-13 for some sensuality.

BOOKS

[Where Did the Party Go? William Jennings Bryan, Hubert Humphrey, and the Jeffersonian Legacy, Jeff Taylor, University of Missouri Press, 344 pages]

Disappearing Democrats

By Bill Kauffman

"I AM A POPULIST," declares political scientist Jeff Taylor in the preface to *Where Did the Party Go?*, wherein he traces the decline—disappearance, really—of Jeffersonian populism within the democracy by contrasting the careers of William Jennings Bryan and Hubert Horatio Humphrey. Midwestern tub-thumpers, White House also-rans, on the surface, Bryan and Humphrey might pass for hyper-voluble cousins. But scrape off the paint and they are as different as a family farm and IBM, 1776 and 1945, Christian peace and atomic war.

Taylor's book, rich in detail, forensically forceful, is no routine exercise in comparative politics. *Where Did the Party Go?* amounts to a populist reinterpretation of the 20th-century Democratic Party. The author is both an exhaustively thorough researcher and a pleasingly partisan writer: he is on the side of the old America of "puritans and populists, of anabaptists and anarchists," and laments its paving over by midcentury "Democratic and Republican leaders [who] agreed on the ends of American life: anticommunism and economic growth." The possibility that these might represent the end, and not the ends, of American life never bubbled up into the effervescent oratory of Hubert Humphrey. But it would have been gospel to William Jennings Bryan.

Taylor has devised a 12-tenet definition of the protean term "Jeffersonianism," which is really more a tendency

than an ideology and savors of a decentralist, libertarian populism. The party of Jefferson today may be as empty as the party of Hamilton is full, but Taylor ends the book with a rallying cry for "a coalition of the populist Left and populist Right" in opposition to "plutocracy and imperialism" and "a domineering state and a materialistic world view." It's the Nader-Buchanan alliance that never quite cohered between 1992 and 2004, though the crimes of the Bush Octennium may yet bring about this devoutly wished civil union. Ah, but we are getting ahead of our story.

William Jennings Bryan, the "eloquent voice of rural and small-town America," the Nebraskan "heir and enlarger of the agrarian revolt" against industrial capitalism who "carried no Eastern state in his three runs for the White House," comes down to us as the tired, pathetic biblical literalist of the smug, mendacious, middlebrow play "Inherit the Wind." On those rare occasions that he is hauled up from the memory hole he is mocked as "a clownish figure symbolizing the country bumpkins and religious zealots who tried to resist the coming of the modern world," with all its accoutrements: manhattans, the Manhattan Transfer, the Manhattan Project.

Bryan had an idealistic streak but we need not idealize him. He was a politician, after all, a "practical ideologue," a majoritarian Democrat who was partially deaf in his libertarian ear. Like Lincoln, his ambition was the little engine that knew no rest. A fundamentalist Christian imbued with a Jeffersonian faith and the commitment to uplift of a Social Gospelite, "he was a champion of small farmers, urban laborers, and small businessmen." He saw these people not as beggars at the banquet, not as noisy almsmen hollering for handouts, but as the true face of America. Restating the Jeffersonian motto "Equal rights for all; special privileges for none," he denounced "ship-subsidy grabbers," "trust magnates," and "the privilege-hunting and favor-seeking class." (Predictably, his campaigns were chronically underfunded.) It might seem odd that

Taylor calls a candidate who advocated nationalization of the railroads a believer in "a laissez-faire economy," but Bryan himself professed it: "The safety of our farmers and our laborers is not in special legislation, but in equal and just laws that bear alike on every man. The great masses of our people are interested, not in getting their hands into other people's pockets, but in keeping the hands of other people out of their pockets."

Bryan was also "a quasi pacifist and anti-imperialist" who made his 1900 campaign a referendum on imperialism and stood up against the jingoes in opposing U.S. entry into the First World War. He supported a national referendum upon a congressional declaration of war, one of the last full-throated shouts of the radical populists. (FDR, the *New York Times*, and Wall Street Republicans burked it for good in 1937.)

Bryan fought Morgan and Rockefeller on behalf of the Dakotas, and he made no apology for it. Among his supporters was a South Dakota druggist whose son, Hubert Horatio Humphrey, would become the grinning, garrulous U.S. senator from Minnesota, burbling fount of the "Politics of Joy," Lyndon B. Johnson's much abused vice president, and the 1968 Democratic presidential nominee.

Young Humphrey was a Willkie Republican in 1940, but during the postwar mop-up, when old American radicals were kicked out of a newly war-enamored Left, Humphrey busily extirpated Bryanism from the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party so that the populist FL might merge with the Trumanite hawks of the Democratic Party. "A Republican less than five years earlier," Taylor notes of HHH in 1947, "he was now reading life-long Farmer-Laborites out of the party." The Humphrey fusionists vanquished "the traditional agrarian populists within the Minnesota Farmer-Labor Party." Thus was born the DFL, a party with all the sects appeal of Walter Mondale.

As a good social democrat—today's neocon elders were almost all Humphrey men—HHH hated pacifists, isolationists, and radical American dissenters and purged them with the fervor