

Worst Book of the Year

R. Emmett Tyrrell, Jr.

Robert Lowell Coover is a writer who, for a man of middle years, invests an unusual number of his waking hours thinking about underpants. And so very intellectual are the thoughts underpants inspire in him that many prominent universities pay him hard cash to take up residence and think some more. Life with the profs and the collegians apparently appeals to Coover, for he has spent most of his adult years in such challenging environs as Wisconsin State University, in dynamic Superior, Wisconsin, where he served as writer in residence and, if I know my fish, kept the local juvenile authorities hopping.

Coover is one of those academically inclined novelists who roost on or near college campuses, attentively gathering preposterous theories from crank pedants and transforming them into literature...from fiction to fiction, the lifecycle of an ideologue's truths. All the trendy moonshine born of the bogus learning of sociologists, psychologists, and other certified *poseurs* turns up in Coover. His is a busy afflatus, and never could elucidating the significance of American underpants satisfy his genius. He has dared to peer beyond, and as the Coover *oeuvre* unfolds we see him assiduously weighing the meaning of armpits, halitosis, nocturnal emissions, and every imaginable aspect of the toilet stool—matters too long shunned by the nation's less sophisticated, less percipient writers. Here, in areas once thought to be the special preserve of hospital orderlies and washroom attendants, Coover finds occasion for historical, philosophical, political, and even theological statement. Thus Coover's audience is limited. His complicated masterpieces are for progressives of a decidedly academic inclination; who, but the willing victims of faculty meetings and departmental cocktail parties, would gobble up his message that human existence is bizarre, ghastly, and absurd? Not only is such a thesis girlishly theatrical, it is unoriginal.

Yet Coover spouts it bravely in books, in plays, and at places like Bard College and Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, where he has reigned as brooder in residence. Coover is—as Joseph Epstein recently noted—an ardent member of the adversary culture, and so his absorption with what admirers call “the cosmic questions” has about it a ludicrous predictability and an invincible ignorance. Once boomed as an intelligently critical stance toward western bourgeois society, the adversary culture has in recent decades settled into a smug orthodoxy celebrating values antithetical to bourgeois society,

namely: unreason, intolerance, coercion, and cultural primitivism, plus anti-anti-Communism and anti-Americanism. This is the stance that so idiotizes modern novelists that men like Coover and E.L. Doctorow become capable of believing almost any elaborate conspiracy so long as it is not directly connected with the John Birch Society.

THE
HAROLD ROBBINS
AWARD

The Public Burning
by Robert Coover

HONORABLE MENTION

The Rage of Edmund Burke
by Isaac Kramnick

Edmund Burke made comprehensible for readers of *Psychology Today* and other collectors of arcane gossip.

Isaac Kramnick is at one with Rona Barrett.

Loose Change
by Sara Davidson

Prima facie evidence against ever sending the enduring flapper to college at the University of California, Berkeley. Next to Miss Davidson, Jayne Mansfield was a suave genius.

All the adversary culture's advanced values inhere throughout Coover's most recent book, *The Public Burning*, an unspeakably dreary 534-page scow of a novel that shudders along propelled by at least three inverted insights: a) the Rosenbergs were innocent of espionage and only guilty of being quite the nicest Americans since Sacco and Vanzetti; b) the villainous United States government framed these two patriots as “expiatory victims of the cold war”; and c) Russian Communism in the early 1950s was harmless if indeed it even existed. Coover depicts Russian Communism as “The Phantom,” a gimcrack term evincing his artistic indebtedness to comic books and TV.

As with so many of the modern academic novelists Coover prides himself not only as a prober of the “cosmic questions,” but also as a theoretician of the novel. “[W]hen something hits us strong enough,

it means it's something real,” he is quoted as having said in *Critique* magazine, and in *The Public Burning* he wallops his readers with one colossal reality after another. Thought-provoking is the scene in which Vice President Richard Nixon secretes himself in Ethel Rosenberg's cell for an amorous tryst shortly before 2,000 volts of electricity make her a saint. Then, too, there is the dramatic moment when members of the Supreme Court struggle through voluptuous mounds of elephant droppings en route to the Times Square execution of Ethel and her mate. And finally, in a scene that bids fair to become one of the most pondered passages in American literature, Uncle Sam anoints Richard Nixon for the presidency by sodomizing him. Some two thousand words are devoted to this metaphysical exchange, and from the finely-detailed sketch of the impaled Nixon one can only conclude that the scene is the product of years of first-hand research by the author.

How these scenes of what is real might affect other readers I cannot say; but they had a fearsome impact on me, causing great freshets of perspiration to run from my brow and putting an unexpected curl in my hair. For me Times Square will never seem quite the same. Henceforth I shall furtively sniff every passing breeze for one last whiff of the noble Ethel, hoping always not to mistake her for that elephant manure. The image of Nixon amorously fondling the Marxist-Leninist Beelzebub banished forever the lingering admiration I held for our 37th president. I am transformed. This is art.

But it is the art of a bygone era. Today the profit margins are down for 1960s barbarism and for that easy nihilism so frequently manufactured by holders of Guggenheim Fellowships and Rockefeller Foundation grants. This past summer, midst huge anticipation in the literary world, *The Public Burning* slid down the ways, steamed out into the channel, and sank. The faithful did everything they could to salvage it. Professor Thomas R. Edwards hollered from the *New York Times Book Review* that the wreck was actually “an extraordinary act of moral passion.” In the *New Republic* a genuine teacher of contemporary fiction from the University of Cincinnati hailed it as “a major achievement of conscience and imagination.” But the musky fragrance of moral passion, conscience, and imagination could not arouse the old clientele. After Solzhenitsyn and Cambodia, America-loathing and anti-Communist-

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John P. Sisk

Pornography, Censorship, and the Cult of the Wild West

The legend of the Western hero glorifies an evasion of adult responsibilities that is still compelling to American males. Pornography is but a spectator version of playing cowboys and rustlers on the sexual frontier, and the resistance to censorship is in fact a fear of the combined threat of women and civilization.

Pornography makes strange bedfellows. Ellen Willis, for instance (see her column in the March 24, 1977 *Rolling Stone*), is appalled on the one hand by the proliferation of pornography with its degrading images of women, and dismayed on the other hand by those feminists who cannot see that to appeal to the censor, even where the most obnoxious pornography is concerned, is a disservice to the cause of women. One can, perhaps, agree with Ms. Willis that women have good reason to protect from the lusts of the censor the pornography and obscenity that threaten them. But one can also say, perhaps with even better reason, that the dislike of censorship—whether directed against pornography or any other promise of release from moral stricture—has been a conventional expression of a male need to escape from the combined threat of women and civilization. One may even suspect that the American male's dislike of censorship conceals a conviction that pornography makes possible a true frontier experience, the closing off of which can only result in impoverishment of spirit.

It is clear enough that American literature—to say nothing of popular myth and legend—has had a long love affair with males whose pre-adult status has generally been identified in such honorific terms as to cast adulthood itself in a villainous role. One thinks of the sensitive and embattled adolescents in the fiction of Twain, Stephen Crane, Hemingway, Thomas Wolfe, James T. Farrell, Fitzgerald, John Knowles, and the early Capote.

There are a number of reasons for this accent on juvenility. For one thing, there is the matter of story necessity: The young have (or at least it is easy for adults to believe that they have) the kind of physical and passionate vigor, the rebelliousness, curiosity, openness to experience, and mobility that get them into the right kind of trouble. Twain's Huck Finn, Hemingway's Nick Adams, and Salinger's Holden Caulfield are not only satisfactorily trouble-prone, but the trouble they get into makes for handy symbolic repetitions of the national experience: open-ended adolescent America putting behind it the history-shackled adulthood of Europe. Youth (the most beautiful word in the language, as Henry James once wrote in his notebooks) is easily assimilated to Emerson's Party of Hope. Youth can always strike out for the territory and so elude the long arm of the censorious establishment of elders—the Party of Memory which is anxious to make the present and future conform to the familiar past.

Put in these terms, it is easy to see that the formulation of youth and adulthood in America can result in melodramatic entrapment: the youth aspiring not to become father to the man but to fight off

the man lest he lose all his clarity, vigor, and virtue. In so far as one is a captive of this melodrama it is not simply hard to become adult; it is a tragedy, if not a disaster. Writers as different as Lionel Trilling, Phillip Rahv, Richard Hofstadter, Reinhold Niebuhr, and R.W.B. Lewis have observed this American trait with varying degrees of critical severity; but none of them has come down quite so hard on it as Kenneth S. Lynn in the Fall 1976 *Daedalus*.

In his "Adulthood in American Literature," however, Professor Lynn is concerned less with the thematic glorification of literal adolescents than with the extent to which 19th and 20th-century fiction appeals to young readers because of the childishness of the adults in it. Like Fenimore Cooper's Natty Bumppo, the classic American writers with few exceptions evade "the painful problem of being old in a young country" and "deny the realities of adulthood"—especially the realities of family and community life. Irving, Poe, Melville, Twain, Howells, James, and Stephen Crane all display that "psychic immaturity that inspired so many childish themes" no less than Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Salinger, Norman Mailer, and Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.

For Professor Lynn, Rip Van Winkle and Thoreau are typical. Easygoing Rip, whose entire life had been an evasion of responsibilities, escapes into his 20-year sleep, leaving his wife "who symbolized the hateful responsibilities of work and marriage" to contend with the consequences of his incompetence. Thoreau at Walden Pond, "seeking an alternative to the quietly desperate world of work and marriage," writes a book every episode of which "reveals an astonishing immaturity." Thus for him, like the "other escape artists of his time, life is an endless series of get-aways."

Influenced as we have been in recent years by the efforts of the human potential movement to re-define self-centeredness as a virtue, any view of American literature that suggests, as Lynn's does, that narcissism in American males has been too routinely defined as a praiseworthy passion for autonomous life is bound now to seem extreme, even perverse. Nevertheless, it is worth noting how much truth there was in this view—at least on the level of legend, fiction, and drama—as the nation moved westward after the retreating frontier.

On the level of lived historical fact, of course, the pioneering effort was often enough an effort of cooperating adults: the men clearing and planting the land, getting in the crops, fighting off Indians and rustlers; the women managing their appliance-free sod house and log cabin households, rearing the children, and performing numerous chores now generally thought of as male. Some of this cooperativeness is apparent on the level of story (and a

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