

enough is the common lot; the difficulty is to strike the balance. "This is the sort of English up with which I shall not put," Winston Churchill is *alleged* to have said, reminding us that there are traps on the right as well as on the

left. To avoid them takes the years of experience that Mr. Kilpatrick, now a grandfather, has and I, pink-cheeked, still lack. In *The Writer's Art*, James J. Kilpatrick shows just how enjoyable the journey can be. □

ENTHUSIASMS  
Bernard Levin/Crown Publishers/\$12.95

Thomas Mallon

A basic assumption about enthusiasm is that one man's meat will be another man's poison. But what happens when a man takes his meat and pounds it into the sort of mush that couldn't kill or fortify any of those to whom he serves it? This is unfortunately what Bernard Levin has managed to do in much of *Enthusiasms*, his hymn to painting, books, music, food, walking, cities, and other delicacies of civilization. There are portions of his book I wouldn't dream of commenting on: I am, for example, generally indifferent to what I eat, and I cherish an active hostility to that barking freakshow of glandular irregularity called opera. But since I share many of Mr. Levin's loves, and still find myself unmoved by his well-meant book, I think he would want me to tell you why.

For one thing, Mr. Levin's combative premise is wrong. On his very first page he states that "to be passionate in appreciation of the good things of life, especially the non-material things, is to court . . . stern denunciation as an irresponsible hedonist . . . behind much of the contempt for joy lie a deep fear and hatred of enjoyment." In fact, we live in an age in which the social norm is the ostentatious pursuit of the perfect croissant, the best quadrophonic reproduction, the most high-minded framed poster. We are so eager to be (and, above all, to appear) enthusiastic that we buy hideous art, endure terrible theater, and display overpriced books on ugly high-tech cocktail tables all because we've been told that these are things we must be enthusiastic about if we're to lay any claim to good taste and cultural soundness. Far from fearing to enjoy, we are desperately afraid to be caught failing to enjoy. This pseudo-enthusiasm may be the vulgar hallmark of our age, but bad as

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it is, it's not the same Puritanism Mr. Levin feels himself up against. He nicely weasels out of having to make his case by stating: "The active hatred of pleasure and excellence, however, though more important, and certainly more sinister, than the indifference which is so fashionable today, deserves a study in itself, though one which I am not much inclined to embark upon, if only because I would find it too depressing." Actually, Mr. Levin barely presents examples, much less a "study."

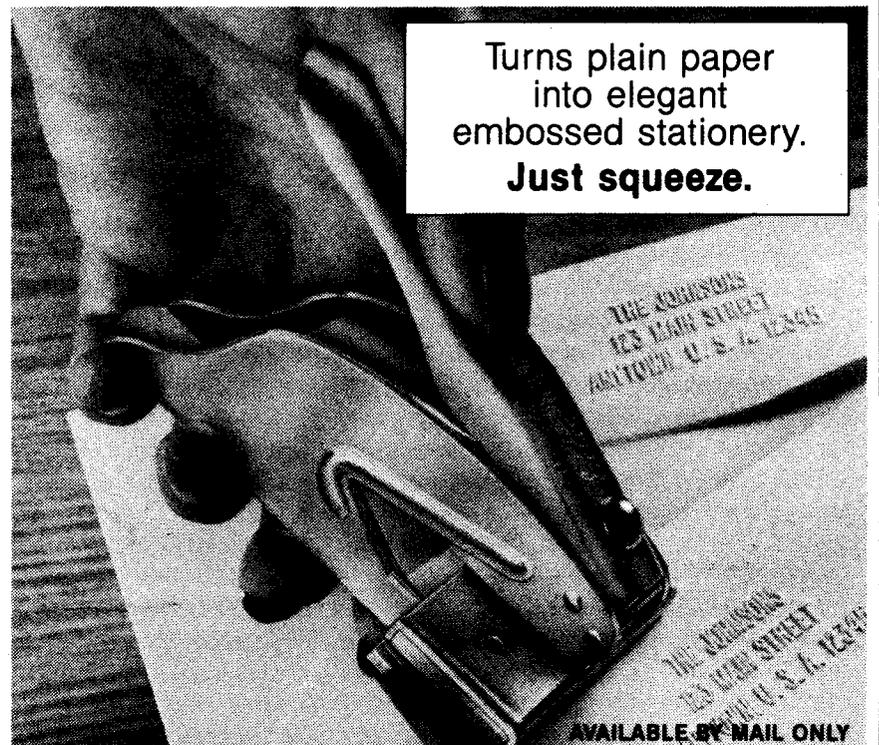
His definition of enthusiasm as "the taking of great pleasure, the feeling of great ardour, the experiencing of great excitement, in the presence or contemplation of the object that arouses the enthusiasm" is reasonable, as is one of the tests he proposes for enthusiasm—namely, "the desire to communicate it." But if these standards are reasonable, they're also minimal, as is Mr. Levin's stated purpose in writing his book: "to try to convey my enthusiasm, not to lecture my readers or to provide them with useful knowledge or instruction." I just don't think this will do. Mr. Levin is, after all, talking about his earthly deities here, and there seems little point—and perhaps even some selfishness—in having a preacher whip himself into frenzies of delight while remaining indifferent to whether the congregation gets religion or not.

Mr. Levin's discussion of Shakespeare is typical of what he does throughout *Enthusiasms*. For anything that is specifically enlightening and even moving—such as his recollection of walking home four miles after seeing John Gielgud in *Hamlet* and being in such a state of oblivious rapture that he was astonished to find himself putting his key in his door—there is unfortunately a good deal more in the way of gush and boilerplate. He tells us about "Shakespeare's unique ability to understand the human soul and its needs and powers" and other such

things that make nineteenth-century bardolators look like models of restraint and precision by comparison. I am delighted to see Mr. Levin on the job against the "idiot 'structuralist' or parlour-Marxist," and to hear him state unabashedly that the arts are supposed to reveal the universe; but if he is really going to provide a useful deterrent to the Yale boys so intent upon torturing literature before they

destroy it finally, he's going to have to be a good deal more bracing than this. To be impressionistic is one thing—and an admirable thing—in criticism; to be icky-sticky is quite another. But Mr. Levin has trouble stopping himself from spraying great clouds of perfume upon every chapter. "There are three paintings in the Uffizi that clamor to be my favourites, all of them quite justifiably, and to all of them I swear

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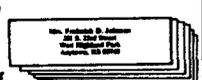
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undivided allegiance, hoping that they will not get together and compare notes until I am out of Florence and on my way to Venice, where there are a score more."

Sometimes expertise is the best testament of enthusiasm, and one only wishes Mr. Levin had looked longer and more penetratingly at the things he knows best. Too much here is too obvious and too familiar. "Has anyone ever pointed out what a huge proportion of graffiti in modern cities consist of the names of the graffiti artists and their friends?" Well, yes, Mr. Levin, they have; I believe even such duty-laden savants as Norman Mailer have

managed to notice this. We've got to be told something new, and be treated less like ladies in a reading club if your enthusiasms are to seem attractive and convincing. "But as I wandered among whole streets and squares of houses and shops that were nothing but facades, the very bricks made of foam rubber, I could understand why Hollywood's magic-lantern show so entirely captured the imagination of the whole world, and has not quite let go yet." One can hear this sort of thing for free, each April, from Gregory Peck, as he introduces Christie Brinkley to present an Oscar to Sylvester Stallone. One ex-

pects something more of Bernard Levin.

And one occasionally gets it—even in this book. Some of Mr. Levin's communiqués of gusto have a nourishing specificity. His tug at the connection between walking and optimism, and his ardor for fire provoke the reader profitably: "Once, at dinner among friends, our host asked what crime we would each commit if all legal, though not moral, sanctions against it were abolished, and after my fellow guests had decorously limited themselves to such sins as embezzle-

ment, smuggling and cat burglary, I robustly declared that my choice was arson . . ." And there is one wonderful gluttonous sentence that goes on for pages cataloguing his most memorable meals. (The food section has the additional quality of being a travelogue, since in order for Mr. Levin, an Englishman, to get many of these dinners he must venture outside the confines of the blandly mephitic oxymoron that even the gustatorially indifferent recognize as English cooking.) Finally, Mr. Levin made me want to see the Vigeland sculptures in Frogner Park, Oslo—even if he did insist on showing them with little Norwegians romping about. Like the country singer, Bernie believes in children.

Mr. Levin might actually have done a better job of conveying his enthusiasms—which, after all, is rather like conveying one's values—if he'd given us less brio and more bio. The sections that deal with his childhood reading, growing up in a Jewish household in London's Camden Town, his first pair of eyeglasses, schooldays in wartime, and the marvelous lift the Royal Festival Hall gave to grimly rationed postwar London are all very good reading and make one look forward to a full volume of memoirs, even though he says he won't write one. But if he would only cease being sentimental about places like Calcutta, and stop indulging in this new tendency to write alarmingly like Dr. Leo Buscaglia, he might, for crying out loud, get around to it. (Crying out loud, incidentally, is something the enthusiastic Mr. Levin is emphatically *for*.) But until then readers will have to content themselves with a book that could have been a series of insightful overstatements, in the manner of Paul Fussell, but instead wound up being a collection of truisms and list of faves. It is a harmless book that Mr. Levin has written, one ironically distinguished by enthusiasm's opposite—namely, laziness. Mr. Levin ends his story of a walk with a friend in London with the following sentences: "There was nothing special about the evening—we had had many others like it—but it lingers in my memory, in an almost unbelievably rich gallery of such memories, as a few hours of happiness with a friend, in which hours the true nature of friendship, though not defined and indeed indefinable, stood revealed." With all due respect, I would assert that the purpose of writing is to take a stab at making the indescribable effable, the indefinable plain. Enthusiasts should be expected—especially when they're going about their life's work—to try harder than this. □

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TESTING THE CURRENT  
William McPherson/Simon and Schuster/\$15.95

Reid Buckley

Oh, this is a good book! *Testing the Current*, a first novel by journalist William McPherson, is one of those triumphs of evocation that you will want to place on a special shelf alongside such as Evan Connell's *Mr. Bridge*, Robert Taylor's *The Travels of Jaimie McPheeters*, and other joys in story-telling that you hope your grandchildren will be moved by Heaven to pause just one moment over before tossing them (after your portrait) into the dustbin.

It takes place 1938-39. Now, Depression literature isn't my cup of tea. I find even Wallace Stegner (*The Big Rock Candy Mountain*) tedious on that dreary period, which has produced some crashingly (woops!) dull literature. No fear on this score about *Testing the Current*, though the reviews have tediously harped on its implied social criticism. It's there, but it is beside the point, because this wonderful book belongs to the sharp eye and dauntless spirit of eight-year-old Tommy MacAllister, third son of a steel mill owner in Grande Riviere, Michigan, whose upper bourgeoisie are of the Midwestern smokestack variety, which is to say, country club-dull, conventional, and rife with the prejudices and politics of their class and time.

These are people whose taste in decor, way of life, aspirations, complacency, and depneumatized social protestantism are as canned as canned can be. They brink on World War II, which, in the words of one of the more perceptive female characters, will "change everything," as indeed the war did; but they are as a whole impervious in their Midwest isolationism (let the frogs dip themselves out of their own bouillabaisse this time), and none can conceive of a future when there may not be a big fat lovable Negress called Ophelia in the kitchen of the country club, nor scullery maids of Indian origin in their own kitchens (the Irish have just graduated from the servile state) and Indian handymen (loafers) on the offshore islands where all of Grande Riviere repairs during the summers.

Reid Buckley is a novelist.

This all sounds pretty dreadful, and it would be save for the precocious recall of Tommy MacAllister, who adores his mother (Emma) and his 22-year-old eldest brother (John), who loves but is wary of his stern father (Mac), and who maintains a splendid state of war with David, the 20-year-old moderately rebellious second son. The family relationships are warm and very real. David I particularly liked. He is caught in that fix of second sons everywhere and in any age, seeking to define himself as different from the paragon firstborn while also being a

little jealous of (and mean to) the baby of the family.

I know. I can hear you thinking it: Well, what's new and different in this novel? Nothing! Mr. and Mrs. Sedgwick, vocal rightwingers, abhor Roosevelt and snoot their noses at Wally Simpson. (You can bet your bloomers, however, that Mrs. Sedgwick would be brushing up on her curtsies were the Duke and Duchess of Windsor to announce a visit to Grande Riviere.) They can be counted on for the most bigoted rendition of the dominant politics of their class. Mr. and Mrs. Steer are country club liberals, typical of their class and time also, and the issues that define their politics are, of course, Roosevelt and Spain. They are atheists (natch), and the professionally unconventional Mrs. Steer, who is one of Tommy MacAllister's special adult friends, is almost inevitably Scandinavian.

Quite right: There is *nothing* novel or even original in this book. (On the other hand, there is also almost

nothing in poor taste, vulgar, or straining of one's credulity, which are the sins of contemporary fiction.) *Testing the Current* is slow, besides, about getting itself started, and oh so apparently casual about unfolding. I do not want to suggest torpidity, but it can be likened to one of those endless summer afternoons of recollection, when the cicadas zing in the back of the mind, wherein Mr. McPherson wonderfully

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