

and corporations alike. . . . As corporate bond defaults have risen, so have consumer-loan delinquencies. So have consumer bankruptcies, 'thrift' insolvencies, and the number of problem banks. Thus, the junk bond market is no isolated speculative fluke. It is mainstream Americana."

What final lesson can be learned from the fall of Drexel and Milken? The oldest one: that speculative bubbles burst, and that credit is based upon responsibility. One need go back only to the 1913 congressional Pujo hearings, when J. P. Morgan answered that the most important thing behind credit was "character. Money cannot buy it." Grant says that for the 1990s, "our working hypothesis is that creditworthiness will regain its economic franchise—that a bull market in financial safety will begin."

What this means for the economy, drunk on easy credit for almost a decade, is fairly easy to project. "There won't be a return to moderation and sweet reason, but unreasonable timidity and caution," said Grant. "When markets react, they don't do so according to the Golden Mean."

The collapse of the junk bond market was caused by tighter credit, and there will be tighter credit still. The junk bond market is unlikely to revive any time soon, no matter how high the yields offered: according to the newsletter *Junk Bond Reporter*, the volume of new junk bonds sold through February was \$350 million. By February of last year, \$3.35 billion in new issues were sold. Pessimists will say that this means less financing for new businesses. Realists will say that the explosion of easy credit financed businesses that should never have been financed in the first place.

This also means fewer leveraged buyouts. As Henry R. Kravis, a general partner at Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co., said recently, any leveraged buyout that involves selling assets, practically all of them, "is going to be viewed with great skepticism" now because there are "many companies that have had a difficult time selling their assets for what they once believed they were worth."

Now that the speculative bubble has burst, we can also expect default rates to rise. Milken and his ilk were able to sell junk bonds during the 1980s because they claimed the default rate was on the order of two percent. And on seasoned junk, it was. But junk progressively got junkier, and credit standards more lax. With tighter money abounding, and the value of assets falling, companies tottering along under a staggering load of high-yield debt won't be able to pay, and very likely won't be able to renegotiate their debts.

So they will default, and all those who have reached for yield, predictably enough, will be stung.

Standard & Poor's reported late last year that "an investor who buys and holds a portfolio of high-yield bonds can expect at least 20 percent of the bonds to default. In fact, studies of historical performance have found 10-year cumulative default rates ranging from about 20 percent to 35 percent. High-yield bond defaults of \$15 billion in a single year, or an annual default rate of 10 percent, are possible in the future."

Finally, tighter credit will push the economy into recession. "We're in for a time of peace and quiet on Wall Street," said Grant. "The credit contraction will deepen the recession that might have been in the cards anyway. Easy access to borrowed money led to expansion. The lack of it will deepen and prolong the downturn." □

THE TALKIES



MEN AND THEIR VESSELS

by Bruce Bawer

Given everything I'd heard about *The Hunt for Red October*, the new film based on Tom Clancy's best-selling novel, I'd expected to be (a) confused to death by the brilliantly complicated plot and (b) blown away by the extraordinary level of suspense. I was wrong on both counts. The movie, directed by John McTiernan from a script by Larry Ferguson and Donald Stewart, proves to be a thoroughly straightforward, sturdy thriller which differs from other films in this genre neither by its brilliance nor by its intricacy but, chiefly, by its production values. I'm not just talking about the much-heralded sequences involving submarines and other military hardware. I'm talking also about such elements as the lighting, which is painstaking (though the film should more properly carry a credit not for lighting but for chiaroscuro), and the sound, which is so impeccably miked that every opening of an envelope, every jangle of a set of keys, seems to offer itself up as a potential aesthetic experience.

Bruce Bawer is *The American Spectator's* movie reviewer.

It's a big movie, but McTiernan likes getting close to, and lingering over, little things. His camera angles invite us to focus on details we wouldn't ordinarily pay much attention to: the flag button on a Soviet diplomat's lapel, the coffee cup on a Kremlin bureaucrat's desk. But a bit of this meticulousness goes a long way, and after a few minutes one finds oneself thinking that it's all rather *too* fussy, that the potential for human drama is practically stifled by a welter of minutiae, that the characters are getting lost amid all the nicely rendered particulars. The lighting is especially distracting: so many submarine-interior scenes are lit mainly by the dramatic red glow of the navigational equipment that one gets to wondering why the crewmen don't spend their spare time developing pictures. In one such scene, the reflected red light forms a hideous shape on a man's face which reminds one very much of Gorbachev's birthmark, and for a couple of minutes one sits in the theater munching popcorn and wondering: Hmmm, could this be a *symbol*? You know, presaging glasnost, and all that?

For it *is* a historical movie, set in the dark, early-80s days of Konstantin

Chernenko. (Remember Chernenko?) Here's the story: the Soviets, in an attempt to enhance their first-strike nuclear capability, have built a submarine, the *Red October*, with a propulsion system so quiet that American sonar can't detect its presence. Just as the world trembled at Sputnik, declares a Kremlin lackey, so the world "will tremble again at the sound of our silence." What the Kremlin doesn't know is that Captain Marko Ramius (Sean Connery), who has been put in charge of the sub, is eager to vacate the Evil Empire, and has chosen as his officers other would-be defectors; when Ramius, who has taken the *Red October* out on its maiden run, informs the Kremlin of his intention to turn the ship's highly advanced technology over to the United States, his superiors initiate a search-and-destroy mission.

Meanwhile, everybody on our side is completely in the dark about what's going on, except, of course, for one guy: the spunky young Britain-based CIA analyst Jack Ryan (Alec Baldwin). Singlehandedly, Ryan ascertains that the Soviets have developed this amazing sub; singlehandedly, he figures out that Ramius is heading our way not be-

cause he's gone crazy and wants to bomb New York (as the Soviets have told U.S. officials) but because he aims to defect; singlehandedly, he divines how Ramius plans to carry off this scheme; singlehandedly, he talks White House officials into buying his argument and helping Ramius out; and singlehandedly, he has himself dropped by helicopter onto the American attack submarine *Dallas* and—but I don't want to ruin it for you. Let's just say that without Jack Ryan we'd all probably be plunged into World War Three.

Needless to say, *Hunt* is a man's film. *Top Gun* gave us the warplane-as-phallus; this movie gives us, well, subs. "Jesus, that's a big sucker," says an American when he gets his first look at the *Red October*. When Bart Mancuso (Scott Glenn), the *Dallas's* wary captain (who's inclined to think Ramius a warmonger, not a defector), lets his ship's location be known to the Soviet sub, he says, "Well, we've unzipped our flies." What would Bruno Bettelheim have said about all this? McTiernan has said that *Hunt* is about how Ryan "learns to stand up and be a man among men," and one gets the idea, watching the film, that something

of this sort is indeed supposed to be happening. But it doesn't work: all the characters in *Hunt* are plot functionaries, and they stay plot functionaries. One never feels as if one knows any of them. This hurts in the case of Ryan, and it hurts even more in the case of Ramius, whose motivation for deserting his country is hinted at but never made real.

•••

If *The Hunt for Red October* constitutes a solid, two-hour chunk of male fantasy, *The Handmaid's Tale*, based on the novel by Margaret Atwood and scripted by Harold Pinter (Mr. Silent Propulsion System himself), offers a distaff nightmare. At least so its advertisements brag: "One woman's story. Every woman's fear." Directed by Volker Schlöndorff, *The Handmaid's Tale* gives us a feminist dystopia, a Women's Lib version of 1984. "Once upon a time in the recent future," we read in the opening explanatory note, "a country went wrong. The country was the Republic of Gilead." Then we watch a young couple and their small daughter trudge through a snow-filled forest in an attempt to sneak across an international boundary. Their plan misfires: the husband is shot dead by border guards, the daughter is seized, and the wife, a librarian named Kate (played by Natasha Richardson, who bears an amazing resemblance to the slender-faced, frizzy-haired, dewy-eyed Miss Atwood), is taken into custody. It's not long before we realize that Gilead is America—an America, to be specific, of the near-future, in which an anti-feminist revolution has brought to power a ruthless autocracy that takes its notions of sex, marriage, and justice straight from the Old Testament—and that the country to which Kate and her family hoped to escape was (where else?) Miss Atwood's icy homeland to the north.

The film acquaints us with the wacky folkways of Gilead by taking us, step by step, through Kate's new life. Since, unlike ninety-nine out of a hundred women in Gilead, she is fertile and free of venereal infection, Kate is sent to a re-education camp of sorts where she sleeps on a gymnasium floor with several dozen other fertile young women and is harangued endlessly by a pretty, wholesome-looking instructor named Aunt Lydia (Victoria Tennant). The revolution, Aunt Lydia informs her charges, was triggered by the proliferation of "lazy women, sluts" who, failing to respect their bodies as "temples of purity" and to recognize fertility as a "precious gift," advocated such evils as abortion, birth control, and artificial insemination. In the Republic of Gilead, such women are

summarily executed. In Gilead, it's understood that while men can't be expected to keep it clean, women are different: "We have self-control, dignity." A woman's duty is to bear a man's children; and in Gilead, if his wife can't do the job, the state—taking its cue from Genesis 30, in which Jacob's barren wife Rachel invites him to impregnate her handmaid Bilhah—provides him with a woman who can.

That's where Kate and the other fecund females come in. "You're going to be handmaids," Aunt Lydia tells them. "You're going to serve God and your country." They're given official handmaid garb: bright red habits and veils. They're taught to grovel. ("You're not an equal, you're a handmaid: that is your role in life.") They learn a new doxology (all together now, to the tune of "Old One-Hundredth"): "Remove our anger, cleanse our will; And leave us empty to be filled." And they're given assignments. Kate, as it happens, is assigned to a couple of VIPs: the Commander (Robert Duvall), an army officer who is in charge of security for the entire state, and his wife, Serena Joy (Faye Dunaway). Kate lives in their lovely suburban home and, whenever the Commander wishes, participates in the "ceremony," a weird, impersonal fertilization ritual in which the Commander, Serena, and Kate (now renamed Offred) all take part.

Naturally, Kate doesn't dig this new life. Sex with the Commander is icky. Besides, as months pass without a pregnancy, it becomes clear to her that he's sterile. If she doesn't have a baby, she knows, it will officially be her fault, and she'll be dispatched to the "colonies" (apparently some sort of gulag). But what can she do? She can't run away: the city in which the Commander and Serena live is heavily militarized, with armed checkpoints all over the place, and if she tries to escape she'll be killed. At Serena's suggestion she copulates behind the Commander's back with his young driver, Nick (Aidan Quinn), even though it's a capital crime. Meanwhile, behind Serena's back, the Commander has frank, intimate tête-à-têtes with Kate. It seems only a matter of time before somebody in the household finds her out, gets angry, and turns her in. Or will somebody—Nick, her friend Moira (Elizabeth McGovern), or perhaps a sympathetic neighborhood handmaid—help her escape?

If this all sounds ridiculous, it is. But it's wonderfully ridiculous. It's ridiculous in the way that solemnly paranoid movies always are. At first, to be sure, one is irritated by this film's inanity, its vulgar religion-bashing, its thoroughgoing political correctness.

How much braver, wittier, and more to the point it would have been, one thinks, for Atwood, Pinter, and company to depict a future America in which men are incarcerated for calling eighteen-year-old females girls rather than women, for finding attractive women more attractive than unattractive women, and for getting excited by naughty photographs in magazines.

Such, as I say, is one's initial reaction to *The Handmaid's Tale*. But after the first half-hour or so, one realizes that this picture is simply too ridiculous to stay angry at, and one actually relaxes and starts to enjoy the damn thing. For—assuming one is capable of suspending one's philosophical antagonism along with one's disbelief—there's a lot to enjoy here. To watch *The Handmaid's Tale* is to climb for a couple of hours into the cranium of a canny feminist with a fantastic imagination, and it's a real adventure. Atwood has worked out Gilead's whole social system—everything from grocery-shopping protocol and the role of television to birthing rites and rituals of punishment—and it's fun to watch it all unfold. There's something genuinely spooky, too, about the stylish, well-bred Gilead housewives in their standard-issue uniforms—blue dress, pearls, and blue pillbox hats—who make the women in *The Stepford Wives* look like Jane Fonda in *Barbarella*; as in *The Stepford Wives*, and as in *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, much of the dramatic impact of this film derives from an association of the thoroughly

outlandish and creepy with the familiar and domestic. Here, as in those films, there's a real undercurrent of terror: set aside the silly politics, in fact, and the suspense easily surpasses that in *The Hunt for Red October*.

One reason for this is first-rate acting. Dunaway—who brings to her part a breathtaking intensity—is the standout: the minute we see her as Serena, we know she can't be trusted. Underneath the Gilead-housewife sweetness and light, she radiates looniness, resentment, malevolence: it is plain that she desperately wants a baby, and it is also plain that she will be desperately hostile toward the handmaid who furnishes her with one. As for Duvall, he makes the Commander arrestingly ambiguous. On the one hand, he seems sincere when he argues that pre-revolutionary America "was in a mess," torn apart by black, gay, and women's pressure groups, and had to be cleaned up: "Nobody really knew how to feel anything anymore: respect, reverence, values." On the other hand, he likes being around the feisty Kate and enjoys being beaten by her in cards and Scrabble; he keeps a stash of forbidden old magazines like *Vogue* and *Cosmopolitan*; and he patronizes an underground nightclub where other high officials of Gilead dance with bimbos ("Jezebels") in black tights and excessive makeup. The Commander is virile, sanctimonious, horny, humane, and hypocritical, and somehow Duvall makes the combination believable.

Yet for all the richness of Dunaway and Duvall's performances, neither of

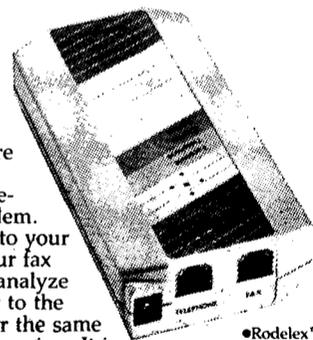
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their characters pays off as one expects them to; ultimately, both actors' efforts seem largely wasted. As for Natasha Richardson, she falls a tad short of making Kate thoroughly coherent and sympathetic. Much of the time she just

doesn't strike one as a woman who has lost her husband and child; in particular, her concern for her daughter—whose whereabouts she doesn't know—seems to materialize on those occasions when the script calls for it and

then to disappear. She never quite comes into focus: if at times she's impertinent, at other times she comes off as torpid, apathetic. One of the movie's primary flaws, indeed, is that for all its feminism, its heroine is a largely

passive character whose one definitive act in the whole movie seems rash and pointless, and who—in a final irony that may or may not be intentional—relies on men for her deliverance. No Tom Clancy hero, she. □

THE GREAT AMERICAN SALOON SERIES



CRAWLING THROUGH THE CLOUDS

by Dave Shiflett

Organist, are you asleep on the keys? And you, Reverend, must you glare from the pulpit as you ring my head with thorns?

The stained-glass windows are dull, for overhead a great mass of clouds stretches like an endless tombstone. The Light Unto the World flickers. The fishers of men work in semi-darkness. And you, Iscariot. Your eyes are solid black.

What's this? The horned one, tugging at my sleeve? Retreat, Satan, retreat . . .

Dave Shiflett is deputy editorial page editor at the Rocky Mountain News and TAS's Rocky Mountain editor.

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Goats and monkeys! Hung over in church!

These things always start so innocently, this time with a Saturday afternoon drive up Mount Evans, one of Colorado's 14,000-footers. The peak road, the highest vehicular passage in America, is closed because of snow (it is open only during the summer), but at Echo Lake, just below the timber line, motorcyclists blast across the ice dragging rope-clutching friends like water-skiers. If you're tired of internal combustion entertainment, take a stroll around and you might see some elk, and maybe a mountain lion. There are mountain goats, too, but they spend more of their time on the other side of the hill. The sky is as blue as a Nordic eye, but this eye is of unlimited acreage and can make an admirer feel like a shrimp, should the admirer stare into it for very long.

These are great scenes, but they don't come cheap: the icy wind blows 50 miles per hour, drying the eyeballs. The parched air, so thin at that elevation, causes a steady panting. In the throat, blisters rise. Sooner or later, from deep inside the brain, comes a message:

Retreat!

At Ponder Point, some distance down the hill, one has time to gather his thoughts, perhaps even to calculate the mountain's weight, which is no doubt considerably more than the weight of the human race, for whatever that's worth. If the mind wanders East, it recognizes that if you tossed all of Manhattan's skyscrapers into a pile, it would not make a mound large enough to rate as a foothill here in the Rockies. Immensity is piled atop immensity.

In every direction peaks rise to stunning heights, but they are dull on top, quite unlike the Tetons, which are ragged enough to slice the guts from a hur-

ricane. Also at Ponder Point is a loo, but wouldn't you know it; the door is locked! Dare we imitate the elk and the mountain lion, or shall we hold out for facilities? And what's this other word bubbling up in the gray cauldron? Budweiser? Perhaps we should drop two birds with one stone. Let's head for the Glory Hole.

And so the trouble began.

The Glory Hole is in Central City, an old gold-mining town about a half-hour or so from Ponder Point, weather permitting. The drive over is scenic, the road signs instructive. "In case of flash floods," one reads, "climb to higher ground."

Down the mountain we roll, through tunnels carved through rock mountains, then we reverse course and head up Clear Creek Canyon, past several gold panning operations. The rule of thumb is that a rookie can pan about \$10 worth a day. But now the creek is frozen so solid that a tractor can't break through. Up ahead, smoke rises from chimneys in Black Hawk, several hundred vertical feet below our destination. We'll stop by there on the way back to the high plains.

At the Glory Hole's front door stands a cowboy maitre d', six-shooters and all. Central City, you see, is something of a tourist place, but to a bearable degree. The Hole is in an old building initially used as a funeral home. Then it housed a newspaper. Finally it became a saloon—a real saloon with a guy playing the honky-tonk piano.

"How do you get that thing to sound that way?" I asked the pianist as he plinked through "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

"Soak the hammers in varnish," he said, which makes the felt hard and gives the piano its tinny sound. He

whips along, reaching occasionally for his Budweiser. The barmaid, who reserves a bar seat for my eight-year-old, fills up his shot glass with coke, which he drains with a gulp. We're drinking Coors Winterfest, a high-alcohol beer (about five percent) that mixes pleasantly with the wood-heated air, which is lightly pressurized here at 8,000-plus feet.

Dinner, sir? No thanks, but how about a snack?

A huge plate of ribs, beans, and cornbread hits the table, and soon enough there's a pile of bones and bottles before us and the kids have barbecue sauce ear-to-ear. In the olden days, we would have shot the ceiling full of holes. A beer for the piano player! A beer for grandma! A beer for the sheriff! Where's the dog? We'll buy him one too.

But wait a minute. Wasn't there another reason we came here?

People of sensibility should be warned that the men's rooms in many mountain establishments are adorned with vending racks. Besides marital aids, one offers a packet of pornographic pictures advertised by a scantily clad woman, around whose lower extremities is drawn a circle, above which is written an odd message: "This way to Canada."

That's something else to ponder as we make our way to the nearby Toll House. We get there just in time for the gunfights.

"Wine, Whiskey, Beer," says the neon sign behind the Toll House bar, and in midafternoon there's lots of it roaring down, some heading toward livers in dire need of a retreat. On the walls hang the heads of buffalo, elk, a bear, a big cat, and something with long horns—a bull of some kind, and thank goodness it's dead.