



by James Bowman

Bad Verse Conditions

On the release of *The Crossing Guard*, Sean Penn, who wrote, directed, and co-produced the film, was profiled in the Sunday *New York Times* as the kind of *enfant terrible* whose temper tantrums and bad behavior are supposed to betoken sensitivity and artistic greatness. Anjelica Huston, one of its co-stars, was quoted as saying: "Look, Sean is a poet and not a simple person. There's a certain male mythology about him, a mixture of tenderness and pugnaciousness that's prevalent in the Irish and causes them to stay up late drinking whisky, writing poetry, getting into fights and falling in love with cool, blond women who'll drive them crazy."

Now, is Sean Penn actually counting syllables over the whisky bottle of an evening? I very much doubt it. This "poetry" is just a makeweight—something to be assumed along with the drinking and fighting and lovemaking and craziness that are traditionally associated with being a poet. Penn makes the same assumption in the film. Jack Nicholson plays a jeweler called Freddy whose daughter was hit and killed by a drunk driver six years before. He is now only able to express his grief by drinking and fighting and womanizing on a truly poetic scale. Of course, it helps that Nicholson has built his career on the portrayal of characters in whom boorish or thuggish behavior is meant to betoken sensitivity and a poetic nature.

As the film opens, the man who killed the child, John Booth (David Morse), is just getting out of prison, where he has served a sentence for manslaughter. Freddy is determined to kill him. But Booth is also a sensitive and poetic soul, although no longer the hell-raiser that his one-time

JAMES BOWMAN, our movie critic, is American editor of the *Times Literary Supplement*.

victim and would-be killer is. He hangs out with a crowd of artists and folk-singers who look as if they have arrived through a time-warp from the 1960's. Quiet, intense, and guilt-ridden, he is given to saying philosophical things like "I think we all know something about confinement." Heavy! But all this poetry, both of the carousing and the non-carousing kind, finally achieves a merely therapeutic resolution. Nowadays, I guess, the poet does not so often drink or fight or rhyme himself to death as he used to; nowadays he goes all too gently into that good night.

This development may be welcome from a hygienic and socially responsible point of view, but artistically it is unsatisfying and anticlimactic. Back when the romantic myth of the disolute, the violent, the rebellious, the hard-living and early-dying poet was young, it was a very different story. In *Total Eclipse*, Agnieszka Holland tries to recapture the spirit of those days by re-telling the story of Verlaine (David Thewlis) and Rimbaud (Leonardo DiCaprio)—a story that, in English-speaking countries anyway, is far better known than the poetry of either of them. The film will not change this regrettable fact. If Holland is interested in the poetry as poetry, she does not convey her interest to the viewer. Perhaps because the poetry is in French and the film is in English, she thought it more diplomatic to confine herself to the lives and let the works remain as closed a book as they already are to the average film-goer.

In any case, this is what she does. Once again, boorish, violent, and self-destructive behavior stands as a synecdoche for poetry that we must take on faith. True, we are given brief snatches of poetic-sounding language and Rimbaud's poetic credo: "Harden up; reject romanticism; aban-

don rhetoric; get it right." But the poetic quotations are too brief to do more than establish an ambiance, and the credo is laughably inaccurate. Reject romanticism, indeed! This from the man we see urinating on a fellow poet whose verses he thinks too "bourgeois" and conventional! Such creative criticism is meant, like Jack Nicholson's drinking and ill-treatment of women, as a hallmark of that ultimate romantic value, personal authenticity: Here is a man whose feelings are too powerful to be masked by the conventions of politeness or consideration. Here is a poet!

At least these poets, whose words we owe to the playwright Christopher Hampton, come to satisfyingly poetic ends: Rimbaud dies young in the Ethiopian desert, and Verlaine is well on the way to death by absinthe when we bid him a fond farewell. But Hampton is not yet finished with us. Having written *Total Eclipse* he slipped into the director's chair for *Carrington*, whose version of British *artistes* contrasts interestingly with the French of Holland's film. The French are revolutionaries: dangerous, unconventional, violent, provocative. The English are, by comparison, polite, sophisticated, and admirably unwilling to call too much attention to themselves. There is less of the theatrical about their defiance of convention, more of the clubbish and self-indulgent. But the romance of authenticity is just as much the story of their lives.

It has to be said that the film is worth seeing just for the performance of Jonathan Pryce as Lytton Strachey, whose *bon mots* ("Ottoline is like the Eiffel Tower: she's very silly but she affords excellent views") have long been preserved against the day when he should be resurrected on film by such a skillful actor. Moreover, the strange relationship

between the homosexual Strachey and the painter Dora Carrington (Emma Thompson) is genuinely touching in its portrayal, even though its insistent separation of love and sex becomes a part of Strachey's project to destroy forever Victorian values. It has ever been his aim, he says at the end of his life, to help deliver the world from a "fog of superstition," but he feels that "I have always been much better at living than at writing."

Carrington's reply—"What's wrong with that?"—scarcely begins to grasp the possibilities of our late twentieth-century media world, in which living is writing; or at least in which living for one's appetites in an embarrassingly authentic way qualifies one as a poet and an artist. It is the remarkable achievement of the American cinema to have completed and democratized this process. Ever since the mythography of the sensitive and troubled teenager emerged in the 1950's, Hollywood has been hard at work establishing the right of every exponent of authentically awful behavior to admiration and emulation, irrespective of poetic or artistic output. You don't need the excuse of being a genius—or even a moderately talented author of expository prose—to become a Hollywood hero these days.

I thought at first that *The Doom Generation* by Gregg Araki might be the definitive send-up of the teen-angst flicks that have made surliness and moodiness into virtues. And it is hilariously if only sporadically funny as—if you can imagine such a thing—a comic version of *Natural Born Killers*. A pair of mixed-up kids, Amy Blue (Rose McGowan) and Jordan White (James Duval), pick up another mixed-up kid, Xavier Red (Johnathon Schaech), and more or less inadvertently go on a spree of murder and three-way sex as American, I guess, as apple pie. Through a nightmarishly infernal landscape in which every number adds up to 666, these ultimate slackers take everything for granted. They have spent so much of their lives in front of the television that nothing seems inconveniently real. "Everything is going to be fine," says Xavier when he accidentally kills a convenience store clerk.

"What do you mean? You just blew

“

**'You can never, never
ask me to stop drinking,'
he tells her. 'Do you
understand?'**

“

someone's head off!" screams the perpetually ill-natured Amy.

"You've got to be a little pessimist!" he scolds her.

But, as we have so often had occasion to notice before, Hollywood satire is almost invariably too close to the things it satirizes to be very successful. The nastiness and grossness of nearly everything in this film eventually becomes an end in itself rather than a means of making fun of the nasty and the gross. That never seems to be the case with our Movie of the Month, *Leaving Las Vegas* by Mike Figgis. The film takes up the theme of self-destruction redeemed by authenticity but without some of the offensive romanticizing of the other films. Ben (Nicolas Cage) is a Hollywood screenwriter who quite deliberately decides to go to Las Vegas and drink himself to death. With the severance pay from his job and the money he gets from selling his BMW and Rolex, he reckons he has enough money to last him several weeks at the rate of \$200 to \$300 a day for booze. "That should do it," says Sera (Elisabeth Shue), the high-priced prostitute he picks up on his first night in town and whom he impulsively decides to tell of his resolution.

What is impressive about the film is its relative lack of any merely theatrical or self-pitying element. "I don't remember," he says, "whether I started drinking because my wife left me, or my wife left me because I started drinking, but f— it anyway." Sera tries to romanticize a little by asking: "Are you saying that drinking is a way to kill yourself?"

He replies: "Or killing myself is a way to drink."

Sera finds herself becoming more and more attached to him. In the quasi-documentary-style monologues (addressed to a therapist?) with which she keeps up the narrative thread, Sera speaks of her natural aptitude for prostitution—how she can meet a man, know what he likes, and instantly become his fantasy. But later she says that with Ben she suddenly "felt like I was me: not like I was pretending to be somebody else." She invites him to move in with her, and the two of them set up a relationship based on mutual acceptance: "You can never, never ask me to stop drinking," he tells her. "Do you understand?"

She replies: "I do. I really do."

He in turn recognizes a certain symmetry in her continuing to function as a prostitute: "I'm a drunk and you're a hooker," he says. "I'm totally at ease with that. Not that I am indifferent. Far from it. It's just that I trust your judgment."

There is a larger truth unaffected by the tacit agreement by which his sin excuses hers and vice versa. Sexual love is implicit in their relationship, but it never quite emerges from the shadows cast by the drink and her profession. "I don't care about all that," he tells her on the first night together. Yet they speak of the idea of sex as if they were a chaste couple looking forward to marriage. "What are you? Some sort of angel visiting me from one of my drunk fantasies?" he asks. "You're so good."

"I don't know what you're talking about," she replies. "I'm using you. I need you."

The rest of the film is a fairly clear-eyed look at his slide toward self-destruction. There are moments of jealousy and backsliding from their splendid acceptance of each other, but they finally achieve a kind of triumph of love. "I accepted him the way he was," says Sera to the invisible therapist, "and I didn't expect him to change. I think he felt the same way. I loved his drama. And he needed me. And I loved him."

What else is there to say? It cannot be said that Ben is a romantic figure, nor does he claim to be a poet. He's just a guy who is lucky enough to find someone to hold his hand on his way out of his broken life. There's not much to admire here, but what's there is at least genuine. Or so it looks to me. ❧

Diaper Dandy

Big Babies

by Michael Kinsley

William Morrow / 336 pages / \$23

REVIEWED BY
Florence King

If our leading liberal pundits could travel back in time to comment on the *Titanic* . . .

Richard Cohen would apologize for damage to the iceberg.

Ellen Goodman: Have you noticed how white males keep saying, “*She hit an iceberg?*”

Anthony Lewis: Thoughtful people everywhere are sensitive to the nuances of five thousand tons of steel crashing into five thousand tons of ice.

Clarence Page: A white iceberg destroyed a black ship the other night. We still have a long way to go.

Michael Kinsley: Oh, spare me the shock and surprise! First-class was weighted down with enough fat-cat Republicans to sink the *Titanic* and that’s exactly what happened.

If Michael Kinsley were a Dickens character his name would be Barnaby Sneerly. He seems to be aware of his identifying trait, at least subconsciously, judging from his frequent use of “sneer” and its derivatives to describe other people. His new book contains at least four instances of this classic projection mechanism. There may be more, but I stopped counting once I got the picture.

Big Babies is a collection of Kinsley’s columns from 1986 to early 1995. The title refers to American voters, whom he blames for democracy’s current discon-

FLORENCE KING’s latest book is *The Florence King Reader* (St. Martin’s). She writes “*The Misanthrope’s Corner*” column for *National Review*.

tents. They want their taxes cut, their benefits preserved, and the budget balanced, all at the same time, and if it doesn’t happen they stamp their feet and bawl. He professes “annoyance at the fatuous populism that dominates American politics,” defining populism as “the politicians are terrible but the people are wonderful.” He has a point, but only an unabashed elitist can infuse such sentiments with Hamiltonian élan. Kinsley, a closet elitist, merely sounds like a snob, and a confused one at that.

On the defeat of his man Dukakis: “I have enough respect for the political intelligence of the public [?] that I hope a majority may come to agree with me the next time around.”

On himself as the Ayn Rand of the left: “My own political views are more or less liberal. . . I hold them under no form of compulsion except reason. It seems to me they’re the sort of views a reasonable, intelligent person would hold . . . the mystery to me is not why journalists tend to be liberals but why so many other reasonable, intelligent people are not.”

Elsewhere, however, he admits to several other political compulsions. Liberals, he says, are motivated by “an instinct to oppose,” “a fear of seeming boosterish,” and a “knee-jerk iconoclasm,”

which can be set in motion by a mere word or phrase that “starts the facial nerves twitching into the formation of a cynical sneer.”

When all these compulsions come together in Kinsley, he goes into a tailspin. He twitches on cue in columns about the 1988 Bush-Dukakis race, contemptuously dismissing the debates over flag burning and the pledge of allegiance as “the flag flap” and “the pledge nonsense.” These, he insists, are mere “symbolic issues” calculated to stir up an emotional populace—and an emotional Kinsley, who suddenly gives vent to a Learish howl: “Is there no one eloquent enough to make people weep with gratitude that we live in a country where people are free enough to burn the flag?”

The case he makes to prove that Dan Quayle was wrong about Murphy Brown recalls those “Crossfire” moments when



ROBERT GROSSMAN

we long to reach into the TV and grab him by the throat.

1. If people waited for perfect conditions before bringing kids into the world,