

BOOKS

1. Pick of the List

by Benjamin DeMott

EVENING, early summer. Outside birches brush the deck, moths flutter the screens. Inside the reviewer reads—page proofs from the book season to come, new novels, biographies, autobiographies, collected essays, collected letters, light and heavy versions of *The Age*. . . . The terms of the publishing trade dictate that, with some exceptions, the strongest works of the year are released during a single 90-day cycle, September–November, and it's in early summer that the pre-publication copies of these items begin to swell the mail.

Before and after the beginning of summer, the beat is gentler, and there's less need to scramble. The reviewer, a person who (as somebody said) conducts his education in public, enjoys lazy stretches, plateaus between peaks, intervals of digestion. Now, though, the wisest, wittiest, most stylish, and most powerful teachers seem all to be in their places at once, commanding attention. School is intense.

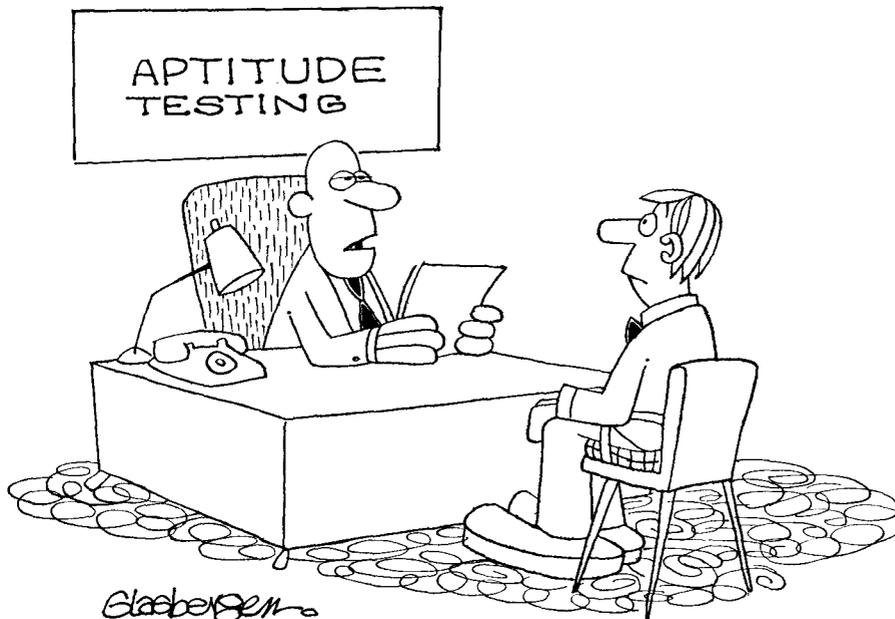
For three weeks running, the reviewer reads hard—and then (late June, a taking-account kind of evening, birches brushing) he attempts a sorting out. Among a passel of strong books, which seem strongest? What does one really like best?

Edmund Wilson's *Letters on Literature and Politics* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, \$20) is extremely impressive. Its publication is, indeed, the American literary event of the upcoming season—the occurrence, that is, most important to the history of American writing, as distinguished from American business, politics, ecology, or whatever. But unlike many such events, this one is miles from boring. Wilson wasn't just broadly learned and penetrating about bookish matters. He was direct and appetitive in his general address to life, and it's these qualities that keep his literary and political correspondence fresh. I like the acerbity and downrightness (“Huxley is the most overrated writer alive”), also a dozen or more enjoyably wicked turns—a report on *The New Yorker's* twenty-fifth-anniversary party, com-

ments on the intellectual tone of the Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., circle on Cape Cod, gossip about what Charles Scribner said to Maxwell Perkins about Ernest Hemingway's naughty words. There are lively settings-straight, of other writers, about usage. (H. L. Mencken is told to look up *jejune*; Alison Lurie is chided, in a letter praising her novel *Nowhere City*, for confusion about *disinterest*.) And there are lengthy exchanges, from over the years, with Dos Passos, Allen Tate, and others that are remarkable for the sustained energy of Wilson's good sense.

Toward the end of his life this critic, despising the pedantry of the “new scholarship” in American literature, entered into serious combat with the “professoriat,” as represented by the Modern Language Association. *Letters*, as edited by his widow, Elena, could be seen simply as a continuation of that warfare by other means. What shines in Wilson's correspondence is a writer's contempt for hyperprofessionalization, his struggle to ensure the survival of a literary atmosphere clean of academicism yet entirely supportive of linguistic precision and imaginative integrity. Real risks were taken in this struggle, and mistakes were made. (About John Crowe Ransom, R. P. Blackmur, and Wallace Stevens, among others, Wilson was consistently unintelligent.) But the overall performance—the quick, sure clarity about major achievements such as T. S. Eliot's and James Joyce's, and the shrewdness of the critic's strategies for maintaining personal independence—is both admirable and enlivening. So, too, is the fundamental unselfishness. *Somebody in our time did this much for letters*, you think, turning these pages. *Somebody cared this much about books*. Amazing.

The major European literary event of the upcoming season—of those that American readers can inform themselves about in their own language—is the publication of André Malraux's *Lazarus* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$7.95), a meditation on death composed shortly after the author was stricken by a nearly fatal nervous disease in 1973. (Malraux, whom Edmund Wilson ranked as the greatest French novelist since Proust, died in 1976.) The book, feverish and occasionally overwrought, descends like a storm on the imagination, obliterating trivia and evasion, driving the reader into confrontation with last things, ultimate meanings, imponderables. The materials are various—dreams, memories of hairbreadth escapes (from execution, from capture in war).



“Let's put it this way—if you can find a village without an idiot, you've got yourself a job.”

dialogues on death and dying with a soberly speculative psychoanalyst, ruminations on Dostoevski's Christ. In the most powerful pages Malraux returns to the subject of an earlier work (*The Walnut Trees of Altenberg*)—the first German gas attack, which took place in 1916 on the Russian front. Immediately after the attack, hundreds of German soldiers, overwhelmed by the ghastly destruction they came upon in the enemy trenches, laid down their weapons, carried the dead and dying on their backs to their own lines. Probing the roots of human solidarity for clues to our meaning, *Lazarus* settles upon fraternity as the value most central to human civilization:

People think they understand fraternity, because they confuse it with human warmth; in fact it is a sentiment that comes from the depths, added almost as an afterthought to the motto of the Republic, whose first flags bore only the words *Liberty, Equality*.

Lazarus asks a certain height of its reader. It made me believe, while I was reading it, in the continuing possibility of thought and action in the heroic mode.

Margaret Drabble's *The Ice Age* (Knopf, \$8.95), the author's eighth novel, is resignedly unheroic—also sane, skeptically humorous, and conversant with the odd rhythms of dailiness, from which spring, as from the splendid pump in Randall Jarrell's "Well Water," rushes of lucky abundance, in answer to no effort, just when boredom or despair or both seem invincible. The time is the present, the people are English and depressed. We follow the fortunes of persons drawn into the life of Anthony Keating, a mildly talented television producer turned real estate entrepreneur during the economic recession of the early 1970s. Marriages go smash, means and expectations are foreshortened, visions of future happiness are sharply reduced. But the journey isn't finally a downer because the novelist has an instinct for moments when the public and the personal diverge and people extricate themselves from the "climate of the age." A couple shattered by misadventures pass an evening together with Mozart on the phonograph and a new dog on the hearth, and a sense of healing breathes. I'm not suggesting that *The Ice Age* is cozy and warm, but that the darkness in the book is oddly comfortable, even trustworthy.

Another England altogether—far less flat, much less strained—figures in *Infants of the Spring* (Holt, Rinehart & Winston, \$10), the first volume of the memoirs of

Anthony Powell. Enthusiasts of this novelist's *A Dance to the Music of Time*, a 12-volume chronicle of English life from 1914 to the present, will turn to the memoirs for hints about the "real life models" for Chips Lovell and other favorites remembered from *Dance*. And while they'll find the autobiographer a shade less forthcoming than might have been hoped, the satisfactions offered—notably an affectionate sketch of Hubert Duggan, the original of the imperishable Stringham—aren't negligible. But the chief value of the book, which takes Powell from birth through Oxford, lies elsewhere. There's a look, to begin with, at England's professional military establishment (Powell's father was an army officer), revealing for its reminder of the ways in which settled institutions of every sort once served as guarantors of leisure, personal cultivation, even pursuit of the arts. There are exceptionally incisive weighings-up of Cyril Connolly, George Orwell, and Henry Green, fellow infants of the spring at Eton. Most strikingly, there are portraits of personalities quite unlike any of the personages in Powell's fiction—proof of the writer's continuing relish of "character" at a moment when, among literary people, belief in the "variety of human nature" is fading fast.

Best by far, there's the character of the subject himself—balanced, good-humored, modest, touched but not overburdened by the claims of his past, appreciative of his own luck and gifts but retaining a proportioned sense of self. This is a book by a man who, having had a good time, seeks out the qualities in the persons and events responsible for the fun, for the purpose of sharing them with his audience. I call that a generous idea.

Arguably, personal character is a key to the distinction also of the *Essays of E. B. White* (Harper & Row, \$12.50). Like Anthony Powell, White is a modest man to whom life (more often natural than social life) has offered satisfactions that, out of instinctive generosity, he's moved to share. Actually, it's not the persona of the essayist that I most admired in these pieces. Nor is it White's subjects—Maine, progress as disaster, frustrations of urban life, and so on—or even his characteristic manner of addressing his subjects. Keeping the telephone in a closet doesn't strike me as a blow for freedom. And I believe less in the truth that a new pup totally disorients E. B. White's life than in the likelihood that the writer wishes to be perceived as someone wholly and lovably disorientable by puppy dogs.

No, what is beyond criticism in a White essay is the music. The man knows all the tunes, all the limited lovely music that a plain English sentence can play—the affordable balances ("It took an upheaval of the elements and a job at the lowest level to give me the relief I craved"), the affordable vowel songs ("the tonic smell of coon"), everything. On nearly every page, there are subtleties of rhythm and pace, interweavings of the sonorous and racy rare in most contemporary writing. A resourcefully melodic collection of "serviceable prose."

What else? A book that seemed deeper than the rest, more humane—in truth, more useful: *Samuel Johnson*, a new biography (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, \$19.95), by W. Jackson Bate. From Boswell to John Wain, men of letters have been writing good and better-than-good books about Dr. Johnson. But the latest work nevertheless wears, with justification, an air of discovery. The author, Lowell Professor at Harvard, takes his subject with a seriousness that seemingly has no precedent: he believes not merely that Johnson was, in the weary phrase, a "great moralist" but that his writings, properly studied, can still teach people how to attain a measure of self-command, how to advance beyond the puerilities of self-absorption, how to be human without shame.

The life story authoritatively told in *Samuel Johnson* has obvious mythic dimensions—"slow rises worth by poverty oppressed"—and the book is alive with joy at the moments of ultimate triumph. But the biographer presses himself throughout for exactitude about details of feeling: the patient, carefully judged constructions of Johnson's innerness—at the times of his youthful breakdown, his wife's collapse, his own madness, his tenure as "literary dictator"—are invariably impressive and often moving. And not less so is the recovery of the Johnsonian moral vocabulary—from "courage" to "envy." In these pages such counters seem both more pertinent and more potent than the Freudian terms with which Professor Bate tellingly contrasts them. Bent to the argument of *Samuel Johnson*, I forgot the need for speed. The galley-strewn house seemed quieter, as though once again there were all the time in the world to learn. Time for the reader to become the book, time to relish the best of fall. ☉

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BOOKS

2. Personal Mentions

by William Cole

LOOKING at the fall book season, the only thing that might be called a trend is “too many books”; “too much duplication”; “too much trivia and not enough meat.” These complaints are made with monotonous regularity in the book trade, but nobody does anything about them. Got to keep those presses rolling. A neat point relating to this hoary “too many books” was made recently by Patrick O’Connor, top editor at Popular Library, when accepting an Honorable Mention in the Carey-Thomas Awards—they’re for distinguished publishing ventures—sponsored by *Publishers Weekly*. Popular Library contributes its share of trash and unnecessary books, but O’Connor is outstanding among the mass-market publishers for sneaking quite a few first-class authors into the bookstalls (Anthony Powell, Nancy Mitford, Margaret Drabble). “People are always saying, ‘Fewer and better books,’” he remarked, “but with fewer and better, the better would be the first to go.” The bad drives out the good.

Much the same point was made recently by the Authors Guild when it ap-

pealed to the Department of Justice and the Federal Trade Commission to put a stop to the merger-take-over trend in publishing. Herman Wouk, the guild’s Washington representative, compared the take-over of publishing houses by conglomerates to TV’s being dominated by the networks. He pointed out that the networks produce less and less quality programming, relying instead on “the cheap shot, which is violence, surefire formula comedy, and sex.”

Yes, too much unnecessary television and too many unnecessary books. For example, do we really need all this self-help: *Self-Mastery Through Self-Hypnosis*, *Celebrate Your Self*, *Self-Rescue*, *Total Mind Power*, *A New You*, *Be Young and Vital*, *Be Good to Your Body*, *Rebirth for a New Age*, and the rhyming *How to Survive Being Alive*. And all this sex: *The Visual Dictionary of Sex*, *The Sex Atlas*, *A Manual of Sex Magick*, *Sexual Etiquette for Women* (no, please, you first), *Sexual Acupuncture*, *The Joy of Gay Sex*, and, fair enough, *The Joy of Lesbian Sex*.

But such stuff is always with us. What’s new that we might actually want to read? I’m slaving after the new novels by Margaret Drabble (*The Ice Age*), John

Fowles (*Edwin Martin*), Peter De Vries (*Madder Music*), and Wilfrid Sheed (*Transatlantic Blues*). There’s talk about Robert Coover’s big one, *The Public Burning*, said to be about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, which has had a lot of legal currying before getting into print. The big commercial novels will be Harold Robbins’s *Dreams Die First*, set among the nudie magazines; Robert S. Elegant’s immense *Dynasty*, which is to China what *The Thorn Birds* is to Australia; Dorothy Uhnak’s *The Investigation*, about the murder of two children; Allen Drury’s *Anna Hastings* (Washington again); John Le Carré’s *The Honourable Schoolboy*; Irwin Shaw’s *Beggarman, Thief*; and *Shall We Tell the President?*, Secret Service stuff by Jeffrey Archer.

In popular nonfiction there’s *The Random House Encyclopedia*, which at \$69.95 should tell us something. James Herriot, the English veterinarian and author of two giant best sellers, is still writing about animals in *All Things Wise and Wonderful*. He’s got one more line left—*The Lord God Made Them All*—before he runs out of hymn. *The Kitchen Book*, by Terrence Conran, with 500 color photographs, sounds good, and *Paul Bocuse’s French Cooking* is high in Pantheon’s pantheon. We’ll have autobiographies from Agatha Christie, Daphne Du Maurier, Margaret Halsey, Peter Ustinov, John Hammond, and that great Irish actor Michéal mac Liammóir. The southern publisher Oxmoor House is plumping for James Dickey’s *God’s Images*, his “reflections” on 53 Biblical passages, with accompanying etchings by Marvin Hayes. *The Album Cover Album* from A & W Publishers is a fine, colorful idea (Macmillan has another, cleverly titled *Phonographics*). And I look forward to “my kind” of books: Lady Antonia Fraser’s anthology, *Love Letters*; the *Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins*, by William and Mary Morris; Alexis Bessaloff’s *The Fireside Book of Wine*; and something long needed—I hope it’s good—a biography, *Fats Waller*, by the subject’s son together with a professional writer. Devotees of destruction will like *Murder Ink: The Mystery Reader’s Companion*, by Dilys Winn.

Too many books, some of which I don’t want to catch so much as a glimpse of. Take *My Cat’s in Love*, or *How to Sell Your Car for More Than It’s Worth*, or *How to Create the Illusion of a More Perfect Figure*, or—oh, my, we are getting silly!—*Stop Talking to Your Plants and Listen*. ©



“Some food on a plate, please.”