

KRAMER VS. KRAMER (Columbia) is surefire. It is a careful film about the death of a family—a father and mother, two decent young people who have come to the end of their particular road, and the seven-year-old son each wants to keep. It is intelligently written, astutely directed, beautifully acted. Almost everyone will see him/herself in some passage of the movie. Only the hardest of heart will sit through it without impulses of joy and tears.

Still one has the occasional feeling that *Kramer vs. Kramer* is in the end a superior soap opera, attentively geared to contemporary fashions in marital strain. The Kramer marriage breaks up not for good old 19th-century reasons of infidelity, but for late 20th-century reasons of identity crisis. Joanna Kramer feels, not unreasonably, that her marriage is destroying her. Her husband, an avid young advertising executive, is hopelessly wrapped up in himself and his career. He has not listened to her for years. As he says rather pathetically after the scales have dropped from his eyes, "I always thought that when I was happy she was happy."

To save her sanity, Joanna abandons husband and child. As she later explains to the judge in the custody hearing, she had to find out who she was, to recover her self-esteem, and so on—a speech so filled with the jargon of the hour that one is not sure whether it is intended seriously or satirically. Ted Kramer, once so preoccupied and oblivious, must play mother as well as father to little Billy.



Sellers as the gardener who makes good.



Hoffman, as father and mother, and Henry.

He has moments of frustration and temper. But the experience matures him, and he begins to understand why his marriage went sour. His child becomes his life. Then, after 18 months, Joanna, self-esteem restored, demands her son.

Parts of the film are wonderfully observed. The obligatory sycophancies of the advertising world, for example, have never been better rendered. But, given the film's quasi-documentary style, there are odd lacunae. For an attractive couple, Ted and Joanna seem to have existed in curious isolation. Except for a friendly divorcée in the same apartment house, who begins as Joanna's confidante and ends as Ted's, they seem to have had no friends. Ted Kramer can always find a taxi, a miracle in New York, but apparently never a baby-sitter.

Yet the isolation of the Kramers concentrates the film's focus. And the strength of the acting suspends doubts. Dustin Hoffman is totally persuasive in portraying the transformation of the vulgar young hustler into a man who has self-knowledge and has learned the virtues of tenderness and sacrifice. Meryl Streep, whose marvelously expressive face frames the opening and closing scenes, plays a difficult role with exquisite conviction. Jane Alexander as the friend is the sweet embodiment of concerned and flustered intelligence. Howard Duff gives a rich performance as Kramer's lawyer. And Justin Henry is quite extraordinary in portraying the innocence and emotion of the little boy. Robert Benton's writing offers us only the truths of recognition, but the acting, under his direction, offers us the truths of discovery.

I doubt that *Kramer vs. Kramer* will be particularly remembered a decade

from now. Still, as some movies awaken us to the reality of social problems, this one awakens us to the reality of human problems. Many husbands who see it will think again about the way they deal with their wives and children. *Kramer vs. Kramer* has its flaws, but it triumphs for the moment because of its steady and irresistible humanity.

BEING THERE (United Artists), on the other hand, is an inhuman tour de force, an act of prestidigitation. Seeing it is like watching a complex mechanical toy crossing a high wire. One is impressed by the ingenuity of the contraption and held in suspense to find out whether it can make it to the end.

In Jerzy Kosinski's adaptation of his own novel, Peter Sellers plays Chance, a backward gardener unable to read or to write and barely able to think, who is thrust suddenly into a world for which his only preparation is a life spent in front of television sets. Nothing is believable in *Being There*; everything is absorbing. With clothes inherited from his late employer and manners imitated from television characters, Chauncey Gardiner, as someone understands his name to be, wins the friendship of an ancient and irascible millionaire, of his beautiful wife, and eventually of the President of the United States.

We watch in fascination but in increasing wonder. What in the world is this all about? Hal Ashby, the director, keeps the fable moving gracefully ahead. The mechanism continues along the high wire at a stately pace. The performances are gripping: Sellers, hypnotically serene and impervious as the idiot gardener; Melvyn Douglas, superbly crusty and vulnerable as the old millionaire; Shirley MacLaine, brilliantly funny as the wife, playing scenes that only her dignity makes bearable.

We watch: The toy clicks along. But what are we supposed to make of it all? Virtuosity for its own sake? One senses a demand that we acknowledge a deeper significance; yet what can it be? Chance the gardener as a holy fool exposing the shallowness of our civilization? Or as a blank screen on which all who meet him project their own wishes? Is *Being There* a satire on a world where television has become a substitute for reality? Or is it just a whirring mechanical toy? I suspect there may be less here than meets the eye. It remains an arresting movie.

—Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

What Johnny Can't Read

by John Gardner

CENSORSHIP HAS always been a touchy issue in advanced societies. In general, good and sophisticated people take the position that nothing should be censored, until one day a book appears that offends them deeply—a Nazi book attacking Jews, a book that stupidly degrades blacks, a book so obscene in its handling of sex that even poor Larry Flint might be troubled—and then, feeling guilty and confused, they flip-flop, coming down for book-burnings, defending their position with the only weapon available, righteous rage. There is nothing wrong with this. I think no one—anywhere, ever—should go to jail for what he writes, but I'm not against making certain books, the kinds I've described above, difficult to obtain. The only qualifying condition to censorship is that each member of a community must agree that it is right. If one doesn't agree, he has the choice of leaving the group or convincing others to get rid of the censorship he disapproves of.

That, I think, is pretty much how we do work in America, and since it's hard to get general agreement from a group, we tend not to ban books outright but to destroy them, if we can, in more devious ways. Where books for children are concerned, the most effective way is to keep books out of the classroom and the school library. What usually happens is that a small group of parents finds something offensive in a given book (a favorite target is J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*) and raises objections to school-district officials. The officials conduct a study and eventually agree that only smart students will be allowed to read the book, unless a particular smart student's parents object, in which case he can't. Obviously this method is not terribly successful, since the book remains more or less available, and the notoriety assures it wide circulation. Another form of censorship that can be moderately effective is the cleaned-up school edition, which is less desirable because it costs too much and tends not to discourage school librarians from buying the real thing.

But there is one way a book can be



destroyed utterly. One can give it, under the auspices of the *School Library Journal*, either the Huck Finn Pin or the Billy Budd Button. These two awards, one for the year's most offensive book for reading, the other for the year's most offensive picture book, have been given by the *School Library Journal* since 1971. The committee that does the judging

consists of one person, the magazine's editor, Lillian N. Gerhardt, a person of great rectitude whose literary style runs to phrases like "makes TV soaps look pretty darn good by comparison." Her plot summaries are inaccurate, her judgments of fictional characters, theme, and intent downright astonishing. I assume she herself made up the names for the