

## Fiction Briefs

### The Men's Club

by Leonard Michaels  
Farrar, Straus & Giroux  
181 pp., \$10.95

BECAUSE HE THINKS it holds fewer possibilities for emotional chaos, guilt, and gonorrhea than an extramarital one-night stand, the unnamed narrator of *The Men's Club* joins six other men for an evening of guy-talk. Initially, this novel seems to be about male consciousnesses being raised while the rest of the party has retired to the women's room. But nothing so banal doing. Instead it's a book in which humor, resentment, and brutality bubble forth from men trying to make sense of their lives with women.

In his previous (and acclaimed) two collections of short stories—*Going Places* and *I Would Have Saved Them If I Could*—Leonard Michaels often examines the same theme and always with the same implied conclusion: It isn't love that binds the sexes but an awful compulsion to cling together in ineluctable, primitive combat. Whether or not this view is unrealistically narrow, the stories hit the target and quiver like steel arrows because Michaels's prose is a combination of the spare and the melodramatic encountered only in rare masterpieces like Edith Wharton's *Ethan Frome*.

Michaels's long-awaited first novel, although funny, painful, and unflinching, runs into trouble because he hasn't applied the lean, vigorous strokes of his stories to a novel. He has simply relaxed the grip he maintains on the brush of the shorter form and has let it stray, thus providing both too much and too little. *The Men's Club* is worth reading not because it is a novel that cuts deeply, but because it is like a crucial chapter in a novel that cuts deeply.—DAVID FINKLE

### Original Sins

by Lisa Alther  
Alfred A. Knopf, 608 pp., \$13.95

THE FIVE ill-fated protagonists in Lisa Alther's latest are finger puppets, not

people. The story opens with a quintet of promising youngsters perched in a weeping beech and ends, after much waggling of novelistic devices, with their own progeny playing in the same tree. What becomes of their hopes and dreams in between?

Pretty Sally marries her cousin, the football hero, and settles into a life of daytime soaps and Eat Me Orange nail polish. Her bulldog husband Jed, still abiding by the tenets of his high-school coach, scrambles for promotion to management of the local mill. Sally's brainy sister Emily and Jed's brother Raymond flee Tennessee for New York City where they rally to the rhetoric of the popular political "isms" of the Sixties and Seventies. That leaves Donny, the maid's grandson, a "good niggah" with a dead-end job as janitor until he skips town and sprouts an Afro.

Growing up and leaving home are the themes here. Separation from family and inherited territory is the struggle represented. Oh, how hard it is, the author says; so hard, it's never really accomplished. We're all locusts who have shed our shells, "helpless larvae, cold, naked and unprotected." Despite the tired one-liners ("He picked her up

out of the dirt and turned her into the clod she was today") and the easy pokes at stale dogma, we are supposed to take this book seriously. We are supposed to care about these predictable characters and their predictably aborted pursuits of happiness.

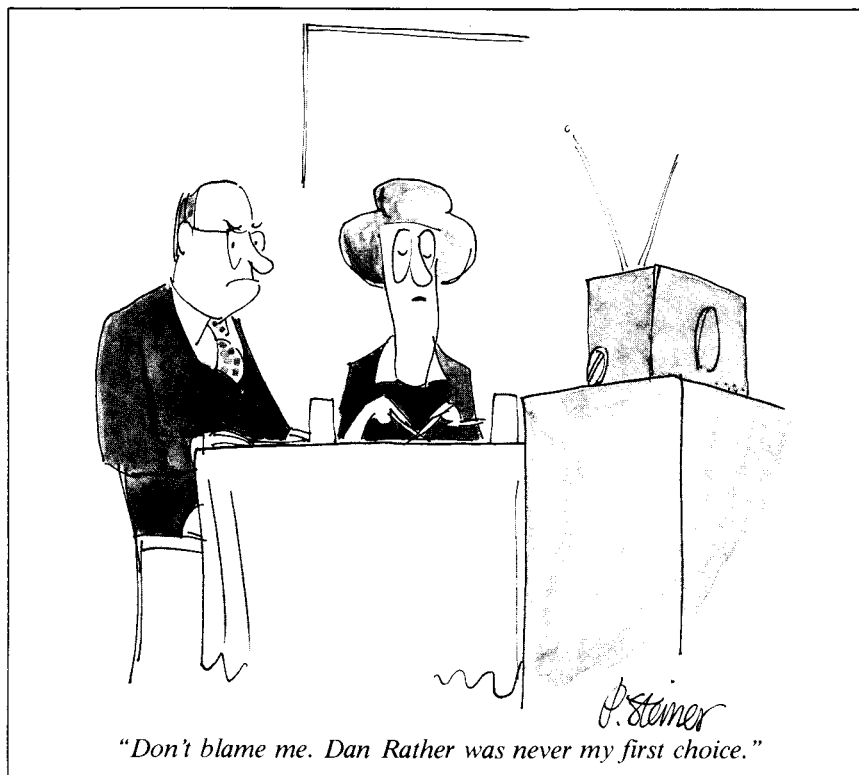
No go. Alther's *Kinflicks* was glib, but *Original Sins* is more so. In the former, the thoughts of a dying mother on the subject of her protean daughter kept the novel several cuts above sitcom. In the latter, canned laughter prevails. —LAURA GERINGER

### Seagull

by Yashar Kemal  
translated by Thilda Kemal  
Pantheon, 250 pp., \$11.95

SINCE PASSION and desire are rarely the stuff of stories about children, Yashar Kemal's *Seagull*, a grand and ramshackle examination of precisely these emotions, is a noteworthy addition to that small list of vigorous books that can be read by both adults and children for equal if not exactly the same exhilaration.

Salih, a young Turkish boy living in a contemporary but not altogether mod-



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### 13. Manila Hotel

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# BOOKS

ern fishing village, finds a seagull whose wing is broken and devotes his fevered days and nights to trying to persuade someone in the village to cure the gull. Among the obstacles he must overcome in his determined search are a lunatic grandmother with renowned healing powers, an alcoholic father, a neighbor getting more and more deeply involved in smuggling, and an apathetic—as Salih sees it from his child's viewpoint—attitude the world takes toward a little boy and his dying gull.

Kemal, who is building a solid international reputation as a storyteller, is far from apathetic, however. He cares about Salih, and it is his understanding of what children choose as their obsessions, how they create their fantasies (a good deal of the digressive narrative is given over to a fairy tale Salih makes up) that gives impetus and strength to the symphonic quest.

It's possible that Kemal might have trimmed some of his excesses and produced an even better work. But what counts is that *Seagull* is one of those books that over the years may quietly reveal itself to be a classic.

—DAVID FINKLE

## What We Talk About When We Talk About Love

by Raymond Carver  
Alfred A. Knopf, 159 pp., \$9.95

SEVENTEEN TALES of Hopelessville, its marriages and alcoholic wreckage, told in a prose as sparingly clear as a fifth of iced Smirnoff. By my tally there are 13

hits and four so-sos or undecideds. But even the undecideds have something to commend them, and the hits are sometimes perfect. Rather, the uncanny power of Carver's drained images will often carry a story to a fulfillment beyond mere plot.

In Carver's world of whiskey-diminished household daylight, life is raw banality, lettered ashtrays, forgotten candy sacks, coffee-ringed notes on the kitchen table, living rooms for empty jawing, hallucinatory backyards, funerals. Crazy talk between long nourishing stares out the window. His characters wonder why their feelings don't fit what's happening, why their chemically depersonalized lives don't join halfway decently.

In the astounding "So Much Water So Close to Home," four heavy toppers go on a fishing trip, find a girl's nude body in a stream on the afternoon they arrive, and sit around drinking and fishing for three days before hiking to phone the sheriff at vacation's end. This brutal feelinglessness is carried over, but subdued in "Why Don't You Dance?" A hopeless man moves all his and his departed wife's furnishings onto the front lawn, hooks everything up to work, and has a yard sale to which two young people drop in, drink until evening, spin records, and dance into the twilight. Yet something dreadful about him is left untold.

A strong, nearly clinical collection of fugue states by the author of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?*, nominated for the 1977 National Book Award.

—DONALD NEWLOVE



"Damn Women's Lib."

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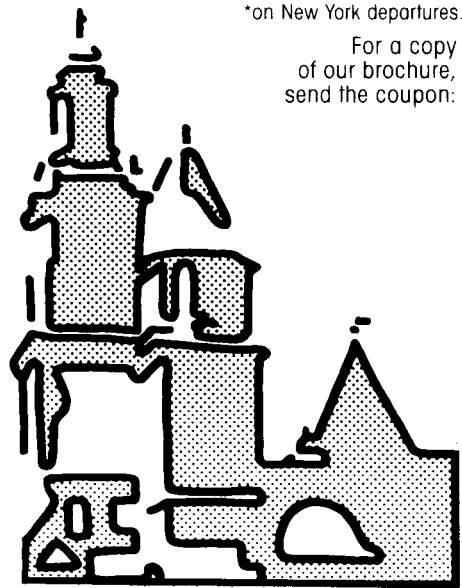
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