

prisoners either of their own instincts or of some unnamed outside force. Freedom is vanity and an illusion. The problem is that we never learn much about these characters and so never care much about them. Nor do we get a clear picture of what their world looks like. This may add to the hypnotic quality of the book, which is its dominant element and its strength, but it also fails to completely satisfy.

The Viaduct was chosen by Graham Greene and William Trevor as the first annual winner of the Triple First Award, a prize offered by the British publishers The Bodley Head for the "best first novel." It's easy to see why: the book is carefully woven and uncompromising in the risks it takes to create its effects. It has energy and a personality that distinguishes it from so many current books. But its strengths are also weaknesses. In the end we don't really care what happens to A., because he is too much a symbol; the ironies of his situation do not move us enough because they are too generic, too dreamy, and too obvious.

—GREG MICHALSON

Angels

by Denis Johnson

Alfred A. Knopf, 209 pp., \$12.95

JOHNSON'S FIRST novel starts on a bus and ends in a gas chamber. To mention this does not ruin the book's suspense, because *Angels* is not about what might happen to its characters, but about what is bound to happen. It is a novel about fate. Near the beginning, its male protagonist tries to declare his independence of money by burning \$200, but his Bic lighter blows up and mutilates his hand. "This kind of thing just keeps on happening until you're dead," Bill Houston says.

Bill is a drunk and a thief, and he and his new lady friend, Jamie, who is on the run from a bad husband, inhabit bars, bus stations, and cheap hotels; they are losers from the start. Like Bill, Jamie has no luck at all. She is gang-raped, becomes addicted to pills and booze, always finds herself among freaks and religious fanatics, and finally goes insane.

The novel is thin, in length as well as subject matter, and at times the apocalyptic tone, the despair, and the helpless and hopeless eccentricity of its characters seem forced. But in two

ways the book succeeds marvelously. It is carefully wrought, line to line, and by the end of the book the reader achieves empathy with its characters. *Angels* is a fine first novel.

—SPEER MORGAN

August

by Judith Rossner

Houghton Mifflin, 376 pp., \$15.95

ROSSNER'S ONE gift may be her ability to keep a finger on the pulse of popular culture, no matter how shallow. It is no surprise then, in these days when pop psychologizing is big business, that the setting of her predictably slick and soulless seventh novel is an analyst's office (it is her third novel since *Looking for Mr. Goodbar*). Rossner attempts to develop, through a repetitive string of contrived therapy sessions, the parallel stories of two New York women: Dr. Lulu Shinefeld, a dreary 40-year-old psychotherapist, and one of her patients, a whiny Barnard freshman named Dawn.

Dawn has had an absurdly traumatic childhood. Besides her confusion from having been raised by two lesbians, she talks about her dead father, who was gay, her suicidal mother, who was a manic-depressive, and a parade of mealy-mouthed Adonises who crave her California-girl good looks, not her mind. Lulu has her share of problems, too. Estranged from her daughter, divorced from her husband, and trysting with a rather obnoxious and unhappily married colleague, she is given to indecorous excesses like picking up anonymous younger men at East Hampton cocktail parties.

Rossner fails to invest either of these self-absorbed women with enough dynamism or depth to evoke the reader's sympathy. Part of the problem is that by using the psychiatric sessions as the structural framework of her story, she distances the reader from all action. Psychoanalysis can be an experience of creativity and illumination, but Rossner uses the couch to induce sleep.

—ANDREA BARNET

Rolling Breaks and Other Movie Business

by Aljean Harmetz

Alfred A. Knopf, 250 pp., \$13.95

HARMETZ COVERS the movie business

for *The New York Times*. As expected, she is impressively knowledgeable, a decent writer, and a consistently able reporter. Her pieces, however, are essentially newspaper pieces. Reading them between two hard covers only exposes the fact that they are perishable goods.

More than half of these twenty-five essays are profiles and as such must be measured against Kenneth Tynan's luminous essay on Louise Brooks, or Joan Didion's *John Wayne: A Love Song*, or even the trenchant Tom Shales sketches. But Harmetz is not in this league; her profiles are soft-edged and wishy-washy. When Tynan describes Louise Brooks, he notes "the sleek jet *cloche* of hair" or comments that "the protective curve of her neck is unforgettable." Harmetz might describe a subject as having "curly black hair, large blue eyes, and a Hollywood manner"; Jack Nicholson is "all charm and antic good humor." These phrases only produce vaporous images that dissolve into thin air.

When Harmetz encounters stars, she loses her skepticism and critical perception: in short, her vision. We

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get dozens of mundane quotations from stars, interrupted only by collaborative assents from spouses or colleagues. Clint Eastwood's wife tells us, "Clint usually exercises an hour a day. It makes his machinery feel better." Columnist Shirley Eder says of Barbara Stanwyck, "Barbara has learned to make do with her life."

Harmetz's essays on business are meatier; she lets facts tell the story. There is one short, incisive, and sad piece on a man named Barry Jagoda who gambled everything on a script he believed in, only to find that ignorance of the proper Los Angeles address can cost a man his dream. This chapter, though, is too brief. Most of *Rolling Breaks* reads like yesterday's newspaper.

—BILL GOODRICH

Cathedral: Stories

by Raymond Carver

Alfred A. Knopf, 230 pp., \$13.95

HAVING READ this volume, I want to read everything Carver has written. The language is crisp and lively, and the insights startling. He's a fine storyteller who knows the language.

In "Cathedral" a man's wife has invited her blind male friend to visit. The husband is transformed when he tries to describe a cathedral to the blind man, finally closing his own eyes to help the man draw one on paper. The same shock of perception occurs in other stories, such as "Feathers," "Chef's House," and "A Small, Good Thing." In "Feathers" a man and his wife go to visit a friend from work. The friend has an ugly baby, a pet peacock, and a wife who keeps a plaster cast of her once-awful teeth on the TV. The visitor's wife plays with the ugly baby—"Bar none, it was the ugliest baby I'd ever seen"—and their lives are never the same again.

Carver has a talent for defining the kind of moment that changes a life.

—J. J. MALONEY

Disturbances in the Field

by Lynne Sharon Schwartz

Harper & Row, 368 pp., \$14.95

SCHWARTZ'S FIRST novel, *Rough Strife*, was nominated for an American Book Award. Her second novel, *Balancing Acts*, received no similar recognition, but it helped solidify her reputation as a graceful

stylist and a careful plotsman, able with a few deft strokes to draw the reader wholeheartedly into the destinies of her characters. Now comes *Disturbances in the Field*, and one is forced to wonder what went wrong. Long and sprawling and utterly lacking in dramatic life, it's a would-be novel of ideas grafted onto a would-be family tragedy. It sinks like a large, misshapen stone.

As if story line had suddenly become a sin, Schwartz holds her new novel open to the aimlessness of everyday life. The still center of *Disturbances in the Field* is narrator Lydia Rowe, a chamber musician, mother, daughter, and wife. Her existence is an endless series of all-but-closed loops, a whirlpool of family and friends. She gives us her past in meandering flashbacks: summers at the shore with her straight-arrow parents and spacy sister, college years at Barnard with three roommates who play at being intellectuals. The four young women quote Plato, Aristotle, and a dozen other philosophers with the halfhearted earnestness of nonbelievers; what really engages them is the idea that

Columbia men live just across the street.

When Lydia isn't ruminating on her past, she spends her time pondering the restlessness of her husband Victor and the emotional detachment of her four teen-age children. The novel contains exactly one event: halfway through, her two youngest are killed—off-camera—in a school bus crash. Lydia and Victor drift slowly apart, the story drifts nowhere in particular, and the reader drifts blissfully asleep.

—ADAM GUSSOW

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