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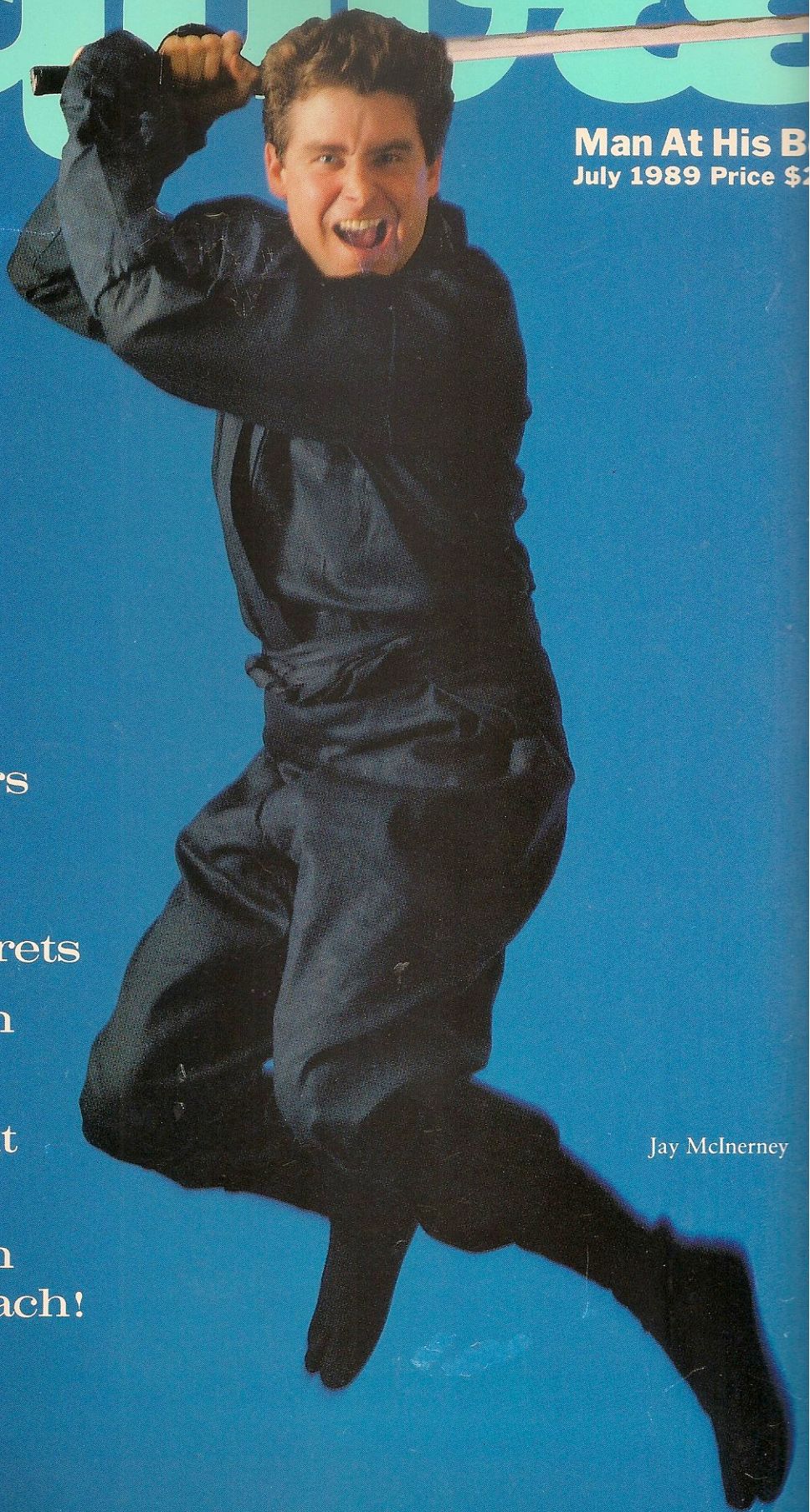
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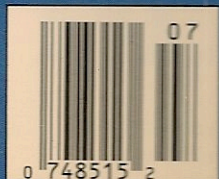
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Jay McInerney



Y

The Writers of Wrong

A novelist carves the critics

By Jay McInerney

*Sed quis
custodiet ipsos
Custodes?
—Juvenal*

YOU'D THINK they would be embarrassed after a while, these guardians of the culture, these anglophiles in their tweed gatekeeper's outfits, flailing their canes in the dark, whacking the shit out of a laurel bush where they thought they spotted a suspicious character—some snot-nosed kid in black leather or Italian linen trying to climb over the wall surrounding the American Literature Campus. Don't their arms get tired? Leaves flying everywhere—*whap whap whap*, I got him, I hit him, he won't be back in a hurry, the little bastard, let him run bleeding back to his filthy friends in the East Village or West Hollywood. Critic's elbow, anyone? By day, they grudgingly

watch the new crop of matriculants in appropriate garb from Iowa City and New Haven file into the hallowed halls, greeting them with manly handshake, while later, back in the gatekeepers' lodge, they grumble that it's just not like the old days, when men were men and girls were poets: remember Ernie, a great athlete, that boy, and young Bill Styron—you didn't catch him listening to rock 'n' roll music in study hall or sneaking into the pages of glossy magazines after curfew. *Cluck cluck cluck.*

There are a few pets, of course, some of them snitches and apple-polishers, some criminally dull and hence not threatening, one or two actual talents who pretended during their interviews to be dutiful and polite. "I love Proust, sir, and I live in New England with my dog, Matthew Arnold." For these, a hearty *rah rah rah*. Few of them are under forty, though. For the gatekeepers, youth is evidence of immaturity or bad taste.

Of course, youth-bashing isn't really a new phenomenon. But that should make it all the more embarrassing: presumably, the tradition-loving critics—the venerable order of hemorrhoidal gatekeepers—read their putative ancestors.

Name this tune: *We have been, I begin slowly to understand, living through a revolution in taste, a radical transformation of the widest American literary audience...to one in which adolescents make up the majority. Controlling the market (it*



is, for instance, largely to reach them that the more expensive paperbacks were invented and marketed in new ways by new generations of editors scarcely older than themselves), they also control the mode. And the mode demands, in lieu of the teenage novelists who somehow refuse to appear, Teenage Impersonators, among whom one might list, say—

Don't rush...This is for the big money. Tama? Bret? Jay? Extra points if you come up with the name of the author of this passage. Sorry, time's up. In the Teenage Impersonator category, the answers are Norman Mailer, Jack Kerouac, William Burroughs, and J. D. Salinger. (Oh, Norman, unhand that co-ed and get off the dance floor!) And for the bonus—this is Leslie Fiedler speaking in a Salinger-bashing piece published in 1962 in *Partisan Review*.

In a more recent article bemoaning the decline and fall of New York City, *The Washington Post's* curmudgeon-in-residence and the charter member of the Youthanasia Society, Jonathan Yardley, writes:

The serious writers...have been replaced by the intellectually bankrupt children of the brat pack....The publishing business is being taken over by tinhorn Donald Trumps, men and women with their eyes on the main chance who give little more than lip service to the literary functions that the business once saw as among its central obligations.

It would be unseemly to dig out the psychological roots of this antipathy toward youth, connected with the notion of a Yardley Youth in which New York City and the publishing industry enjoyed a golden age. The aged Henry James wailed much the same tune in *The American Scene*. We hear it in every era. It is the sound of arteries hardening. Sending young men off to die

Jay McInerney's most recent novel is *Story of My Life*, published by Atlantic Monthly Press.

in war has often served to ease this distaste among the elders of a tribe for those who will inherit the earth after them.

The Fiedler passage is interesting given all the talk about Salinger in relation to recent fiction. An inordinate number of young writers have been published in the last five years, often and not surprisingly writing about youth; Salinger has been

used as a kind of yardstick, not really to measure but to flog (*whap whap whap*) the young and restless. Salinger himself has outlived the malice and resentment of the gatekeepers mainly by doing a terrific imitation of a dead author, his literary merit now taken for granted by the younger tweedsters in a way that must pain Fiedler et al. (Ditto for Kerouac, only he is dead.) But if inflicting injury by way of comparison is the object of all the recent fulminating, it strikes me that the Joyce of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* might make a heavier cudgel. To name just one. But we don't read many book reviews that look back, in anger or otherwise, that far.

The Salinger gambit isn't always boneheaded. Those of us who have grown up and gone to school within the last five hundred years or so have probably read *Catcher in the Rye* at least once. Or about thirteen times, for

chrissake. Susan Minot's *Monkeys* (1986), a collection of related stories grouped to resemble a novel, is certainly a direct and honorable descendant of the Glass family stories, chronicling a populous, half-Catholic family of precocious kids, while Peter Smith's neglected *Highlights of the Off-Season* (1986) seems to be an act of Holldenesque literary ventriloquism, which, if American literary journalism were remotely in touch with developments in the other arts, would have called forth numerous essays on "appropriation" of past texts.

Late adolescence and early adulthood are by no means *the* privileged positions from which to view the turns of this mortal coil or the larger issues of culture and history. But are they entirely illegitimate perspectives, as recent lit-chat pundits seem to

insinuate? Personally, entering the middle years myself, I'd rather reread *Goodbye Columbus* than *Zuckerman Unbound*.

THERE ARE MANY KINDS of sticks with which to flog a dead horse, a bad boy, or a naughty girl. A taxonomy of the currently favorite, though ageless, critical fallacies would have to include the following:

1. The Intentional Fallacy. This occurs when critics extrapolate the extraliterary motives of the author and his publisher from the text of a work of fiction. Often involves critics pandering to their audience by accusing a novelist of pandering to his. Features such sentences as "Mr. X clearly wrote this novel in the hope of getting a date with Michelle Pfeiffer."

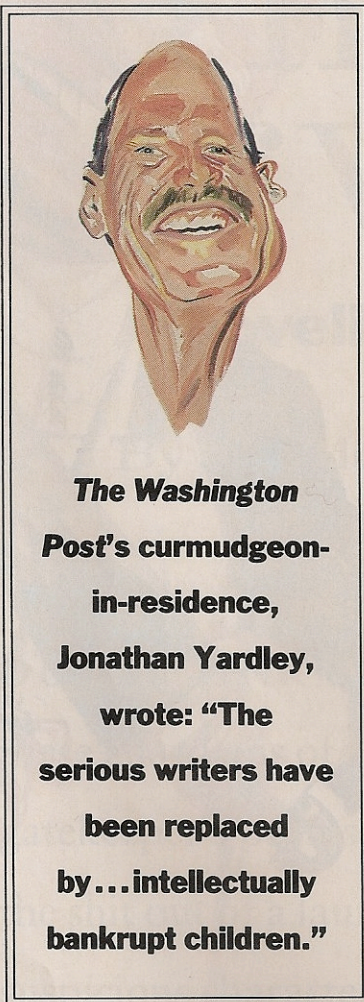
Or this: "It is not beyond probability that Mr. Fitzgerald may have had one eye cocked on the movie lots while writing this last novel." The novel in question was *The Great Gatsby*; the critic, a contemporary named John M. Kenney Jr.; the publication, *CommonWeal*.

2. Killing the Messenger. To paraphrase Oscar Wilde, the hostility toward the new realism is the rage of Caliban at seeing his face in the mirror. In an ugly era, the frightened gatekeeper flails at the man who holds up the mirror. Recent critics, complaining about subject matter that they find distasteful and unpretty, uncannily mimic French Academy attacks on Zola, among others. Unfortunately, most recent "criticism" is fixated on subject matter—that which should simply be granted a writer—at the expense of discussion of language and technique.

3. Determining Guilt by Association. This strategy usually begins with irresponsible label-mongering—"Minimalism," "Brat Pack," and "Yuppie Lit" being some recent labels that come to mind. Or "Women Writers," for that matter. Once you turn an individual into an abstraction, it's easy to commit atrocities.

4. Ad Hominem Attack. That is, the atrocities mentioned above. This includes indiscriminate use of derogatory adjectives and attacks on someone's haircut, manner of dress, boyfriend or girlfriend, speech impediment, or behavior at a launch party in 1984 at which you happened to be present, sober as a judge. This kind of petulance is called "character assassination," or in value-free parlance, "gossip."

5. The Autobiographical Smear. The word *autobiographical* is often used as a critical diminutive, the insinuation being that we all have *lives*, and if the best an author can do is to plunder his own, then he hasn't done anything terribly special. Since most novels are in a sense autobiographical—*Great Expectations*, *Remembrance of*



The Washington Post's curmudgeon-in-residence, Jonathan Yardley, wrote: "The serious writers have been replaced by...intellectually bankrupt children."

Things Past, and *Ulysses* come to mind—the word is very selectively applied to indicate critical disapprobation, though it hardly seems to serve any function even when accurate.

6. Citation of Spurious or Dubious Sources. The misquotations and paraphrases attributed to writers in feature articles, gossip columns, and “interviews” are suspect and should not be considered primary sources. A writer should be held accountable for all *written*, signed, published statements of position—not for alleged quotations taken by reporters *sans* notebooks or tape recorders via phone or at a book party.

SCOTT FITZGERALD had H. L. Mencken and Edmund Wilson egging him on. Mailer's generation had Dwight MacDonald. Not so long ago, Geoffrey Wolff and Wilfrid Sheed were writing actual criticism without malice aforethought. Now we've got the hype patrol and the ego police and what we don't have is serious criticism. Next time you hear a writer is overhyped, ask yourself how it happened. Did the author in question lift himself off the ground? Ad budgets for nongenre fiction are pathetic by the standards of other industries. For my first novel, *Bright Lights, Big City*, the total promotional budget was around \$3,000. Generally, writer's reputations get inflated in the same places they get deflated—in the culture press—according to principles of fashion and psychology, though all parties like to allude vaguely to an immutable literary gold standard. In illustrating the above fallacies I fear it will be necessary—hell, it will be *amusing*—and instructive to actually employ the fallacious devices in question. As the Replacements say, “You be me for a while, and I'll be you.”

IT IS DIFFICULT to pick one piece that illustrates the obtuse outrage, the *ressentiment* that has characterized so much of the response to the new fiction. Like the judge at the kindergarten art show, one is tempted to say that *all* the contestants deserve the

first-prize set of colored pencils (red). But in terms of hitting all the pissy notes of gatekeeper censure, we could hardly do better than to start with Terrence Rafferty's October 1987 screed in *The New Yorker*.

There were two occasions for this lecture: the almost simultaneous publication of Bret Easton Ellis's *Rules of Attraction* and Tama Janowitz's *Cannibal in Manhattan*, and the debut of T.R. in the book columns of the revamped *New Yorker*. Like so many critics, Rafferty disingenuously took the coincidence of publication dates to represent a youthful, philistine conspiracy against Arnoldian high culture. “Bad art isn't such a crime against humanity that it requires show trials and public executions as deterrents,” he begins, truthfully enough, in preface to a five- or six-thousand-word indictment. If it's so bad, why bother? It's not as if anybody else was out there comparing Bret and Tama with Balzac and Austen.

After thrashing an Ellis effigy mercilessly (*whap whap whap*) without a single specific reference to the text of the novel in question, Rafferty concludes: “Thanks to his publishers, Bret Ellis is out there...getting killed by reviewers.”

Which is rather like saying, If you'd just kept the kid off the streets, Mr. and Mrs. E., I wouldn't have been forced to blast him with my trusty .357 Magnum.

What's the beef here, really? Ellis's two novels “contain large, even toxic doses of the elements that stimulate sales.” This is the crux: Ellis's first book, despite a wolf pack's worth of similar reviews, captured the attention of the book-buying public and the demotic press, and the gatekeeper mentality equates sales and feature articles with low culture, with the walls tumbling down. In gatekeeper parlance the word *sales* is code for *trash*. So, what are the elements that stimulate sales? “Lots of sex, lots of drugs, brand names on every page...” I don't know, sounds like America to me, T.R., if not exactly Edith Whar-

ton's America. We've changed a little these last few years.

The gambit here is Kill the Messenger, though as far as I know, Ellis didn't invent sex or drugs—you'd have to be a blind, noseless eunuch not to notice them everywhere—while it seems to me that Salinger, Donald Barthelme, and Ann Beattie pioneered in fiction the use of brand names in—yes, *The New Yorker*.

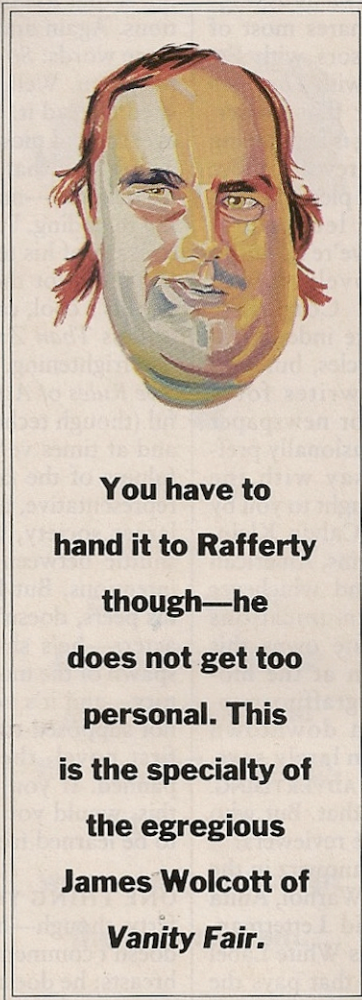
We live in shitty, depraved, and complacent times; the novelist is not under obligation to respect our delicate sensibilities, our desire for good, clean entertainment or sympathetic, haute-bourgeois characters who clench in a reconciliatory embrace at the end. (Tom Wolfe got reprimanded recently on these grounds—not enough nice folks in his novel—by Rafferty, among others.) In fact, the novelist is under the opposite obligation. Sex, drugs, kids with too much money and not enough education—this alleged fringe represents a symptomatic wedge of American society. The age *deserves* an image of its accelerated grimace. And stuffy indignation isn't going to help your daughter just say no to drugs, or to the sex-killer next door.

Janowitz gets whacked sadistically, too, though there is a wonderfully shameless disclaimer buried in the middle of her spanking. “There were stories in *Slaves of New York* that showed evidence of a real—if not very rigorously applied—talent: moments of sharp, unforced humor, some dead-on observation of artistic types caught with their attitudes down.” Do we mean *New Yorker* stories? Like, the very stories that actually appeared in those same thin columns? One detects an editorial hand here, a note on the first-run galley of an earlier version that didn't contain this passage: “Didn't we publish her, though? Let's discuss.”

As any novice book reviewer knows, a puff piece gets the novelist's name out there while a hatchet job gets *your* name in circulation. If as a critic you wish to generate a little—dare we use the H word? Very well, we will—a little self-hype, well... So, when publishing correspondent Edwin McDowell comes around from *The New York Times* asking how it's going, your boss can say: Well, the Rafferty piece got a lot of attention.

A friend from New Canaan writes: “Correct me if I'm wrong, but I could have sworn I already read this sort of review in *Time*. No, actually it was *Vanity Fair*, I seem to recall.”

Virtually identical pieces also appeared in the *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, and the *Village Voice*. At about the same time, we observed the rise of an ugly new form of youthanasia—first-novel



**You have to
hand it to Rafferty
though—he
does not get too
personal. This
is the specialty of
the egregious
James Wolcott of
Vanity Fair.**

bashing. At one time, the rules of combat were such that first books were treated as such—their authors were chided more gently than the veterans; reviewers sounded more like pipe-smoking writing teachers than like today's hardened child-abusers. Today's first-novelists are often slaughtered virtually in their cradles, as Jill Eisenstadt (*From Rockaway*) and Mark Lindquist (*Bad Movies*) discovered, no doubt to their amazement. There seems to be a lot of wasted effort here. Canes are so inefficient. I suggest that in the future we issue assault rifles to any licensed book reviewer with orders to kill young novelists on sight. Their skins can be cured and used for leather-bound sets of Jane Austen.

WITH REGARD to the two books in question, it has to be said that *Cannibals* isn't nearly as fresh as the better stories in *Slaves*, which have all the virtues that Rafferty grudgingly notes, and then some. That collection actually contained two distinct types of stories—the wry, low-key, naturalist "Eleanor" stories, which seemed quite at home in *The New Yorker*, and the prose cartoons—verbal Keith Harings—like the sketch on being married to Bruce Springsteen. *Cannibal* is of the latter type, a joke that doesn't quite work at book length.

Janowitz hasn't done herself any favors by doing ads. Selling your credibility to the highest corporate bidder does compromise your contract with readers insofar as you wish to speak to them about matters of life and death. Janowitz's ads, like the extraterrestrial deadpan humor, the affectlessness, and the subject matter, are a legacy of her mentor, Andy Warhol, whose aesthetic—or antiaesthetic—blurred the fine old line between commerce and art, a strategy that may, in fact, be opportunistic for all its self-consciousness. But aspiring critics who want to write something really important, or cast big stones, should note that Tama's liquor ads appear in magazines that also publish their book reviews—commercial imperatives infiltrating the debate at all lev-

els, like background radiation.

In a column a couple of years back, Jonathan Yardley, the man who would be dean of the gatekeepers, runs down a list of Esquire's "advertisements for the discreetly ostentatious life," in order to demonstrate that the magazine, like American youth and "literary fiction," has gone to hell in a hand basket. Yardley seems unaware of the

fact that *The Washington Post* shares most of these sponsors with Esquire, and with *The New Yorker*, for that matter. Advertising is frightening in what it reveals about us and our pleasure buttons, but let's get it straight—we're all implicated. Novelists who flack for Corporate America are indeed suspect as oracles, but anyone who writes for a magazine or newspaper should occasionally preface an essay with the note: "Brought to you by Tiffany's, Calvin Klein, Virginia Slims, American Express, and whichever giant communications conglomerate owns this publication at the moment." A graffito popping up in downtown Manhattan lately says, DEATH TO ADVERTISING. I'm all for that. But who will pay the reviewers?

So put Janowitz in the context of Warhol, Anita Loos, David Letterman, the Dewar's White Label Fellowship that pays the rent on the gatekeepers'

lodge, and take two Tylenols—everything will be fine. The walls will still be standing in the morning.

Ellis is not a near-relation of Janowitz, nor for that matter, of myself. Anyone who mistakes a sentence from *Bright Lights*, *Big City* for one from *Less Than Zero* should go back to Prose 101. And maybe I'm an interested party, but the abashed romantic sensibility of the former novel seems remote from the bombed-out cynicism of the latter. Ellis's line of descent passes visibly through Hemingway, Robbe-Grillet, Joan Didion, television, the movies, and the L.A. punk-rock scene.

Though Ellis has none of Céline's manic verbal explosiveness, though in fact Ellis's numbness seems at the furthest remove from the Frenchman's logorrhea, still they

share a quality of disgust, of astonishment at the hideousness of a world they don't wish to inherit. That disgust can be purgative. Burroughs has it, too—a horror that can only be alleviated by the act of witness. This quality, and the unblinking observation of an actual milieu, make *Less Than Zero* a significant novel.

I don't know of any recent American novel that has provoked such violent reactions. Again and again I hear virtually the same words: *So disgusted I threw it across the room*. Well, I did, too, the first time I tried to read it. But it stayed with me, and eventually I picked it up again. My first reaction was that Ellis was sensationalizing his material—making his own snuff movie. On rereading, I became impressed with the courage of his testimony and saved my indignation for the society that I recognized in Ellis's cool, caustic gaze.

Less Than Zero was trashed because it was frightening. And real, if highly stylized. *The Rules of Attraction* was not as powerful (though technically more accomplished and at times very funny), because the awfulness of the college kids didn't seem as representative, as indicative of the rot of a larger society, and because it seemed to shuttle between documentary and satiric intentions. But Ellis, almost alone among his peers, doesn't ask you to like his characters—he's showing you the privileged spawn of the most privileged society in history—and it's not a pretty picture. You're not supposed to cheer at the end. Like his first novel, the second was universally panned. If you were a young writer like this, would you imagine there is anything to be learned from your reviews?

ONE THING YOU HAVE to hand to Rafferty, though—he doesn't get personal. He doesn't comment on the size of somebody's breasts; he doesn't convey the smarmy impression that hey, he's met these people, seen them close-up, picking their noses, and, believe him, you don't want to read their books. This is the specialty of the egregious James Wolcott of *Vanity Fair*—who can be observed at Manhattan publishing events, hunched in a corner, looking pained and miserable with his self-imported Diet 7-Up, so that an innocent bystander might sympathetically recall Ezra Pound's lines about the young lady who "would like some one to speak to her./And is almost afraid that I/Will commit that indiscretion." Many who have committed it discover that he was counting their blackheads for a future column—a wolf cub in sheepface.

Wolcott is the master of argumentum ad hominem, and the preceding paragraph is a humble homage to his mastery of this tactic. He opens a piece on Harold Brodkey by



**The New York
Times's Michiko
Kakutani is
basically cautious.
She seems to
hold a wetted finger
to the breeze
to check for cultural
consensus.**

describing the party persona of the novelist—"a social smoothy." In another, editors Gary Fisketjon and Morgan Entrekin are hauled onstage for a cameo in which they are described as "egregious," only to disappear before the reader can figure out why. Egregious how? Their work? Their manners? Their hair? We never find out. The columnist has already left the scene of the crime, razor blade dripping.

Wolcott's Ellis-Janowitz slash-job was more vicious than most, employing most of the major critical fallacies, including the Intentional: "It's as if Ellis is supplying a soundtrack for the movie he expects *The Rules of Attraction* to become." (How does Wolcott divine Ellis's expectations?) He lumps me in with Ellis and Janowitz, while repeating a misquotation attributed to me elsewhere about being in a galaxy of my own. And he harks back to the "good kids," in this case the Beats rather than Salinger—much nicer than these kids today. "[Kerouac] knew that some waters could be baptismal. The stream of consciousness in these novels snakes along the gutters, strictly urine." Is somebody getting hysterical here? Throughout it all there is Wolcott's tendency to dwell on physical characteristics: he calls Janowitz "squint-eyed" and Ellis "baby-faced." This makes for colorful reading, I guess, but it's a sleazy pleasure at best—like watching a kid in school get a wedgie.

It's not just the kids. Wolcott does not really like *anybody*. Among the very few writers of any sort who escape his seething, furious resentment are the deliberately minor—P. G. Wodehouse, for instance, or fellow icon-slashers like yellow biographer Albert Goldman, whose reassassination of John Lennon must have spoken deeply to Wolcott's Mark David Chapman—like need to fell the mighty, wedgie the popular kids, and slash the guys with big...you know—advances. Recognizing a fellow righteous Nerd-Avenger, our columnist was positively flattering as he shrugged off the serious flaws in Goldman's research

and humanity. Ultimately it is hard to resist the suspicion, when we read Wolcott on John Lennon or John Irving or Brodkey or Ellis, that we are listening to the sound and the fury signifying penis envy.

With women he is merely condescending and rude.

The most shameless recent example of Wolcott's blatant sexism is a column called

"Good-Bad Girls," in which he sneers at three books by first-time female authors. "Girls who want to Live [his caps] are writing novels of their own." (Haven't they always?) Silly females, Living's for men. Then, well, listen to this: "Mary Gaitskill carries the street credentials of a writer who wants to live, live, live. As a former runaway in Toronto she even took a brief walk on the wild side as a stripper." It's hard to know where to begin to express one's astonishment. The condescending tone in the first sentence, and then the sneer at this woman's life. Running away from home is usually a desperate measure. Wolcott dismisses it as if it were research, just as he dismisses with the adjective "brief" and the phrase "walk on the wild side" the surprising, perhaps horrendous fact that she worked as a stripper. The smugness here is hard to believe. The message is—work-

ing as a stripper, you call that Life? Hey, if you'd been a hooker I might be impressed. The implication seems to be that Wolcott himself really knows life. "I'm a guy. I've been around," he says. Apparently he has been on the street, *man*, going down on Lincoln Tunnel commuters to pay for his junk habit.

To quote Army counsel Joseph Welch, the man who ended the long run of a popular televised forum of character assassina-tion—"Have you no shame, sir?!"

P.S. Confidential to J.W.: Knowing how much you want to be in the know—we don't call them "discos" anymore.

ALTHOUGH SHE POSSESSES in abundance the anglophile gatekeeper's sensibility, *The New York Times's* Michiko Kaku-

tani—our most centrally placed commentator—tries hard not to indulge in gratuitous violence. In general her reviews are thoughtful and sober, as I'm sounding right now—I think. She is basically cautious and sometimes gives the sense of holding a wetted finger up to the breeze to check for cultural consensus. Weighing in early on my first novel, she breezily swatted it, objecting particularly to "Mr. McNerney's attempt to tell the entire story in second person—all the 'yous' pile up in a jangled heap of grammatical distortions." She concluded that I didn't live up to my "considerable talents," though the only evidence of talent on my part was the unsatisfactory novel in question. In writing about my next two books she has referred fulsomely to my first, as if it were an old friend. For which I'm grateful, if puzzled. Perhaps she reread it and changed her mind. Or perhaps she read the other reviews.

Kakutani's weakness is probably her sense of speaking for an establishment, of writing earnest term papers for an unseen professor. I would guess that her favorite writers are Virginia Woolf and Henry Green. Youth is hardly a desirable attribute in this universe, though Kakutani was one of the few who almost understood *Less Than Zero*, sort of, and can be credited—in the same review in which she cuffed me—with launching David Leavitt, saying "regardless of age, few writers so effortlessly achieve the sense of maturity and earned compassion evident in these stories." In other words, he sounds older.

Leavitt's gifts and predilections were ideal for the literary establishment in some ways. He was Yale, and he had mastered some of the lessons of the new realists of the Seventies—Carver, Beattie, and Robison being his acknowledged mentors—while also taking courses in the earlier *New Yorker* domestic short fiction of Cheever and Updike. And he had the official sanction of that establishment publication. He was also good, writing with craft and insight about family relationships and adults of both sexes. If anything, he's better on grown-ups—his kids and young adults aren't always terribly convincing.

Leavitt also wrote about gays (though it was, contrary to popular myth, Allan Gurganus who first broke that taboo in the pages of *The New Yorker*), and this, paradoxically, made his acceptance behind the walls quicker and easier. There's a need for a certain kind of gay writer—the cultural establishment being politically if not aesthetically liberal. John Rechy and Edmund White are so—well, you know. Blowjobs and what-have-you. In *Family Dancing* the sex was in the background, the gayness treated as just one more aspect of family



**At first the
gatekeepers were
confused (see
James Atlas shrug-
ging off Carver in
the Jan. '82 *Atlantic*),
but then they
were ready to accept
the new realism.**

life. Leavitt broke his contract with the hetero gatekeepers in his novel *The Lost Language of Cranes*, which contained some pretty heavy sex—and rambled much. Ethan Canin has since taken the seat reserved for the kid who writes as if he were much older.

Leavitt's model for gay love was an easy one for straights to handle—suburban monogamy. And his model for the new literature, found in a clubby essay he wrote for the *Times* Book Review, was short stories about the suburban family, a mode that has subsequently become virtually the mainstream of the Eighties. (The writers—Amy Hempel, Meg Wolitzer, Peter Cameron, Elizabeth Tallent—were Leavitt's friends.) Suburban up-bringsings are common to many college-educated kids raised in the Sixties and Seventies, but some of us fled as soon as we could. It's a little scary to see so many young writers idealize the land of lawn mowers and station wagons.

RAYMOND CARVER and Ann Beattie are the literary godfather and godmother of the largest brood of young writers of the Eighties—the deadpan domestic realists. While both to some extent dodged the critical bullet, their influence has been much decried; millions of words have been fired at a straw man called minimalism. Carver's career as a story writer and prose stylist had several distinct phases; only his second collection, *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, can really be called minimalist—a conscious attempt to leave almost everything out. (Among the descendants, I would be tempted to call the admirable Amy Hempel a minimalist.) These writers did seem stripped down and laconic after the sprawling novels of the Sixties and early Seventies, their concerns narrowly domestic after the political and apocalyptic noises of immediate predecessors like Pynchon, Gaddis, Barth, and Vonnegut. They seemed artless and naive to the metafictionalists, who were all wrapped up in epistemology, the status of storytelling and fictional dis-

course, how to go on.

It looks easy to write the way Carver and Beattie have written, though it isn't. But these models are easier to learn and teach than *Gravity's Rainbow*. The Carver-Beattie influence (reinforced by Mary Robison, Tobias Wolff, Joy Williams, and Richard Ford) swept through the graduate schools in recent years, providing models of scrupulous craftsmanship and psychological depth at the least, and effecting a genuine renaissance of interest in the short story among writers and readers.

The gatekeepers were confused at first (see James Atlas dismissing Carver in the January 1982 *Atlantic*), but by the mid-Eighties were ready to accept work that resembled the cutting edge ten years back, particularly if, like much of the new deadpan domestic realism, it didn't drool on itself, masturbate, or do hard drugs before supper. But the odyssey from the kitchen table to the backyard and back again is fairly well covered by my generation at this point, and one hopes the navigational skills acquired thereby will extend beyond the realm of the nuclear family and relationships—of living in one's own private Idaho.

FOR INSPIRATION, those of us who have much to learn might look to another branch of literature from the Seventies that deserves attention, a wide-screen fiction that frames an entire society and is even now finding readers and students, thanks in some measure to the publishing renaissance of the Eighties. A handful of editors refused to concede the field to movies, television, and rock 'n' roll, seducing a new generation of readers back into the bookstores with a combination of serious product (novels that seemed to actually be about the late twentieth century), and yes, astute packaging and marketing. Lo and behold, readers have discovered not only the new literature produced by neatly coiffed barbarians, but also some fiction that had been sitting around out-of-print or underread for ten or fifteen years.

An anomaly among iconoclastic novelists who emerged in the Seventies, the titanic Robert Stone has long enjoyed a substantial readership, as well as critical acclaim. John Irving enjoyed the latter first, then a staggering amount of the former, at which point the gatekeepers predictably nipped the hell out of his heels. Don DeLillo and Thomas McGuane found a new readership, along with the youngsters. Frederick Exley has remained mostly a secret addiction for his colleagues. To these add Joan Didion and Hunter Thompson, and you have a serious countertradition of recent American letters that engages the structural issues of our alleged culture and politics—something very different from the domestic realism discussed above.

Thompson and McGuane know all about the scorn of the gatekeepers, while others escaped censure partly by being underread. Reading these guys in college in the Seventies was like discovering a new drug you thought no one else knew.

If there's a general problem with my g-g-generation, I think—contra the gatekeepers, who love nice, life-affirming stories about slightly eccentric families in Baltimore and Boston—it is too fucking polite, too focused on the psychology of individuals, when we live in a time of extreme social pathology. If we look back on what we all accept as the great literature of the past, much of it is the stuff that really pissed off the culture police of the era. Dostoyevsky and Baudelaire were convicted, Flaubert, Joyce, and Burroughs prosecuted. Babel was shot. Faulkner and Melville were ignored. Mailer had a bitch of a time getting *The Deer Park* published.

Here's a thought: we must be doing something right—somebody's pissed off. But, clearly, we have to try harder, us aging boys and girls. We need more in the way of great expectations and ferocious ambition. It's possible none of us will be read in fifty years, even if anyone's still around by then. But when the real masterpiece slouches into a bookstore in your town, don't expect the reviewers to understand it or beat their drums in praise. You may have to discover it on your own.

What's that sound? At my back I always hear that obnoxious tattoo—*whap whap whap*—from the campus in the sticks, where pale geeks fiercely patrol the perimeter, clutching canes in one hand and in the other the yellowing college syllabus pages of the "Gatekeeper's Manual," the cultural equivalent of Amy Vanderbilt's rules of etiquette. Someone should tell them to check the library—half the volumes have been stolen and the thieves are building another campus down the road, closer to town. ■

**The novelist
is not obliged to
provide us with
clean entertainment.
This is an
age that deserves
an image
of its accelerated
grimace. And
stuffy indignation
surely isn't
going to help your
daughter just
say no to drugs, or
to the sex-
killer next door.**