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Reviews:

Bonnie Angelo's *First Mothers*
REVIEWED BY TAMARA VISHKINA

Christopher Rice's *A Density of Souls*
REVIEWED BY ELIZABETH ROUTEN

Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook*
REVIEWED BY CHRISTINA GOSNELL

David Malouf's *Dream Stuff*
REVIEWED BY CLARISSA AYKROYD

Tyler Cowen's *What Price Fame?*
REVIEWED BY CHARLES STAMPUL

and a feature on
ALBERTO MORAVIA
by GAITHER STEWART

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THIS ISSUE

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ABOUT CRITIQUE

Critique is a monthly Internet magazine dedicated to publishing quality reviews of modern and classic fiction, nonfiction, and poetry, as well as insightful features on and interviews with publishing's icons. *Critique* is an English language publication that caters to a well-educated international audience between 25 and 65 years of age.

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ALBERTO MORAVIA: MAN OF HIS TIMES

A profile of the Italian über-author's
obsessive love of work and women.

REPORTED BY GAITHER STEWART

I've always envied the 20th century Italian writer Alberto Moravia because he began writing as a teenager and, according to him, wrote almost every day of his life—whether in Rome or in Nairobi or Shanghai. As a foreign correspondent and journalist in Rome, I interviewed him three times at the acme of his maturity during the 1980s and followed him personally in his astounding career as the true man of letters until his death in Rome in 1990.

After pouring over old notes, listening to my taped interviews and re-reading my own published stories about him, I nonetheless hesitated to begin this essay about one of Italy's major novelists. It was the embarrassment of choosing. I had too many materials. Then Moravia himself resolved the problem: he reappeared to me out of one of my published interviews in which I described the scene of the ivory knobbed cane, the coffee table, and the microphone.

I recall fondly the afternoon in his apartment when, to underline that the

crisis of the relationship with reality is the major theme of his work, Moravia said "reality can be that table" and whacked the coffee table with the knob of his cane—all his life he walked with a limp supported by a cane—and knocked the microphone of my recorder to the floor. He laughed in embarrassment and we had trouble adjusting it again.

After a long pause to return the couch and ponder his own statement, he repeated, "Yes, reality is this table. I'm not speaking here of our relationship with the social world. It is more philosophical than that. I mean our relationship with an object. The problem emerges from the idea that there exists something outside ourselves—despite the idealistic philosophy according to which nothing exists outside ourselves. The thing is people don't realize this crisis but they suffer from it anyway."

To open this attempt to reflect Moravia's chief literary theme of desperation over the crisis of man's relationship with reality, I will quote myself on the occasion of one of the first interviews he gave me.

DARK CLOUDS RACE ABOVE THE JAGGED CYPRESSES along the crest of the hill of Monte Parioli across the Tiber River. Puddles of water on the terracotta terrace of his apartment reflect the swiftly changing colors and moods of a Rembrandt Roman sky that forms a continuity with the somber natural light of the intimate salon. The restless artist uncoils carefully from the deep couch like a jungle lion after its noonday nap, circles a stuffed chair, prowls along a wall, adjusts a tribal mask and a book on a shelf, and spins around cat-like before settling back down to his favorite spot in the couch corner.

"My obsession?" he growls. "Maybe! Well, yes, for I am obsessed by the need to write in order to express myself. Like my characters I suffer too from anguish, from that interior individual kind of anguish, the anguish of most men. The fundamental theme of my work quite naturally became revolt and the difficulty of relationship with reality. This too, I suppose, is obsession. Anyway life is a difficult activity. If it's not difficult, it's not life. Communication becomes the basic problem of man. So since expressing oneself is central and fundamental, I've found that writing is the best therapy for nervous problems."

Critics could not categorize Moravia's most famous novel, *The Time of Indifference*, when it appeared in 1929 soon after the 22-year-old voracious reader and budding writer emerged from a sanatorium at Cortina d'Ampezzo in the Dolomites after five years of treatment for bone tuberculosis. Five years of solitude that were to condition his entire life! "S*olo col sole*"—alone with the sun—as he described those years dedicated to reading world literature and composing his early

poems. Yet with time that novel proved to be one of the greatest successes of modern Italian literature—even if the author paid for its publication, as was the custom then in Italy—and at the same time created a scandal because it departed from everything sacred in Italian letters.

The Time of Indifference is often compared to Camus' *L'Etranger* and Sartre's *L'Age de la Raison*, which it preceded.

Today, 72 years later, it reads better than most of Hemingway.

Moravia told me that his personal life was total chaos—because of his women I believe—in which the only constant was his literary work. He wrote novels, short stories, articles and essays, film scripts, film critique, travelogues. For years he was co-editor of the magazine *Nuovi Argomenti* and had a column in the Rome weekly, *L'Espresso.* For at least the last decade of his life, Alberto Moravia was the dean of Italian literature—a term he however claimed to detest.

Today, as in 1929, it is impossible to remain indifferent to centennial Alberto Moravia, the forerunner of European existentialist writers. The man of letters and always a man of his times, Moravia has many admirers; also those who admire him less nonetheless recognize his prominent place in Italian letters of the twentieth century and in the world of literature. Whatever the opinion, Moravia the man, the writer and world traveler, is fascinating, enigmatic, courageous and controversial.

THERE IS A MISCONCEPTION that Moravia simply exploits popular themes of sex and wealth. For most Italians his literature is still synonymous with sex. He did write about both, which for him, the artist, are the two fundamental criteria for an interpretation of existence and social reality, the principle measures of a society that rejected the traditional moral standards inherited by his generation. In his over 50 books Moravia zeroes in on the absurdity of the world he lived in. Sex was the symbol of his work.

In his lifetime that spanned most of the century, it was useless to try to scandalize open-minded Moravia the man. Nor was he affected by his notoriety. When in his last years he married his 31-year-old companion of three years, a Spanish woman, Carmen Llera, Rome was titillated by images of the old man and the vamp. Hemingway could have devoted a novel to him. Cartoonists had a field day. But the young-old man was oblivious. "Why not?" he said. "If I don't like little girls, I adore beautiful women." He must have laughed at the cartoon of him and his young wife in bed, both reading important Moravia novels—Carmen naturally has *La Noia* [Boredom] and he, *Gli Indifferenti* [The Age of Indifference].

In his late years in the 1980s the Rome press described a ubiquitous Moravia. Gossip columns reported on a restless Moravia haunting new restaurants, opening

vernissages of important painters, crowning every literary prize ceremony, or off another trip to exotic places like Yemen. His readers could then exclaim, "Ah ha! Moravia's out in the world, engagé in life, still desperately grasping for reality like the characters in his literature."

"It's totally false," Moravia told me. "I have contacts with few people. I'm like Marlene Dietrich when she was crying in her room in the Hotel Excelsior on Via Veneto because no one wanted to be with her that evening. Once after a TV interview in Washington that was seen by 30 million people, I asked a women from the TV crew to dine with me but she declined—she had a boyfriend—and I spent the evening alone. I'm in bed at 10 o'clock nearly every night. Versace or Valentino picks me up for the opening of a fashion show or they want me for the opening of a new discothèque. I accept. I stay three minutes, they take a few photographs, and then send me back home. And I'm in bed by eleven."

In those photographs, however, mundane Moravia is usually in the company of one or other of the beautiful young women of his life, who also frequented his bed. Sex was the metaphor of his personal life as it was of his literature. Sex and literature! For he was also married to two important women writers, Elsa Morante and Dacia Maraini.

Therefore, before moving toward desperation, I have brought Moravia on sex to the forefront, which also was the main subject of one of my interviews with him.

"Sex is the most primitive means of communication," the writer about incommunicability repeated all his life. "Like the woman asked if she preferred to masturbate or make love? 'Make love,' she answered. 'That way you at least get acquainted with someone.' While language tends to degenerate," Moravia said, "sex is not worn out. Like some couples who don't love each other anymore still continue to make love—I think, in order to communicate."

In his essay, "Eroticism In Literature," Moravia, after pointing out that eroticism in modern literature emerged from the liberation from pre-existing taboos and is a reacquired freedom for man, says that the writer *must* write about sex. "If I describe a man who catches syphilis I obviously have to speak of sex. For the writer, sex is an object like any other. It also has a poetic function. If this object is at the center of my narration, I must describe it. Sex as one of man's means of communication should appear in literature. And when it appears in good literature no one is scandalized." For Moravia, however, it was not a matter of sexual freedom. "Sex is only free in art. It is only free in its representation. In life it's difficult for sex to be free. Few people can achieve sexual objectivity. In fact, sex in my literature is seldom erotic, rarely for pleasure. It's for communication, and subordinately, for procreation. It is a metaphor for life. Sex is a social-historical

fact. Love however is outside history. There can be sex without love but hardly sentimental love without sex. Love presupposes sex but sex does not presuppose love. The happy man has both."

THE TIME OF INDIFFERENCE thrust onto the literary scene a different kind of Italian writer: anti-provincial and European in outlook, groping with the problems of his own life and the problems of his age. Until Moravia's time, fiction had never flourished in Italy. Italy's literary reputation was based on its poets from Dante to Leopardi; the first important Italian novel, Manzoni's *The Betrothed*, appeared late, in 1827. Then, under Fascism, style continued to be all-important; observation and critical thought were frowned upon. No wonder that *The Time of Indifference* caused a scandal in that prudish and sterile atmosphere.

Moravia—his real name was Pincherle, born in Rome in 1907, whose father was an architect from Venice—was absorbed early by the theme of alienation and the impossibility of communication. That theme was to emerge years later with the French existentialists, Camus and Sartre. Moravia's Michele was the first existentialist in European literature.

Inevitably his themes soon brought him into conflict with the Fascism of family values and patriotism. He had to escape that too, isolating himself in Paris and London from 1930-1935. "Illness and Fascism," he said, "were the two most important facts of my life."

The characters of *The Time of Indifference* move in a world of a tightly closed circle, unable to communicate or express themselves. As they become aware of themselves and their condition, they become apathetic and incapable of action, more complex and also more insignificant, superfluous like the intellectuals of 19th century Russian literature that the boy Moravia read in the sanatorium. Camus' Meursault and Moravia's Michele are direct relatives: both are indifferent and incapable of a relationship with the world, marked by skepticism, despair, escapism and panic. How modern, how 21st century, compared to Hemingway's dead.

That theme resurfaced as anguish [*angoscia*] constantly in Moravia's work. In *La Noia* [published in English as *The Empty Canvas*] in 1960, it was the painter's relationship with his materials and with his woman friend. In *1934* [1986] it was desperation. Moravia: "Psychiatrists call this defect of our relationships with reality 'de-realization.' It's a sickness. But there are various mediations between us and reality—like sex. I believe we relate to reality with our bodies. One person by making love, another by a life of action like Hemingway, or another by simply speaking.

"Desperation is linked to indifference, boredom, incommunicability, and

anguish. Of course not everybody has it! For there are many varied things in this world. But I have always been desperate. In *1934* I wanted to show the necessity of accepting that desperation. I concluded that although I suffer from anguish, it's better to live with it rather than die. I call that 'stabilization of desperation.' In that book for the first time I wanted to send a message—man is desperate, man must be desperate. Like Kierkegaard said, if man is *not* desperate, he *should* be. But he must live with it, not die. That seems right to me. I'm against suicide. I favor the Stoic idea that one must live with desperation. It's also a Christian thing. A real Christian must be desperate. To accept being desperate is not a compromise. It means to live in desperation. To accept desperation means simply not to kill oneself. It doesn't mean to live in peace. Desperation is a serious matter and requires a certain amount of play-acting as a way to live with desperation. The main thing is not to bother others."

For Moravia to live in desperation means to break through the veil and see reality as it is. Living without illusions is unpleasant, he admits. And that's the difficult aspect for this complex artist: how many people can live without illusions?

"Man needs his illusions. It's difficult to live without them. The writer must not attach importance to his success! Like the man who cannot be illuded that his woman loves him!"

WHILE AS A BOY IN THE SANATORIUM Moravia read assiduously—Dostoevsky, Joyce, Stendhal, the French poets. He said he knew much of Rimbaud's poetry by heart. Italian writers Leopardi, Manzoni and Goldoni had an influence on his precocious development. Later, as a successful writer, he associated with the writers, painters and filmmakers of his age. He knew Norman Mailer and Saul Bellow well and once made a trip to Brazil together with Graham Greene. He related how as a 20-year-old he spent the summer with Bernard Berenson in Florence. A car came for him each day at his pension to take him to Berenson's villa in the hills where he read aloud chapter a day of *The Time of Indifference.*

"The day I finished the last chapter Berenson said, 'A remarkable achievement.'"

European writers after World War II were enamored of the fresh and invigorating American literary voice. For some years, Moravia and other European writers seemed outdated. Moravia, the existential novelist of alienation, seemed rooted in the past. That soon changed when in Europe anti-Americanism became fashionable.

Moravia's critical faculties were soon directed against American writers. He was extremely critical of Hemingway's decadence. Quite naturally their relationship

with women was central. Conceding that at least in his literature Hemingway respected women, Moravia pointed out that the American writer couldn't describe them because he didn't know them.

"His dialogues influenced me at the beginning of my writing career. But not his life. I once spent a month in the same places Hemingway did in Tanzania. If his descriptions of nature are marvelous, he was an insufferable paternalist with Africans. When I read of how he treated Africans I felt only irritation. A real colonialist. Not to speak of animals! He loved dead animals not live ones. Then after he killed one, he examined it closely and exclaimed, 'What a magnificent cadaver!' I call him an aesthete of action. Perhaps he had sexual problems, I don't know. He had a conception of courage based on guts. Life however is not made up of guts, but of other things. His was a Boy Scout conception of life. Like that of Kipling. He was quite decadent. He felt nature deeply but behaved badly with men. He's like Kipling in that he described men well—but not women. Hemingway's only interesting woman is Brett, who is marvelous even if she is a slut. That lack in Hemingway made him an incomplete writer.

"Actually Hemingway is not a novelist but a poet. I translated into Italian his story *The Killers* that I see as a poem, in both style and composition.

"Finally, I would say to those critics who consider me an enemy of Hemingway that he wrote some beautiful books up until the Spanish Civil War. His best are *The Sun Also Rises*, *Farewell To Arms* and *49 Stories. Green Hills Of Africa* is pretty good. After that he only repeated himself."

MORAVIA'S LITERARY MILIEU IS THE BOURGEOISIE. All his life he professed to hate it with a passion—although he was part of it. In his work the proletariat and the intellectuals hovering around the fringes of his bourgeois world are his instruments for dissecting and analyzing that world. The working class yearns for the Eden of the bourgeoisie while the intellectuals like Moravia and his Michele who live within that world are suffering in their alienation. Since there is no escape, their *angoscia* can only grow. On the other hand his Rome proletariat seems artificial. Critics have written that his Rome proletariat is a negative, forced sympathy, originating in Moravia's fierce hatred for the bourgeois class.

In the interviews with me, Moravia explained that he was not class conscious when he wrote *The Time of Indifference.* He himself was of the bourgeoisie. In his 1945 essay *Ricordo degli indifferenti,* he writes: "Art is an interior matter. I wrote that novel because I was inside the bourgeoisie, not outside it." He said that he only became aware of his repugnance for that class after writing the book.

Moravia's bourgeoisie must be understood in moral terms, not economic. It is

a lifestyle. He states quite clearly that it is better to be rich than poor. Moreover, *bourgeoisie* must be understood in European terms. It is not the American Middle Class. The term originated in a century of social revolution in Europe terminating in the Russian Revolution.

Uncertain in his artificial idolization of the proletariat as the natural opponent of the hated bourgeoisie, Moravia gravitated toward Communism, as did most of his liberal generation in Europe. Yet he soon negated the practice of Communism. He wrote that, "A shadow of coercion suffices to cause poetry to dissipate. The Communists will have to conquer the whole world before they can have an art worthy of the name."

"You see," he said that afternoon in his apartment on Rome's Lungotevere, "culture is a very general thing. Some people think that only books record culture, but everything is culture. Art, however, is special in that it is an anti-social activity. Art can never be social since it is the subconscious of society. It must express the unexpressed. All other aspects of society are expressed. Many, like the police and judiciary, are repressive. Art is the only activity that is not repressive since it expresses the subconscious. Art is also distinguished by its non-utility.

"Aesthetics may play no role in itself. However if a society produces beauty then one may say that it is partially successful. Nor do I think that tradition is of particular importance. It is simply a reality, like nature. And must be taken seriously. Ezra Pound felt tradition strongly, but always as a reality—like a vase of flowers. Tradition should not be idolized or become a fetish.

"To close this chapter I would add that the writer is certainly not always an artist. Some are commercial like most films today. The difference between the commercial writer and the artist is fundamental."

BECAUSE OF HIS TREATMENT of the life under Fascism, *The Woman of Rome* [*La Romana*], published 20 years after *The Time of Indifference* is one of Moravia's main novels. Critics of the period considered it the culmination of two decades of work and a clear re-statement of his various themes. Here his interpretation of life is the social representation of society as a whole, not just the bourgeoisie. Yet its characters, too, are victims of Moravian alienation and desperation. To criticism of the death of all his characters at the end of the novel, he simply cited the precedent of Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.

For Moravia, in this novel, it was the bored indifference of the Italian people as a whole that facilitated the birth and 20-year survival of Fascism, the same political indifference that marks Italian society today in the face of a modern form of reactionary extremism.

In the post-war until his death Moravia churned out his novels, forever dealing with his theme of man's relationship with reality—some were successful, some failures. I cite a few with their English titles—*Disobedience, Conjugal Love, The Conformist, Roman Tales, A Ghost At Noon, Two Women, The Empty Canvas, The Fetish, 1934.*

BECAUSE OF MORAVIA'S PREDILECTION for plot and theatrical techniques, film directors discovered his works and several became films. He said that his ambition was "to apply to the novel the principles of the unities of time, place and action because I felt a strong need to exert a strong hold on reality, which continually seemed to escape and melt away."

"My books might seem cinematographic," he said at the time *L'Uomo Che Guarda* [literally 'the man who peeps'] appeared, "but the conversion of book to film is complex." A great lover of the cinema, for years the film critic for *Espresso* Magazine and an intimate friend of Pasolini, Moravia said he felt discomfort when he saw film versions of his books. "The fact is a book is the work of one artist, a film of another. A writer cannot ask a film director to be faithful to his book. He can only ask him to make a good film. No artist can be forced to be faithful. Actually I don't believe a film can be faithful to a book. The aim of the filmmaker is to express himself, not be faithful. As a rule, few great films result from books.

"Literature and cinema have one thing in common: duration. Unlike theater where everything happens in one place and in a couple hours, cinema and literature move in time. But despite this similarity, film images cannot say the same thing as words. Words are ambiguous. When you write the word 'table' you mean this table or many tables. But the film image is of one precise table—the one you see. Then, the novel has the past tense. In the cinema even flashbacks are in the present tense: if you see Caesar passing the Rubicon, he is passing it in that moment. Only words can attempt to express the inexpressible. Words have nuances that cinema images can never have."

DESPITE HIS CLAIM THAT HE WORKS EVERY MORNING from 7 to about one 'o'clock and sees people in the afternoon, the interview about cinema and literature took place in late morning. The telephone rang several times and I had to tell him each time since he was hard of hearing and conversations were shouted. I began to suspect he asked people to call mornings—he liked the interruptions. They were an escape. The doorbell rang and it was difficult for him to rise from the couch. It was a messenger from *Espresso* to pick up his column. "I'm thinking of dropping the column," he said. I remembered he had told me five years earlier he would never write another

novel—"Too much trouble," he said. But he wrote four since. Meanwhile his huge old dog kept muzzling my microphone and Moravia's shouts of "*via*" or "*fuori*"—get away—still today ring out on the old tape. Moravia was getting jumpy. It was almost time to meet his young wife for lunch in a Rome restaurant, the Carmen that people suspected was having an affair with a prominent Lebanese politician.

Besides, he'd made me promise not to make him work too hard.

Gaither Stewart
Rome
January 2001

FIRST MOTHERS:
THE WOMEN WHO SHAPED THE PRESIDENTS
by Bonnie Angelo

William Morrow/HarperCollins
ISBN 0-688-15631-2

Review by Tamara Vishkina

Is there a recipe for raising a future president, necessarily a confident and secure individual? In *First Mothers: The Women Who Shaped the Presidents*, Bonnie Angelo provides some insights into the issue. She recounts the paths of eleven mothers of presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to Bill Clinton, "women blessed with common sense and uncommon wisdom," and gives a composite portrait of a wife/mother/homemaker in midcentury America. Through slightly mythologized short stories the reader meets a host of real people surrounding the would-be presidents in their childhood, observes how "the high and mighty" deal with plain human problems and emotions, and witnesses clashes of culture and tradition.

What is shared by all presidents is their recognition of a happy childhood or at least firm belief in one. Obviously, there is always revisionism and beatification of the presidents' youth, but why do all presidents remember their childhood as idyllic? Mrs. Angelo gives an answer: their mothers. Because of their family matriarchs the future presidents were completely self-confident. Their mothers were pillars of comfort for their families, tutors, and friends who created cheerful and supportive worlds for their sons, gave them inner faith, serenity and security, and implanted beliefs and attitudes. Concentrating on mother-son relationships, Mrs. Angelo proves Ralph Waldo Emerson's words true: Men are what their mothers made them.

All of them were strong, self-assured, and intelligent individuals with diverse backgrounds who invested wit, knowledge, and energy in their children under the

careful guard of unconditional love. These women also shared one more attribute: selfless love not expressed in words.

A study has indicated that a father's main concern for his sons is the choice of career, while mothers envision a future with no limits. In their view their sons are destined to excel. As Mrs. Angelo writes, "right or wrong, from her viewpoint you [the child] are always right."

Some of the future presidents had a hard time defining their identity as they grew up. Sara Roosevelt's "mother knows best" principle made FDR strive for separation from his mother's possessive love. Another matriarch, Rose Kennedy, exercised a powerful attachment to her sons. But Martha Truman, a strong woman, too, already knew how to let go of ties of affection between the mother and the son.

These mothers encouraged their sons to stretch their horizons and ambitions, tend to spirit and mind, foster an iron will, and strive for self-improvement. They were role models and were able to turn even volunteer service into the equivalent of a career, as Dorothy Ford did. They fostered an adventurous spirit in their children, much like Dorothy Bush did. They were the directors and producers of their son's lives, as Nelle Reagan was for her child. They instilled into their sons the ability to feel other people's concerns, as Virginia Clinton did. They were bent on stressing accomplishments, as Lillian Carter was, the first presidential mother to have a career outside the home—at sixty-eight she joined the Peace Corps and went to India. Their vanity, apparent in Ida Eisenhower, was a strategy for their children. Competitiveness was bred into families, and the future presidents were nurtured by the drive to win. Due to their manipulativeness, Mrs. Angelo deducts, the young boys' political skills might be attributed to their need to win their mothers' approval, as it was in case of Rebekah Johnson.

As Mrs. Angelo points out, all young presidents shared an interest in history. The notion of going into politics appeared to them quite naturally as a noble pursuit. Then, as mature men, they lived it and made it.

The book may be seen as a combined family diary that reflects complex human relations in which the conflict of fathers and sons is reinterpreted as the conflict of daughters-in-law and mothers. Mothers were dominant over sons because of emotionally or physically distant fathers. Sometimes mothers were the balance between severe father and resentful sons. Most of the mothers had a powerful attachment to their fathers, and the link of influence stretched from grandfather to mother to son. Special mother-son bonds were developed and reinforced by the striking fact that six of the eleven presidential mothers gave their special sons their family name—thus they were singled out from the other children.

The author is a shrewd observer who sees historical events through the eyes of

American families from all levels of the social ladder; these women's lives were entwined with the story of America at the end of nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, an era of enormous changes. She presents a comparative analysis of presidential families in which she tries to define who was in charge of these men's success—genes, the environment, or God's will.

Mrs. Angelo's praise of "values set in cement" and undeviating principles evokes an involuntary protest when she slips into an edifying and didactic tone. At times the narrative becomes a second-hand story painted in black-and-white and devoid of its original vivacity; the chapter about George Bush is a bit too idealized and Christmas-y, as opposed to the chapter devoted to Bill Clinton, which is too preachy in its moralistic musing.

In *First Mothers*, Mrs. Angelo has presented a succession of presidential mothers' portraits and an analysis of rapidly changing family dynamics. The author laments that the old good times when families had a sense of where they came from and small towns provided a secure community are gone. Now, when the boundaries between settlements dissolve or are swallowed by spreading city conglomerates, we are challenged to commence a new quest for our sense of identity.

A DENSITY OF SOULS

by Christopher Rice

Talk Miramax Books/ Hyperion
0-7858-6646-2

Review by Elizabeth Routen

I*t was a dark and stormy night.* Okay, not really.

But Christopher Rice's poignant debut novel, *A Density of Souls*, does begin with the, well, ominous line: "Beneath a sky thickening with summer thunderheads…" and continues in sometimes flat and sometimes magnificent prose to tell the story of Louisiana teenagers caught in a web of fraternal lust, familial love, and mindless jealousy.

Against a backdrop slathered in the history and tradition of New Orleans, four young people are forced to come to terms with the darker aspects of human nature. Meredith, a typically confused young woman searching for a place to belong, chooses to sacrifice her body to bulimia in order to join the "in-crowd." Finding no fulfillment in popularity and abused by her football-player boyfriend, Greg, Meredith spirals into the clutch of drunken binges that eventually put her close to death.

But death, a routine escape for young novelists, is used and not abused in *A Density of Souls*. Suffice to say a tragic fate does meet Greg, but only after his younger brother is crushed beneath the wheels of a truck. If Greg's fortune is uncommon, suicide in such a situation is at least understandable. Less reasonable is Greg's best friend's reaction to the tragedy. Brandon joins a hate group which will play an important role in the development of the final third of the novel.

Yet Mr. Rice does not permit us the painless luxury of such an indifferent tale. Instead, *A Density of Souls* is a more complex look at sexual awakening with an added dynamic: the final, and most important, character in Mr. Rice's quartet is a young man struggling with his homosexuality. Mr. Rice's portrait of Jordan is unflinching, sometimes painful in its honesty. Here is the typical outcast, here is

the typical scattering of childhood playmates, here is the typical sacrifice of simple pleasures—and at what cost? Jordan lives in the shadow of his dead father, a quasi-accomplished poet perhaps most revered by his wife. But the reverence is laced with dread and Jordan eventually must assure his mother he will not take his own life, as his father did. The pair lives in a house where the memory of a dead man keeps company in an untouched study, surrounded by drafts of his work. It is a strange image, and the reader senses it is true to life. What hurt compelled Mr. Rice to paint an all too accurate picture of perpetual grief?

Thus home, a dark place as stagnant as any bayou, is another challenge to Jordan's attempts to break free of his appointed role. His mother accepts his sexuality, as does Meredith, though she will not help him face disapproving elements in their community. But Greg and Brandon, who discovered early in their days as playmates that sex games involving Jordan were surprisingly pleasing, lash out as a result of conflicting emotions. Greg turns into the aforementioned abusive jock, while Brandon allows a depression inspired by the dispatch of his sidekick and, one senses, protector, to tip him over an emotional ledge.

This is not the whole story of *A Density of Souls*, though it is enough to say that most of the characters get their just desserts, including a reconciliation between Jordan and Meredith. What is most important is the honesty with which Mr. Rice pushes his characters into peril and hatemongering. It is too close to the actuality of every child's experience to be strictly fiction. But doesn't the best fiction serve to illuminate the dark corners of everyday life? A writer of strong character and unceasing devotion to his craft is required to so accurately tell such a story, and at that Mr. Rice is an unqualified success.

Yet there are problems with his rendition, not the least of which is a deus ex machina storm that allows several characters to right somewhat manufactured situations. It's the sort of ambivalent ending he won't be allowed to get away with in subsequent attempts, and is a disconcerting departure from the realism of the rest of the work. Troublesome, though understandable, is an ignorance of the differences time wrests between the young and old. For better or worse, that is a fault which will be corrected by the passage of time. But let's not go into the all-too-cute final page, which leaves Jordan in the arms of a male lover whom his mother knows to be his half-brother. This is a regretful lapse in good judgement which precludes praise for an otherwise perfect maturity.

More serious than these typical first-effort errors is a devotion on the part of Mr. Rice's publisher to accentuating his relation to another, more revered, Rice. Half of the book jacket's spare biography is consumed with making sure the unknowing buyer makes the connection with Anne Rice, the author's mother and the creator of

such horror tales as *Interview with the Vampire.* Though it is clear that this book stands on its own merits, everything from the book design to the author's website is influenced by the publisher's hopes of capitalizing upon Ms. Rice's fame. The loser in all of this is Mr. Rice, whose wholehearted novel's authority is undermined by inevitable questions of authenticity. Is Christopher Rice another Jeff Shaara, destined to write in his parent's shadow?

For his sake, the reader hopes Mr. Rice is able to overcome this handicap in disguise. *A Density of Souls* is a challenging first work which highlights the best aspects of a promising new author's skill. As a coming-of-age tale it is not up there with *Portrait of the Artist* or the like. But Mr. Rice makes clear that he has the talent to go far—if only his parsimonious cohorts will allow him room to breathe.

THE GOLDEN NOTEBOOK

by Doris Lessing

Harper Perennial
ISBN 0-06-684-85075-3

Review by Christina Gosnell

How many novels can be said to have an impact on readers almost 40 years after their publication? Doris Lessing's *The Golden Notebook* is one of them; her words have resonated through the years and continue to illuminate and enlighten the lives of men and women all over the world. The words which comprise *The Golden Notebook* have breath even after the book is closed. The human issues are clear; the life of Lessing's main character, told in quiet prose through the four notebooks, offers an understanding of issues such as political repression, sexual abuse, single parenthood, writer's block, and the women's movement. These problems, presented with a quiet virility, give strength to readers even today.

"Knowing was an *illumination.* During the last few weeks of craziness and timelessness I've had those moments of *knowing* one after the other, yet there is no way of putting this sort of knowledge into words. Yet, these moments have been so powerful, like the rapid illuminations of a dream that remain with one during waking, that what I have learned will be part of how I experience life until I die."

It's lines like this that give substance and meaning to the life-driven chaos felt by all people at some time in their lives. Anna Wulf, the protagonist in the story, is a writer, a single mother—and more than she had imagined. She uncovers and dissects the pages of notebooks that sit side-by-side on a simple desk, a quiet retreat in a dark room in her flat. She lives alone with her young daughter, occasionally renting out a room; this is the way to fill some of the empty space around her and to keep the empty walls of her home from closing in on her. It's the warm pitter-patter of feet up above that keep her from feeling the loneliness she has denied for most of her life.

Writer's block has taken her over and choked the love for writing and searching she once had. Her first novel, an autobiographical story about a group of Communists in colonial Africa, was immensely successful. Though, as she says, "It's almost as if someone else wrote it…"

Now, the four notebooks contain the moments of Anna's life. Each of the colored books presents a facet of her existence. A part of her self is contained within their pages. The black notebook contains her experiences in Africa; red her thoughts on the current politics in England. The yellow notebook is for her fictionalized version of herself and a blue notebook is her diary, her release, her intimate message to the world.

Anna, the writer, the single woman, the political activist, struggles to find a way to integrate her multiple selves, a way to make her life seem less painful and to pick up the broken pieces that surround her. She's motivated to keep these four notebooks out of "fear of chaos, formlessness—of breakdown." Although framed by a conventional novel called *Free Women*, the point of the novel, according to Lessing, is the "relation of its parts to each other."

By separating the parts of her life, Anna carefully probes each layer of her consciousness and is eventually able to bring it all together in one notebook, *The Golden Notebook*. She unifies her existence and identity into one. By going over her experiences, her responses to life, she eventually comes to terms with her growing disillusionment, her self-induced sexual betrayal, and her feelings of social and emotional rejection.

In 640 pages of well-written prose, Doris Lessing tries to come to terms with all that she has or hasn't created in life. She's up against the same choices many of us have to make: deciding what's important in her life and what isn't. The main character, Anna, is in the midst of a breakdown and a breakthrough which are evident through the plot elements presented in each notebook.

Ms. Lessing's novel broke the mold in 1962 when it was first published. Even now, it's hard to imagine another piece of work that fuses sex, politics, and emotional breakdown so completely and with such honesty and frankness. What is most astonishing and intriguing about this novel is how it takes the reader through the essence of a true emotional breakdown. The very form of this novel is what provides such an intimate glimpse of something to which almost any reader can relate at some point in this novel. And it isn't even recognizably a novel at all. Instead, the reader is shown fragments, memories, emotions, and opinions thrown together—but the relationship they all eventually form together is what the reader is forced to figure out and learn from.

Even with the nontraditional form that Ms. Lessing chose, the novel is not

difficult to understand or follow. The author finds a quiet beauty in the simple language. It's not hard for the reader to find him- or herself settled neatly in the midst of Anna's troubles. Ms. Lessing exposes her character in such a way that's it's much like looking through a pane of glass at a character and her plight for emotional balance.

When she becomes aware that these four books fail to capture her whole self, Anna attempts to convey the totality of her experience in a new (golden) notebook. Bewilderingly, the reader now discovers that he or she has been reading this novel all along—a glimpse of what Ms. Lessing presented at the beginning, *Free Women*. This new novel, or rather the one that has been hidden beneath it all, is a realistic one in which Anna Wulf appears as a relatively sane, whole human being. *Free Women* forces the reader to abandon their preconceptions. Though almost forty years old, this book is contemporary in its concerns.

Doris Lessing wrote once that she considered this novel something of a failure because it only names the issues, exploring briefly, but not solving. But *The Golden Notebook*, if read carefully, soulfully, and with introspection, will force the reader to struggle right along with Ms. Lessing's Anna Wulf in search of the real self. If you let it, this book will change you.

DREAM STUFF

by David Malouf

Schocken Books, 2000
ISBN: 0-375-42053-3

Review by Clarissa Aykroyd

David Malouf, a novelist, short story writer, and poet, sets most of his work in his native Australia. His new collection of short stories, *Dream Stuff*, is no exception. The beauty of Mr. Malouf's fascination with Australia is in his ability to write stories in which the setting is at least as important as character and plot. Whether he is writing about the experience of a child, a soldier, or a prostitute, the stories in Dream Stuff all convey the heat, the darkness, and the blinding light of the island continent.

This is particularly true in "Jacko's Reach," one of the most unusual stories in the collection. "Jacko's Reach" is more like a non-fiction article written with a remarkable depth of emotion than a piece of fiction. It is about the effect that a four-acre area of undeveloped, wooded land has upon several generations of the town which it belongs to—a town which has decided to build a shopping center over the area. Early in the story, Mr. Malouf describes the Reach as "a point of re-entry to memories they [the town's citizens] have no more use for," and then goes on to show why it can be described in this way. Through tales of murder and early sexual experiences in Jacko's Reach, Mr. Malouf creates a chilling sense of primeval mystery, climaxing with the words: "So it will be gone and it won't be. Like everything else. Under. Where its darkness will never quite be dispelled, however many mushroom-lights they install in the parking lot."

Other stories in the collection generally have a more conventional structure. Mr. Malouf repeatedly shows his fondness for the moment of epiphany, but always in a convincing and moving manner. In "At Schindler's," a story about a boy, his mother, and her American lover, the moment of realization is delayed, but the

reader is always aware that it must be coming. The boy, Jack, has been resisting the knowledge that his father will not return from the war. He finally accepts that knowledge in a lightning-illumined nighttime scene with some of the elements of a ghost story. But rather than ending the story at that point, Mr. Malouf concludes with a peaceful morning scene, rounding out the narrative in a satisfying way.

The stories contain many descriptions which are so perfectly written that they stay in the mind even after the plot may have been forgotten. In "Lone Pine," a man camping in the outback with his wife comes face to face with a murderer: "In all that emptiness, with not a house for a hundred miles in any direction and in the dead of night, they had come at the same moment to opposite sides of the caravan door." It is hard to imagine how the vastness of Australia and the danger of the moment could have been conveyed more effectively. "Great Day," about a family reunion, includes several powerful images of light and fire: a fire which destroys the town's treasured museum, a dying bonfire on the beach, and finally: "the heat…of a new day coming, the light that fills the world."

Mr. Malouf conveys some important ideas without a hint of didacticism: the possibility of finding real love in "Sally's Story," the pain caused by the conflict between religious beliefs and the natural love amongst family members in "Closer," and the power of memory, a recurring theme in his stories. Above all, he is an exquisite prose artist who is always a pleasure to read. If his works ever cause the reader pain, it is because of their beauty and the sometimes difficult truths that they contain.

WHAT PRICE FAME?

by Tyler Cowen

Harvard University Press, 2000
ISBN: 0674001559

Review by Charles Stampul

What would motivate a person to launch a destructive computer virus, commit a mass murder, receive counseling on national television, or show video of highly personal activities over the Internet? The answer, of course, is fame. In the quest to get noticed and stand out from the crowd people compromise taste, personal integrity and morality.

But like the profit motive, the desire to gain acclaim has driven people to create and accomplish great things, not just in the realms of art, literature, music, and athletics, but also in the fields of science and technology. The lure of fame has led to the erosion of cultural institutions and the separation of fame and merit, but only because the mass of people ceased to value scientific, technological, and artistic accomplishments.

This is a critical point missed by Tyler Cowen in *What Price Fame?* An economist at George Mason University, Mr. Cowen blames the free market system for the deterioration of cultural institutions and the separation of fame and merit. "The modern world," he writes, "generates fame without requiring consensus on which performers are most meritorious. The decentralization of our market economy allows production—including the production of fame—to proceed without an overall plan. As markets distribute fame more widely and more diversely, most fame rewards will stand apart not only from merit but from any particular standard."

In Mr. Cowen's judgment, markets should correct, or at least not exacerbate the lack of individual tastes, values, and judgment responsible for the separation of fame and merit. The market, however, should not be expected to

give people an appreciation for art, and it should not be expected to compensate for people's propensity to adopt the likes and dislikes of the crowd. The role of the market is to satisfy desires, not parent against them.

Mr. Cowen believes that the separation of fame and merit is the price we pay for modern democracy. This belief is based on a deterministic view that the mass of people will always have poor and undeveloped tastes. He overlooks the very real possibility that moral and aesthetic values could improve. The way moral and aesthetic standards could improve is through the abolition of compulsory government schooling.

In the United States and most other industrialized nations, the state has a virtual monopoly on education at the grammar and high school levels and a stranglehold on education at the university level. Insulated from the competitive process, the state provides a substandard level of education. People have blamed the state's education monopoly for high levels of scientific illiteracy and poor English composition skills, but have largely dismissed its role in driving down moral and aesthetic standards.

In state run compulsory schools children are taught to reject objective standards. For instance, children are taught that the fantastic paintings, drawings and sculptures of Leonardo da Vinci are no better or no worthier of discussion than the "pop art" of Andy Warhol. This attitude toward art extends to literature, music, athletics, architecture, etc.

Many people blame the media for the public's poor tastes. The media, however, has little influence on individuals who think independently. Its influence is primarily on those susceptible to psychological conditioning and indoctrination—those educated in government controlled schools. Since the state takes on the role of educating and cultivating the minds of children, it must accept the responsibility for the decline in moral and aesthetic standards, just as it must accept the responsibility for high levels of scientific illiteracy and poor English composition skills. Until or unless people are free of compulsory government schooling for a long period of time, we cannot know how great of a capacity the average person has to identify, appreciate and reward musical, literary, artistic, scientific and business accomplishments.

But regardless of whether putting an end to compulsory government schooling would improve our culture and polity, efforts to raise moral and aesthetic standards through subsides and tax deductions are not morally justified. Groups and collectives do not have the right to use public money to advance the careers of individuals they think are worthy of acclaim. Furthermore, government fine tunings of the fame market, as Mr. Cowen

correctly points out, are unlikely to succeed. So for now, the separation of fame and merit is the price we pay, not for democracy, or for capitalism, but for the doctrine of cultural relativism and the institution responsible for its inculcation.

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