

"The Track Meet," the stories Atlas has chosen illustrate Schwartz's achievement as voice and interpreter of the fate of Jewish immigrants and their children in the New World. Unfortunately, Schwartz's understanding of that fate is not clearly indicated by Atlas, who restricts himself to an appreciation of the author's close observation and skillful representation.

The lives of the immigrants were determined essentially, according to Schwartz, by the "deity America"—by the false, inevitably destructive hope of escape from the entanglements, frustrations, and failures of the past; by the presumption that happiness is a right and tremendous success not far away. Schwartz saw the immigrants blindly embracing the bitch-goddess Success—the vulgarized American Dream—and begetting endless miseries. There is no escape from the past, Schwartz declares time and again. The reality of American life is exile—deracination and alienation.

At least two stories in the collection are masterpieces. "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" is primarily a complex demonstration of the immortality of the past. The narrator of this story dreams that he is in a theater viewing his parents' excursion to Coney Island on the day of his father's marriage proposal. He is increasingly distressed and at last loudly protests, "Don't do it! It's not too late to change your mind, both of you. Nothing good will come of it, only remorse, hatred, scandal, and two children whose characters are monstrous" (p. 6). "The narrator's outcry," Howe suggests, "is not so much a protest against mistakes as a protest against life itself, inconceivable without mistakes" (pp. viii-ix). It may be argued that the narrator protests against neither "mistakes" nor "life itself," but rather, against frightful irresponsibility. His parents' marriage is contracted not in Heaven, but in Coney Island—the fantastic amusement park of the American Dream.

In "The Track Meet," Schwartz employs again the device of the dream and an "escape" setting (a sporting event). His principal aim is to illustrate the crisis of modern Western man, who, having lost the governance of traditional institutions, is condemned to a chaotic and devastating "scrimmage of appetite" or to anguished, futile protest. The history of modern man, in Schwartz's view, is the history of his fall from the biblical order into a hell of egoistic

ambition. God and his hosts of ideals have been deposed; the new reigning deity is "Mother," whose throne is the id, whose wisdom is science and cynicism, and whose will is success—at whatever cost.

Schwartz was a child of fantastic expectations, an American dreamer who, like many of his characters, came in the end to desolation: No matter how one judges his vision of the modern condition, one must respect the courage and intelligence with which he struggled to understand the modern ethos of egoistic ambition.

Theodore Hall

## KATE STIMPSON

### *Class Notes*

N.Y.: Times Books, 1979. Pp. 225.  
\$8.95.

Kate Stimpson, literary critic, feminist scholar, teacher, and editor, has written a witty first novel about growing up in Washington state in the 1950's. *Class Notes* carefully narrates the adventures of Harriet Springer, the convincingly vulnerable innocent, would-be intellectual, middle-class daughter of Big George and Eleanor. Harriet, sensitive but inept, goes through a series of cruel rites of passage—home, school, and life in New York. The incidents of rejection, embarrassment, and insult, are often sharply drawn in brief dialogues and scenes. Harriet acts and is acted upon swiftly, in situations from the age of sweaters, pleated skirts, saddle shoes, and preoccupation with marriage.

*Class Notes*, although it centers on Harriet's lesbianism, is not a novel of erotic sexual exploration, like the work of Rita Mae Brown, nor is it Utopian, like the work of Marge Piercy. Instead, it's about America and American cultural attitudes, a book about who we are and where we are. Harriet's particular experiences, as a large "handsome" girl who admired Elizabeth Taylor, are redolent of the experiences of an entire generation of women who encountered stereotypes that limited and bewildered them.

It is not long before Harriet is questioning the standards of Elizabeth Taylor. If she cheats on her DAR State Good Citizen exam, she confesses to an aged suffragette to ease her conscience. Her mother's ideal of being well groomed as well as smart does not automatically produce an invitation to the Junior Prom. Harriet notices that the red-baiter also offers her conventional sexual wisdom. At her student government national convention, she votes for an amendment to a resolution to promote Negro equality and racial justice that removes the words "Negro" and "racial," wondering if she is doing the right thing. The CIA interviewer at Harwyn College wants one or two of the "best girls"; Harriet leaves the meeting early. Through her work in reform politics in New York, she meets her first homosexual friends, yet the candidate Harriet campaigns for subjects her to an intense sexual humiliation.

Marriage pursues Harriet. When she goes to have some chin hairs removed before starting college, Harriet is advised to get her "M.R.S." degree. At college, her friend warns her "you've got to live with men in this world" (p. 97). Her mother and grandmother feel education will solve the problems of "a girl like her"—who might not find a man to support her. Even the college career office director assures Harriet that "a Harwyn education is a wonderful background for an enduring marriage" (p. 144). Part of Harriet's cultural education comes from seeing the effect of class, religion, and geography on her friends' decisions. Darlene, her friend from high school, stays home in Northville and marries a local boy. When Harriet returns for summer vacations, Darlene is already a mother with a drunken husband. Amarillo, rich and Jewish, from Texas, backs into marriage at college graduation "because my father wants me to" (p. 148). Her friends' parents fare no better for being in a different generation. Sloan Trouver's mother is an alcoholic, her father is a bully; Marcia Gold's father can't have sex with her mother unless he ties her up with scarves. Even Harriet's own Uncle Charles may have abandoned a woman who was pregnant by him.

Beyond her class identity, her naiveté, shame, and sensual isolation, Harriet is often surprised at her own resiliency. She can recover from rejections by women just as she has recovered from rejections by men. This is a novel that comments perceptively on lesbian relationships, tracing

Harriet's emotional evolution through the women with whom she becomes intimate. Harriet makes many choices, lesbian choices among them. But *Class Notes* doesn't narrow itself to being "lesbian literature"; it is an absorbing and carefully crafted novel. The author's mastery of irony keeps Harriet's emotional roller-coaster into young adulthood in perspective. Although the sections at home and at school are full of numerous telling details, the last section of the novel, seen less clearly, is the most daring. In her life after college, Harriet's strengths, her still unused potential, are all the more poignant, as she mediates between her ideals and the demands of experience.

Elizabeth Fifer

ROSS C. MURFIN  
*Swinburne, Hardy, Lawrence, and the Burden of Belief*  
 Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978. Pp. 238.

In this scholarly and perceptive study, Ross Murfin convincingly argues that a reaction against Romanticism largely determined the outlook of Swinburne, who in turn had a profound effect on Hardy and on Lawrence. Very little attention has been accorded Swinburne by modern critics, and Murfin's book does much to restore a proper perspective, not only by ably demonstrating that Swinburne was a major poetic voice, but also by showing how significant he is in the mainstream of literary history.

Swinburne in his earlier poetry derided romantic love, denied the concept that the universe was orderly and life was part of a Divine plan, and that through the spirit man could transcend the mundane and commonplace. Murfin sees the masochism and sadism which are so much in evidence as part of the savage horror of this nihilistic philosophy. This explanation certainly has some validity, but one is left with the uneasy feeling that Murfin is glossing over Swinburne's sexual aberrations which are