

may have been a "colossus of chaos" but who nevertheless managed to hold together the Federal Writers' Project, and Edwin P. Banta, a 70-year-old member of the New York Writers' Project, who, at a party in his honor, persuaded 106 fellow workers to sign a copy of Earl Browder's *The People's Front*, and then turned the book over to the Dies Committee. And, inevitably, there is Martin Dies and his committee. Determined as that body was to discredit Roosevelt and the entire New Deal, the WPA became one of its pet targets; the project, as committee member J. Parnell Thomas loudly announced, was a "hotbed of Communists," another "link in the vast and unparalleled New Deal propaganda machine." Mangione's chapter on Dies and the committee's attack on the WPA ("Congress Sees Red") is one of the best sections in *The Dream and the Deal* and will serve as a corrective to Robert Vaughn's really inadequate study of show business blacklisting, *Only Victims*.

Despite its many virtues, however, *The Dream and the Deal* is a troublesome book. The problem, I think, lies in Mangione's approach to his subject. As national coordinator of the Federal Writers' Project, Mangione might have given us a personal memoir of his experiences. Or he might have written a scholarly history of the project. Instead, in an attempt to recapture "the atmosphere and drama of the project experience," he decided to rely heavily upon interviews and correspondence with former participants in that experience. The disadvantage of such an approach—of relying so extensively upon the impressions and information of people some thirty years after the fact—is that the reliability of such information inevitably comes into question. Even recollected in tranquillity, memory frequently is shaped by the attitudes one wishes to establish for the future. (And who speaks, in such cases as this, for those who no longer are able to extol their own causes?) What Mangione has given us in *The Dream and the Deal* is essentially an informal history of the Writers' Project; it is very readable, but it is also impressionistic.

As is almost unavoidable in a study of this scope, *The Dream and the Deal* has its share of inconsequential errors. More serious, however, is Mangione's penchant for making unsupported statements. Kenneth Fearing, for example, is said to have been "closely identified with the Stalinist faction." There's no evidence to support such an allegation. (For an interesting picture of Fearing during the early 1930s, see Albert Halper's novel, *Union Square*.) In this instance, as in many others, one is

forced to wonder about the reliability of Mangione's sources.

One also comes to question, after the first few pages, the value of all the anecdotes. Is it important to learn that when John Cheever moved to Washington he found the city's most attractive feature to be the large number of available girls, and that he "availed himself of some of them"? Or that Nelson Algren "seldom wasted time but now and then would openly flirt with the young typists in the secretarial pool"? These tales no doubt are part of Mangione's attempt to breathe life into the saga of the Federal Writers' Project, but their presence in the volume is of dubious value.

The Dream and the Deal, then, is not the definitive study of the Writers' Project, as some reviewers have claimed; Mangione's reliance upon hearsay and

recollection make such an assessment impossible. But it is a good beginning, and a very necessary one. To be sure, Mangione's book won't resolve the issue of federal subsidy of the arts; but then, for at least four more years that does not seem likely to become a very practical issue. Still, although the Federal Writers' Project did not produce any outstanding works of creative literature, and although Archibald MacLeish may have been correct when he told the WPA administrators that "What you people did in WPA was completely hypocritical. . . . You kept telling yourself you were actually giving people a job, but you were really more interested in your program," the reply of Florence Kerr strikes one as being most to the point. "You must admit," she told MacLeish, "it was one of the higher forms of hypocrisy." □

A Dusty Answer for Spiro

THE EFFETE CONSPIRACY: And Other Crimes by the Press. By Ben H. Bagdikian. Harper & Row. 159 pp. \$6.95.

ROBERT K. LANDERS

Mr. Landers is a newspaper editor and reporter. He lives in New Jersey.

It is depressing to contemplate how poor are all but a few of the daily newspapers in this country. It is even more depressing to contemplate how wanting are those exceptional few. In this collection of essays, Mr. Bagdikian chooses to concentrate on the low estate of the majority of newspapers and notice only the relative stature of the few. Ostensibly, his purpose is to counter Spiro Agnew's complaints about the liberal bias of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* by reminding us of the conservative bias of the overwhelming majority of the daily papers.

Now this is a reminder at once unnecessary and irrelevant. To whom capable of recognizing its truth can that truth have been hitherto obscure? And are the alleged crimes of two defendants to be excused by the crimes of others? Agnew, then, seems to be little more than a decorative ribbon tied around the package. And indeed, only two of the fifteen essays collected (all but three of them originally published in *The Columbia Journalism Review*, the earliest in 1962) were composed after Agnew attained his current eminence.

Six of Mr. Bagdikian's essays deplore the dismal quality of most newspapers;

seven describe the various relationships of Presidents Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon with the press; one draws the "lessons" from the Pentagon Papers case; and one demurs at the "gentle suppression" of news about Nazis in Washington, D.C., by that city's newspapers.

According to Mr. Bagdikian, "A few [American daily newspapers] are excellent, most are mediocre, and many are wretched." The last two denominations, at least, are unlikely to excite much disagreement. And Mr. Bagdikian, in fact, has little to say about the mediocre and the wretched that has not been said, *mutatis mutandis*, before, most notably and rather more incisively by the late A. J. Liebling.

Bagdikian: "The newspaper is a community educational institution run for profit. The owner's relationship to the news he prints is something like a university trustee's relationship to reading material selected for courses. . . . Leadership and policy control on newspapers need to be made more responsive to the society at large, not as a mirror image of the body politic, but sensitive to social and economic reality as a good university is to learning."

Liebling: "The function of the press in society is to inform, but its role is to make money. . . . I think that a good newspaper is as truly an educational institution as a college, so I don't see why it should have to stake its survival on attracting advertisers of ball-point pens and tickets to Hollywood peep shows.

... When I put together *The Wayward Pressman* . . . I dedicated it, 'To the Foundation of a School for Publishers, failing which, no School of Journalism can have much meaning.' Nobody has responded to that appeal, either."

Bagdikian: "There is almost nothing a community can do about a local paper that fails in its primary duty. Starting a new metropolitan competitor is too much like a man disillusioned with his automobile trying to start a new General Motors. . . . Nor is there any effective way he can reach owners who choose to remain unresponsive."

Liebling: "Freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one."

One notes that Bagdikian makes no mention of Liebling in his book, even as, if memory serves, he made no mention of Michael Harrington in his first book discovering poverty. Rather like a newspaper which palms off as its own a story which first appeared elsewhere.

The story is not entirely the same, however. Bagdikian departs from Liebling in his readiness to imagine that there are a few truly "excellent" newspapers, pre-eminently, he implies in a 1971 essay republished here, *The Post* and *The Times*. "There are about 1,750 daily papers in the country, of which the two most powerful in national policy are *The Post* and *The Times*," he writes. "They are justifiably singled out for special attention. Their influence is disproportionate partly because they happen to be delivered to important people in the Capitol every morning. But that isn't the only reason. With all their faults, they are better than other papers in their selection of news, completeness of reporting and knowledge of national social and economic developments."

Bagdikian, it is evident from one of his essays, assumes that the reporting of foreign news by *The Times* and *The Post* is authoritative, an astonishing assumption. George Lichtheim wrote, ". . . One day is pretty much like the next, so far as the handling of foreign news by *The Times* is concerned. The overall impression—a compound of ignorance, provincialism, and plain incompetence—remains the same year after year." The "excellence" of *The Post* and *The Times* is a fantasy possible to maintain only by a suspension of the standards otherwise so rigorously applied.

The case of the Pentagon Papers—which Papers, according to the *Post* reporter Sanford J. Ungar, Bagdikian himself secured for *The Post*—leads him to declaim, "For a newspaper to know something to be accurate and important and not to trust the public with

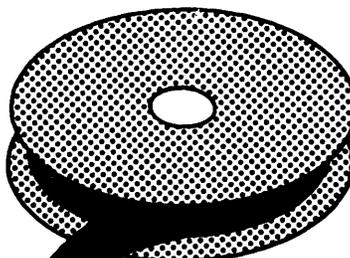
it is arrogant. To withhold the truth from the public is to hold the public in contempt." He does not mention that, as Ungar relates, *The Post*, so as not to offend the Chief Justice prior to the Supreme Court decision in the case, killed a story about the jurist greeting two *Post* reporters at his door with a long-barreled gun. Bagdikian also does not remark the smug and slanted coverage of the case by *The Times*—how, for instance, it buried deep within its pages the news of Sidney Zion's identification of Daniel Ellsberg as the source of the Papers.

Bagdikian, in another essay, is rightly outraged by the intrusion of propaganda from foreign governments into the news columns of various papers, but he manages to be far less disturbed by the intrusion of propaganda from our government into the news columns of, among other papers, the "excellent" ones. For he tells us that the President "will often use the press for his own and the national purpose"; that the press

needs some "official guidance"; and that "The backgrounder is too useful—to both sides—to abandon."

Bagdikian tells us that "Trying to be a first-rate reporter on the average American newspaper is like trying to play Bach's *Saint Matthew Passion* on a ukelele: the instrument is too crude for the work, for the audience and for the performer." But is it so vastly different on the "excellent" papers? David Halberstam once wrote: "Charlotte (Curtis) and I talked rather endlessly about the future: she kept telling me that newspaper writing was the only way to write and I kept insisting that if you stay with it you hit a point of no return, your talent levels out and eventually diminishes, and that you retire without even knowing it. I kept telling her that *The Times* simply is not in a position to let me write what I want to write. . . ."

The only defect in *The Post* or *The Times* which Bagdikian evidently thought worthy of mention in his book is *The*



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Post's "gentle suppression" of news about Nazis; a gentle criticism he is careful to surround with praise for the social conscience of the suppressors. He has not always been so blind: In a 1967 essay in *The Columbia Journalism Review*—which, significantly, is not included in this book—he wrote that *The Post* was "the most irritating [newspaper] in the country," that "Too many *Post* news stories are flawed by policy," that *The Post* was less "reliable," less well edited "by far" than the *Washington Star*. Two years after that essay appeared, Bagdikian was hired by *The Post* as national editor and assistant managing editor, and he subsequently became the paper's media critic. In 1970, he told *The Wall Street Journal* that "he hasn't solved the problems he wrote about . . . and he admits the news judgment still leaves something to

be desired." Not long after the publication of *The Effete Conspiracy* last summer, Bagdikian quit *The Post*, complaining, "There's a feeling here that I should be loyal to the management." He told *Time* that *The Post* was still "not yet a great paper," but that *The Times* was.

Bagdikian's inattention, in *The Effete Conspiracy*, to the flaws of the "great" and "excellent" newspapers may, then, have sprung less from simple complacency than from a desire to preserve his imagined influence as a reformer of newspapers. One hopes that Bagdikian will awaken from his sleep and strive to write the book suggested by the photograph on the dust jacket of this one. The photograph shows a folded and rolled copy of *The New York Times*, its pages pierced by a critic's well-aimed arrow. □

estingly on the page; or Sarah Fabio's "Hoodoo" and "standard" versions of her poem "Of Puddles, Worms, Slimy Things," accompanied by a self-conscious "explanation" cast in a black vernacular that sounds more chic in her hands than natural; or even in Clarence Major's poems, in which he parades his rejection of conventional punctuation.

But the merits of this collection outweigh its weaknesses. Three-quarters of the material is eminently worth reading, and we should be grateful to Mr. Reed for making available to us some very good things that might never have found a platform. Against the self-conscious prose of Claude Brown is set the clean, understated writing of John A. Williams, who gives us a dry and unemotional report of the racism of white tourists on the black-populated and black-governed island of Grenada (one group of them petitioned their black concierge to prohibit blacks from using the hotel dance floor). And opposed to the confusion of Cecil Brown's play is Francisco Newman's *The Blue Drifter: A Film Treatment*, a movie scenario distinguished by the control Newman displays over his content, the emotional as well as the thematic unity of the wildly disparate series of screen images that make up the film.

There are, furthermore, short stories and poems here that show an unusual feeling for language, and an unusual ability to evoke responses. I like most Ishmael Reed's poems. His "Railroad Bill, A Conjure Man" is a bouncy, entertaining mixture of his own "neo-hoodooism"—the poem is about a folk hero who could "change hisself to a tree/ . . . he could be/What he wanted to be"—Dr. Seuss ("He could, you bet he could/He could, you bet he could"), and the Western ballad form, with its trotting rhythms and its colloquial figures of speech. His best one, though, is "Poison Light," addressed to an old friend, quiet in mood, nostalgic but not sentimental in tone.

China Clark's poetry has a simple and obvious appeal; she is observant of small things, and she condenses with the skill of the epigrammatist:

*The answer is in the middle of the circle
and it is the same as the Question.*

Others exploit their own language for the mixed effect of the humorous and the serious. Calvin Hernton's affectionate "Low Down and Sweet" is one of the best of a great many celebrations of the black woman. And O. O. Gabugah draws strong folk poetry from the voice of a strident but vital black revolutionary who attacks the Uncle Tom.

I wish there were more prose fiction

Lights and Laughter Everywhere

YARDBIRD READER. Edited by Ishmael Reed. Vol. 1. Yardbird Publishing Cooperative. 184 pp. \$3.95.

JERRY H. BRYANT

Mr. Bryant is the author of *The Open Decision: The Contemporary American Novel and Its Intellectual Background* (Free Press). He is lecturing on American literature at the University of Copenhagen during this academic year.

Yardbird Reader, Volume One, came into being when a group of young black artists in the San Francisco Bay Area got angry. Feeling that they had been discriminated against by white editors and publishers, they decided to form their own company. They put together the Yardbird Publishing Cooperative, named after Charlie "Yardbird" Parker, and set up their editorial office in Berkeley. Their plans, as Mr. Reed says in his introduction to this first volume, include at least four more readers, each with a different editor, and "chapbooks containing the work of young Afro-American poets." Their aim is both national and regional—"to produce works worthy of the tradition of excellence to which we belong . . . and worthy of the independence associated with the Afro-American west. . . ."

Yardbird's first effort is a little ragged. The *Reader* has more than the average number of typographical errors. And there are a good many errors of convention: *au natural*, *comraderie*, *effect* for *affect*. Much more important, some very bad writing has been judged to be printable. What is surprising is the fact

that some of it comes from already established writers. Claude Brown sounds like an entirely different writer from the one who produced *Manchild in the Promised Land*. In a selection from that book's sequel, "In Consequence of Manchild," his prose is immature and affected: "As I ingressed into the vast, high-ceilinged living room, the gentleman from the elevator jaunt . . . stood and greeted me. The face, divested of the unflattering baseball cap, implied the incipience of a *dé jà vu* [*sic*] experience for me."

Cecil Brown's short play, *The African Shades*, is also a piece of writing much inferior to *The Life and Loves of Mr. Jiveass Nigger*. A white Ph.D. sometimes sounds like a teen-age carhop, sometimes a disappointed romantic, sometimes a pedantic psychoanalyst—occasionally all in the same speech. At one time, his wife appears as a flashy jet-setter who likes black men, at another as a character out of a 19th-century melodrama, the bad girl gone wrong who regrets it aloud for the edification of the audience. There is also the strong young black who has put it all together, which we can tell by his steady stream of sophomoric epithets and his contempt for the white producer of black movies.

It seems to me there can be no argument about the low quality of these pieces. My distaste for a few other selections, however, is simply that—a matter of taste. For instance, I see no merit in N. H. Pritchard's "Three Transrealistic Poems," which are simply three sets of dots and lines arranged uninter-

is highly uncertain, if not totally nonexistent. Did it not occur to any Senator present to ask Gray how many such investigations have been initiated in the months since he took command of the bureau?

At this writing, there is a chance that the hearings may be suspended so that the committee can examine Mr. Dean—that is, if the President will permit him to testify. It would be desirable if they could be held up, as Senator Kennedy has suggested, until Senator Ervin has concluded his investigation of the Watergate affair. In any case, the committee will be seriously remiss in its duty if it fails to question Gray on the critical issues of police surveillance of citizens unrelated to law enforcement.

Big Numbers

In the words of Daniel W. Hofgren, \$200,000 is "big numbers." So big that the former vice chairman of the finance committee of CREEP excitedly reported to "Morrie"—Maurice Stans, that is, chairman of the finance committee—that Robert L. Vesco, who was having certain difficulties with the Securities and Exchange Commission, just might make a contribution in that amount. Morrie, "the closer on most of the bigger deals," said he would take it from there. On April 10, Harry L. Sears, a New Jersey lawyer who headed the President's re-election campaign in that state, with an associate (both men were identified with Vesco's operations), delivered the \$200,000 in cash, in a briefcase, to Stans. That was three days after the new federal law governing contributions went into effect.

The contribution was not reported nor was any receipt given for the money. Sears had previously warned Stans that Vesco was under investigation by the SEC and that the contribution might therefore be regarded as improper. Stans was again reminded of Vesco's legal difficulties on the day the money was turned over to him. And as early as February 11, 1972, Sears had told then Attorney General Mitchell that he wanted to set up an appointment with the chairman of the SEC to discuss Vesco's problems. At that time, Mitchell was noncommittal, but two hours after Stans got the money, Sears again met with Mitchell who said that he thought the appointment could be arranged. And Sears did see both the chairman and C. Bradford Cook, then general counsel, now the new chairman of the SEC.

On January 13, 1973, the finance committee wrote to Vesco saying that it had come to their attention that he was under investigation by the SEC and for that reason both the \$200,000 unreported cash contribution and \$50,000 received by checks (this amount was reported) were being returned. But the fact that the \$200,000 was eventually returned—it being a bit too hot to hold—does not dispel the stench that envelops this episode. Such incidents—this was merely one of the more offensive—inspire the thought that perhaps those who have been critical of the doings of Warren G. Harding and the "Ohio Gang" should join in a pilgrimage to the Harding shrine—wherever it is—to tender their apologies. By comparison with the antics of Morrie the Closer and his briefcase toters, Harding and company were small-town pikers.

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