

BOOKS

[*Look Homeward, America: In Search of Reactionary Radicals and Front-Porch Anarchists*, Bill Kauffman, ISI Books, 211 pages]

All-American Anarchists

By Rod Dreher

“AFFECTION FOR THE proliferating variety and mystery of human existence, as opposed to the narrowing uniformity, egalitarianism, and utilitarian aims of most radical systems”—that’s the second of Russell Kirk’s Six Canons of Conservative Thought. “Affection” is far too domesticated a word to describe Bill Kauffman’s feelings in this regard. His *Look Homeward, America* is a rollicking, book-length mash note to kooks, cranks, holy fools, wild men (and women), prophets, and sundry all-American nonconformists who embody the manic genius of this country of ours.

Understand, this book is not for everybody. Kauffman is no party man, God bless him. He is an ardent eclectic with a soft spot for just about anybody with the moxie to buck the system. It takes a certain kind of conservative to appreciate Kauffman’s gonzo vision; I happen to be that kind of right-winger and found *Look Homeward, America* tonic for a soul weary of the philistine populism and straitjacketed know-nothingness that dominates mainstream conservatism today. If you are the kind of conservative who despairs over the chain-store, geography-of-nowhere, slob-in-the-grey-velour-sweatsuit consumerist crapulence that is devouring the American cultural landscape like kudzu—well, Bill Kauffman is your man.

Here’s Kauffman on Robert Gard, a Midwestern theater director who was a passionate regionalist:

Gard the evangelist knew that ‘knowledge and love of place is a large part of the joy in people’s lives. There must be plays that grow from all the countrysides of America, fabricated by the people themselves, born of their happiness and sorrow, born of toiling hands and free minds, born of music and love and reason. There must be many great voices singing out the legend and lore of America from a thousand hilltops...’ You may dismiss this as sentimental claptrap, windy populist hokum. I don’t.

Do you, reader? How you answer this question will determine how you respond to this book. For the most part, Kauffman’s populist exuberance might best be described as Whitmanesque. But when he gets too gushy, one can’t help thinking of Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, and the golly-gee innocence of Busby Berkeley’s barn.

I make a big deal about this issue because the reader should not be blindsided. This is a big old sloppy mess of a book, strange and charming and rhapsodic and even inspirational. It will make its receptive conservative readers reconsider what it means to be a true conservative and even what it means to be a true American. But it is also the kind of book that will leave quite a few conservatives scratching their heads and wondering if Kauffman is more a rocking-chair Romantic than red-state right-winger. Then again, in these sour and shipwrecked late days of Republican Party rule, it is both useful and pleasurable to read conservative writing this fresh and iconoclastic.

In truth, Kauffman doesn’t really consider himself a conservative but rather an “Independent. A Jeffersonian. An anarchist. A (cheerful!) enemy of the state, a reactionary Friend of the Library, a peace-loving football fan.” But his outsider status, as well as his fellow-traveling on the Right, gives him a terrific vantage point from which to reconsider the value to conservatives, especially traditionalists, of the life and work of Catholic

liberals Eugene McCarthy, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, and Dorothy Day.

What these great Americans most have in common, at least in Kauffman’s telling, is their complexity, their humanity, and their willingness to be nobody’s man—or woman—but their own. Kauffman revels in their flawed humanity. After reciting a litany of Pat Moynihan’s sins, Kauffman concludes, “He is irreplaceable.” The last paragraph of his meditation on Catholic Worker founder Day encapsulates what Kauffman finds so admirable in all his subjects:

The Little Way. That is what we seek. That—contrary to the ethic of personal parking spaces, of the dollar-sign god—is the American way. Dorothy Day kept to that little way, and that is why we honor her. She understood that if small is not always beautiful, at least it is always human.

Look Homeward, America hits a polemical peak when Kauffman lights into stuffed-shirt corporate Republicanism in, get this, a defense of the 19th-century labor hellraiser Mother Jones. “Mother Jones or Lamar Alexander: you tell me who’s the real conservative!” Kauffman writes, after contrasting the laborite’s view that working men deserved a wage that would allow women to stay home to care for their kids with the Tennessee senator’s profitable devotion to day care for kids. Kauffman’s jibe brings to mind Russell Kirk’s observation that the family is the institution most important to conserve—a view that many latter-day conservatives support up to the point when it costs Big Business something.

Kauffman’s finest chapter is his profile of Wendell Berry, the Kentucky farmer, poet, and essayist whose unshakable devotion to the land, to localism, and to the dignity of traditional life makes him both a great American and, to the disgrace of our age, a prophet without honor in his native land. (Kauffman: “Among the tragedies of contemporary politics is that Wendell Berry, as a man of place, has no place in a national political

discussion that is framed by Gannett and Clear Channel.”) Kauffman, like Berry, is a pacifist. I, like most people, am not, and despite the Iraq debacle, militant Islam does not grant us the luxury of being peaceable bystanders. Still, the discussion in this book of how war devastates communal and family life—and, in the modern industrial era, can lead to barbarism that mocks any pretense of humanity—cannot be easily gainsaid by the bellicose internationalists of the contemporary Right.

Kauffman can get carried away. His voice is strong, distinct, and engagingly poetic, but he takes you places that can be hard to follow and make you wonder about his judgment. (He reminds me of one of those big-hearted people who can't bear to turn away a stray dog.) We visit, for example, Carolyn Chute, a Maine novelist and gun enthusiast who, along with her illiterate husband, lives an aggressively unorthodox life in the Yankee backwoods. Let's just say that there is a fine line between hale eccentric and outright kook, and I'm not sure Kauffman recognizes it. “We could do worse than to heed our poets” is a characteristic Kauffmanian line, but some poets—paging Mr. Pound!—really are crackpots.

The book's only serious weakness, though, is its chronic digressiveness. In one typical passage, Kauffman ambles from fondly musing on the Black Panther Eldridge Cleaver(!) to a meditation on football and the American spirit. Huh? The chapter on American regionalist artists is studded with insightful miniatures on forgotten and near-forgotten creative types. But in trying to make a broader point about the value of local culture, Kauffman loses focus. The effect is of having just been led through a hodgepodge of an art gallery by a companionably pixilated docent.

Kauffman's worst indulgence on this point comes with the penultimate chapter, “What I Found While Hunting Civil War Artifacts,” which would have been more accurately titled “Obscure Local Oddballs I Esteem.” “May I first tell you about Millard Fillmore?” he asks. Come on, Bill, do you have to?

In the end, Kauffman seems to understand that the book is as much eulogy for what rock critic Greil Marcus once called the “old, weird America” as a celebration of same. There is, of course, no reason at all why any of us have to be prisoners of the zeitgeist, and all it takes to recover the America that Kauffman hymns is for creative people to refuse and resist the disorders of our age. Alas, the great American unwashed actually like their Wal-Mart, their cable TV, their junk culture. Kauffman and family roll into Columbus, Mississippi, hoping to see a *tableau vivant* out of some Delta Blues song and instead find a sullen teenager strung out on his boom-box and “four ladies with mellifluous Mississippi accents” sitting in a diner, chirruping happily about the plot of last night's episode of “Friends”:

I wanted to confront them, plead with them: Look. Here you are, citizens of the economically poorest yet culturally richest state in the Union, the state that gave us Eudora Welty, the Delta Blues, William Faulkner, Muddy Waters, Shelby Foote, and yet you not only consume but crave the packaged products of cocaine-addled East/West Coast greedheads who despise you as ignorant red-necks and stupid crackers. Get off your knees, Mississippi!

Preach it, Brother Billy. My heart's with you, even when my head can't follow. As it happened, I finished *Look Homeward, America* on a flight, put it away in my bag, then returned to the depressing, infuriating narrative of *Cobra II*, with its dismal tale of the Bush administration sophisters, calculators, and economists who, in violation of Kirk's fifth canon, tried to reconstruct the military and the Middle East upon abstract designs. The juxtaposition took me by surprise and made me realize that whatever Bill Kauffman's eccentricities and excesses, I know on whose side I'll take my stand. ■

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[*The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy From 1940 to the Present*, Christopher Layne, Cornell University Press, 304 pages]

Lose Your Illusions

By Leon Hadar

AT SOME POINT while you're reading *The Peace of Illusions*, you may experience a “Matrix”-like moment. You know the feeling: when you suddenly recognize that reality as you understand it—that U.S. foreign policy since 1940 has been designed to protect Americans against threats to their national security—is actually a complex simulation created and manipulated by the powerful forces of the Machines—the foreign-policy establishment consisting of Washington's policymakers, the military-industrial complex, and Wall Street firms—that allows all of us to live mostly peaceful but occasionally very non-peaceful lives while the truth about our condition is hidden from us.

But being a “Neo”—that is, a “neo-realist”—you are troubled by the bloody occupation of Iraq, the mounting tensions with Iran and North Korea, and the growing sense that something is terribly wrong with our diplomacy. But you just can't put your finger on it. So you're browsing foreign-policy websites all through the night, reading the latest issue of *Foreign Affairs*, accessing the wisdom of Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington, and searching for answers to those questions that prevent you from falling asleep. Is it possible that all the blame lies with President George W. Bush and his neocon advisors and their determination to maintain overwhelming U.S. geopolitical dominance, breaking sharply with what you assumed all along was the principle that guided earlier policymakers, that is, defending the U.S. from outside menaces?