

ends in the unmasking of the killer and his forced confrontation with his own monstrous guilt. Another satisfying mystery has been solved, another plot unraveled, and if it all seems a bit contrived, we remember that this form allows James to flex her literary muscles in other, more edifying ways. The familiar framework provides James with a platform to mull over the degraded condition of London's lumpen proletariat, made childish and repellent in part by the misguided ministrations of the welfare state, capital punishment, revenge versus retribution, grievance and justice, fidelity and treachery, and the really big question that always seems to be knocking about in the minds of her characters: Is this all there is?

Some will say James is doing nothing more than using familiar imagery to bolster a genre that is essentially escapist, that she is not making a Big Point, any more than George Lucas was when he recycled ancient mythology as high-tech pulp fiction in his *Star Wars* movies. Maybe. At the same time, isn't the exploitation of the popular form to larger and perhaps, in part, unselfconscious ends precisely what the best storytellers do? I know nothing of James's religious convictions, and there are times, especially in her 1986 *A Taste for Death*, when the religious images appear secondary to a pervasive and grim agnosticism. Still, Christian themes and images are a constant part of her mystery fiction, particularly in the Dalgliesh novels, and she has over the years come back again and again to what should be by now familiar territory to discerning readers.

Wayne Allensworth writes from
Purcellville, Virginia.

Brief Mentions

I Shared the Dream: The Pride, Passion and Politics of the First Black Woman Senator From Kentucky
By Georgia Davis Powers (*Far Hills, New Jersey: New Horizon Press*), 321 pp., \$25.95

"She was 'The Woman' the press whispered about, with Dr. Martin Luther King on that last tragic trip to Memphis," reads the back-cover blurb in over-size type. No, not Irene Adler, but the

"first black woman senator from Kentucky." Georgia Powers has finally come forward and described her many trysts with King, recounting how she tried to climb into the ambulance with the dying King but was told by Andy Young, "No, Senator, I don't think you want to do



that." Unfortunately, this should also have been the publisher's response to Powers' attempt at autobiography, for do we really need to know about her first menstruation, the size of her "full chest," how she cheated on her first husband, cheated on her second husband, and once broke into the house of a couple she cleaned for as a teen in order to use their bedroom to make love to her boyfriend? True, Powers was ahead of her time. When the homeowner discovered that he had Lolita instead of Hazel for a housecleaner, Powers threatened to accuse him of sexual advances if he ever complained to her parents. And Powers does occasionally unearth a gem, as when she remembers a particular phone conversation between King and his legal advisor Stanley Levison. Upon hanging up the phone, King was overhead muttering, "Cowardice asks, is it safe? Expediency asks, is it political? Vanity asks, is it popular? But Conscience asks, is it right?" "Will you use that in our speeches?" asks Powers. "He smiled, 'I will use it when it is appropriate.' I said, 'M.L., is anything we do and say original?' He replied, 'Originality comes only from God.'" But the preponderance of this book is rank self-promotion that ironically tarnishes every individual and cause that Powers has always championed. For does learning details of King's adulteries improve our image of the man? Will highlighting these "family values" of the original civil rights leaders help alleviate the plague of promiscuity ravaging the black family today? Powers has long been honored as a pioneering black feminist whose political accomplishments won greater respect for women of all races, but is stealing another woman's man, and doing so repeatedly, an act of "respect," of "female solidarity"? Is this

what "empowerment" really means? "After that first night [with King]," she writes, "I knew there was no going back. How could I *not* seize the moment . . . no matter what the obstacles. . . I have never regretted being there with him." Conscience does indeed ask, "Is it right?" And King and Georgia Powers replied, "Who cares?"

—Theodore Pappas

Thirty-five Years of Newspaper Work: A Memoir. By H.L. Mencken. Edited by Fred Hobson, Vincent Fitzpatrick, and Bradford Jacobs (*Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press*), 390 pp., \$34.95

This volume is the last substantial legacy provided by the author's will which, operating on the principle of time-release, has already resulted in the publication of the *Diary of H.L. Mencken* and the availability of many useful letters and papers. While *Thirty-five Years* adds little if anything to what was already known of Mencken's life, it does fill out stories and episodes, and in general makes a superior period-piece, less formalized but more informative than the *Days* trilogy. A case may be made, indeed, that period-work, apart from philology, was what Mencken did best, as well as being the most lasting of his accomplishments. He wrote beautifully, with the smoothness of hawser-rope coming off a winch; and his prose, when freed from the rhetorical horsing-around of the essays, columns and other opinion-pieces, is all the more supple, at the same time muscular and smooth as silk. Although the book held no surprises for this reader, I found myself reading on, and on, without skipping, held to the text as if on rails and powered by the terrific momentum generated by the writer himself. *Thirty-five Years* is vastly more interesting than the undeservedly notorious *Diary*, and provides a fitting supplement to *My Life as Author and Editor*, edited by Jonathan Yardley. Contrary to contemporary opinion, Mencken's most baleful influence on the several generations of writers that followed him stemmed not from his bluntness on various tender topics, but rather from the apparent imitability of his absolutely inimitable style. In this regard, the message of the last of his great projects to all young authors, and many mature ones, is invaluable: *Write well; and you will be read forever.*

—Chilton Williamson, Jr.

Letter From Massachusetts

by Eugene Narrett

Our Mr. Brooks



Hometown of John F. Kennedy, Brookline, Massachusetts, blends small-scale charm with a shabby urbanity. Plugged like a weak rib into Boston's west edge, Brookline is laced with picturesque trolleys and dotted with quaint buildings. Its citizenry is an odd mix of recent immigrants from Russia and the Caribbean, college students, seniors, a tasteful dollop of minorities on welfare, and hip singles battening on rent-controlled apartments. Brookline is home base for Planned Parenthood and for gaily proud Congressman Barney Frank, famous for dancing with his husband at Beltway balls. All in all, the town boasts a ferocious political correctness rarely seen outside Cambridge, Berkeley and Ann Arbor.

My primary example of Brookline *chic* concerns a lifestyles initiative at the Runkle School, a K-8. It was a sort of unofficial pilot project, a counseling program not yet packaged for national distribution. As of this writing, the story hasn't spread much beyond the boutiques of Beacon Street. And no wonder; the key players prefer it be a secret, for in its small, ugly way it exposes the heart of our contemporary darkness. Perhaps similar initiatives are at work in your neighborhood.

In fall 1993, about a year into Bill Clinton's term, Craig Goddard was surprised when his kids came home from school talking about how a woman could turn into a man. The mommy of one of their classmates was becoming a daddy, they said. The school guidance counselor was telling them all about it. Goddard asked around and learned that other parents were hearing similar stories. Alarmed, several of them contacted school principal Martin Sleeper for further information. "We weren't challenging them at first," Goddard said. "We

were just trying to get information."

Sleeper verified that Brenda Stern, Runkle school guidance counselor, was speaking with first-grade students about the sex-change. The physical appearance of the parent in question was much altered. She was dressing like a man ("like a teenage boy," Goddard recalls) and developing facial hair. Her voice was cracking.

Principal Sleeper confirmed to parents that the transsexual had been meeting regularly with himself and Stern to lobby for the meetings with the first graders. The transsexual had insisted on being present when the children were counseled so that she could answer their questions directly. Sleeper refused to provide concerned parents of other children in the class with any verbal details or written notes on the contents of these meetings. He did confirm, states Goddard, that "they were trying to convey to the kids that the sex change was just another type of normal experience."

"Counseling" was deemed necessary partly because the lesbian was often at the school, "helping out" four or five days a week in the kindergarten and first-grade classrooms. So her mutation was on display as a kind of show-and-tell. Why not make it formal counseling? Guidance counselor Stern defended her talks with the children. "We wanted them to hear it from one source," she said. "Not from 18 sets of parents."

Goddard recounted that parents asked Stern whether she had any professional experience or training with this kind of counseling. She acknowledged she did not, but said she felt it necessary to be "sensitive" to the concerns of the transsexual parent and "to any questions the kids might have."

While Stern and Sleeper were attentive to the transsexual's urgent agenda, they were less sensitive, though not less curious, about the other kids' families. In the course of discussions with the principal that continued into spring 1994, Goddard learned that not only did Stern and Sleeper counsel the first graders on the normalcy of the sex change, but that they solicited information about the personal lives of the other parents. "In my son's case," said Goddard, "they wanted to know about my divorce." Religion and other "lifestyle"

topics were compared to the sex change as examples of cultural diversity.

Principal Sleeper and guidance counselor Stern may have been diligent in pursuing their therapeutic mission and curious in soliciting personal data about the students' families. But they were not thorough in all matters. For one thing, they had failed to alert parents to the latest item on the public school erotic agenda. Little surprise, perhaps, but like many schools in Massachusetts and elsewhere in these days of expanded lifestyle counseling, each grade at Runkle has a parent designated to act as intermediary between families and administrators. In this case, however, the parent was kept in the dark. When finally alerted to the situation, the intermediary's response was instructive, for it was strictly a procedural one. While critical of the school for failing to contact parents in advance, she refused to criticize the fact or content of the counseling itself.

After several months of largely fruitless meetings (the transsexual continued to work several days a week at the school as a volunteer), the story leaked to the press. A couple of cable stations picked it up and it briefly was a small media event. At this point, Brookline's Superintendent of Schools ordered Sleeper to apologize to parents. He did so, for failing to notify them in advance about the counseling. The limited nature of the apology was neither an accident nor an oversight. At a Parents and Teachers Organization meeting, the treasurer, a member of the state teachers' union, stated that his primary concern was to "protect the Brookline public schools" and to "get it [the controversy] out of the media."

I received a similar message when researching the story. Counselor Stern failed to return my calls. When I finally got through to Martin Sleeper and asked if I could have his view of the events, he said brusquely, "I have no comment. That situation is finished. I have nothing at all to say. Nothing." Then he hung up.

But perhaps the matter is not finished. I asked Goddard whether he and the other parents had sought redress beyond the partial apology. Had they consulted a lawyer, I asked. Had they requested the dismissal of the principal or guidance