

The Perfect Little Set-Up

a review by Suzannah Lessard

When we were little, my cousin Ben and I played cards often with our Great-Great-Aunt Alida. In her bedroom, which was encrusted with religious objects, she and we would cheat hard at Casino and Euchre. We had to join forces in order to out-cheat her, finally hitting upon the device of getting her to sit with her back to the mirror so that we could get glimpses of her hand and anticipate her cheatings, but even then it was a tight battle. There was no reverence on our part, or condescension on hers, during these games; we would contradict, accuse, gloat, and bicker like the most familiar contemporaries. As time went on we were replaced by younger members of the family, and they in turn by the next crop, who say that in the depths of her age Aunt Alida became too sloppy at cheating to make it any fun and began to take losing so hard that the six-year-olds would let her win to be nice. But in my day it was good sport and more. In the silences of concentration as well as in the bursts of argument there was contact. The games were an encounter, an event in the day, and cumulatively an event in my life, as they were, I'm sure, in hers. We knew each other, and pretty well, as people who regularly cheat on each other do.

When even younger I had another

and probably much more important relationship with my great grandmother. She lived next door and every morning I would run over and see her. I can't remember what we talked about, but every day we visited together. We went for walks in all seasons, and when she was laid up I would play pick-up sticks on the floor of her bedroom. Perhaps I gave her something: her husband had been murdered in middle age, and the adults who knew her say that from then on she had cut herself off inside from human contact and that our friendship was an exception. She gave me something, though I'm not sure what. I remember her face vividly, and the friendship exists like a pillar in the vagueness of early memories. She also gave me ginger ale and ginger snaps, just as Aunt Alida later gave us tea and cakes after cards. That was part of it.

I mention these two encounters because they are so different, indicating the range of relationships between the very old and the very young, and because the classic exchange between the extreme ages is, of all exchanges between the old and the non-old, so patently and uniquely rich. While attention in growing degrees is being focused on the physical condition of the aged—their poverty, lack of adequate medical care and suitable housing, and to some extent on the cruelty of their segregation from the mainstream—little

serious consideration is being given to what it means to the mainstream to be segregated from them. Politicians invariably say in their declarations of concern with the issue of the aged, "we will all be old someday," as though caring for old people is a matter of charity and then a little more—preparing the ground for society to be charitable to you. All this is important. Hopefully it is simply a matter of time before the old are well provided for in this country. But the question of how each of us values the aged—what part in the social weave they form—is an entirely different question, not the prehistorical problem of the poor old, at last to be solved by the rich technological society, but a new problem bred by that society. The patterns of life the modern world has developed have caused such a fundamental dissociation between the old and non-old that most people, however much concerned with the physical welfare of old people, smile skeptically when you suggest that the old are actually desirable to have around. This cynicism, which like all cynicism, tends to cast any opposing suggestion as foolishly optimistic, blocks with condescension any exploration to the contrary. The relationship between the octogenarian and the small child, of a goodness which no one who has seen or experienced it can deny, is a stronghold from which to foray out at that wilderness of skepticism, both

because of its self-evident value and because, as relationships go, it captures an essence of human exchange which is threatened in modern times right across the board.

Toward the end of her tome *The Coming of Age*,* Simone de Beauvoir writes: "In spite of the moralists' opinion to the contrary, in old age we should wish to have passions strong enough to prevent us from turning in upon ourselves. One's life has value so long as one attributes value to the life of others, by means of love, friendship, indignation, compassion." The book, which is an unevenly fascinating encyclopedia of information—anthropological, historical, biographical, sociological, medical—on old age is valuable chiefly in that it brings the state of being old out of the mist of phobic ignorance into live focus. Her biographies of people like Victor Hugo, the Tolstoys, and Lamartine in their later years portray people who were far from impassive and in no way living the diminished internal life we assume lies before us. De Beauvoir's comment about valuing others' lives is directed at the old person's attitude towards others, and indeed much of the book is intensely interesting from the point of view of learning how to be old and what to expect, knowledge which is denied us almost completely

**The Coming of Age. Simone de Beauvoir. Putnam, \$10.*

in a world which recoils from age and death. But the admonition works both ways. It is the unwillingness to attribute value to the life of the old which glazes the eye with tolerance, or twitches one's nerves with intolerance when exposed to them. The result is a breakdown in the line of communication, a failure to engage a person openly and without prejudice, as independent and entire, that gift one can see employed in an almost pure state by those vastly different creatures (contrary to myth), the very old and the very young.

Assuming that the lines of communication between all kinds of people, but particularly between generations, are the life lines of a culture, to be tended carefully, the points of breakdown are worth the most serious attention. In another of her most incisive comments, de Beauvoir points out that through history, conflict between generations has taken the form of paying back; the young paying back the old, and the old the young, for oppression suffered in the past. This is as true for the father who domineers over his son because his father did so, as it is for the son, who, finally wresting authority from the father who held on to it for too long, neglects or mistreats him in his old age. The urge to pay back is one of the surest ways to cut the lines of communication.

Another way to cut the lines is to try to impose a character on someone else. A subtle form of this behavior can be seen in parents who treat their children as though they were projects, a treatment which most likely results in another cycle of paying back, the child of his parents and then of his own children. The extent to which the old have a character imposed on them—docility, propriety, minimum needs, asexuality—comes out repeatedly in remarks quoted by de Beauvoir. These tendencies have no doubt plagued human beings since the beginning of time: Through time people have evolved various arrangements to counteract them and keep the lines of

communication intact.

The arrangement which has emerged here would seem, if anything, to be designed to accomplish the opposite. The modern colonial, split-level, and ranch-style houses which have cropped up to accommodate the expanding numbers are apt symbols of the new way. The new houses don't even face each other or merge their patches of turf into a common green. Each is a little world unto itself, a pudding mold of Mom and Dad, Dick and Jane, in living area, dining area, and den. There's no question that if Grandpa were brought into the capsule he would be an excessive burden, let alone maiden aunts, visiting cousins, eccentric uncles, or anyone who would not strictly conform to the dictates of the mold. Nor, unless there's quite a lot of money around, could any of these people easily live next door. Houses are clumped together according to size. You don't often see a one- or two-bedroom cottage next to a modern colonial; you have to drive quite far from the one-acre split-level area to get to the "lower income" region where the quarter-acre plots and smaller houses are bunched together.

If the setup is working as it is supposed to, if incompatible elements have been successfully resisted, that exclusion has a quasi-inevitable effect. Hidden beneath the placid surface of the pudding is a pressure cooker, two generations of four or five people living in close proximity, with little relief from each other. One can surmise the effect on the marriage partners. Another effect, more relevant here, is on the children. The children are both over-attended and under-attended—the closeness breeds the tendency to overly concentrate on the child and raise him or her in a preconceived image, and prevents that little distance which allows the parent to see the child as an independent person developing in an individual way. So when the children reach adulthood they've had it—they get out, never to come back, and any

friendly observer would cheer them on, rightly certain that they desperately need to discover their own lives. Only years later does the larger pattern emerge. Dick and Jane are now living in their own molds, miles apart from each other—and miles away from Mom and Dad, who are old, now, and alone. There is no longer any connection between parents and children, because the lines of communication, damaged to begin with, and cut long ago in that necessary bursting out, were most likely never repaired. They live in separate worlds. And Dick and Jane III are growing up in new pressure cookers with no relationship to their grandparents, who might, if integrated into their lives, not only offer that special friendship between the old and young, but relieve the pressure of growing up with only two adults, a pressure which in turn is going to drive them out at the first opportunity.

The nature of the pudding mold is that the people living in it have minimum flexibility. There is no place inside or nearby for grandparents and the adjustment they require, nor is there room for anything to go wrong. A retarded child, a nervous breakdown, a physical handicap have no place either, and if they should unavoidably intrude, they create a hell. It's a set piece, and can only work if everything is perfect, which is a clue, perhaps, to the fanatical conformism typical of many American communities. Alien elements *have* to be feared because the set piece is both so fragile and so tight—so unrelaxed—that a person untailed to the mold cannot be absorbed without demanding such strenuous adjustment that total disintegration of the arrangement is threatened.

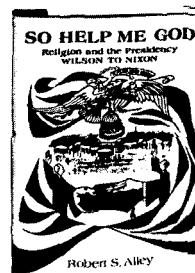
There are two levels to this issue—living arrangements and state of mind. As far as living arrangements are concerned, it may be especially easy to criticize Windsor Estates, which provides such a succinct example of a closed life style, but the same structure can be found anywhere in the

great middle, among urban sophisticates as well as square suburbanites. In general, only the rich and the poor still keep the grandparents in the fabric of the family. One might say that the rich do so because they have the money to create comfortable set-ups, and the poor because they have no choice; that it comes down to financial determinants. If this is true, it's only because we have set things up so that it's true: all over Europe one finds cross-generation groupings of people.

In the end I believe state of mind—not arrangements which follow on state of mind—excludes the old from the mainstream and excludes us from the old. One way of putting it might be the tendency to build one's life like a little masterpiece. Whatever your idea of the ideal situation might be—the modern colonial or a pad in Greenwich Village—and whatever your status, single or married, parent or childless, with or without grandparents, the attitude and its effects are basically the same. The preoccupation

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with "my perfect little setup" cuts across lifestyles from the split-level dweller to those who despise his way of life and have chosen what they would describe as a more free-form, adventurous way of living guided by a higher set of values. Yet, most often, the situation shares far more with the split-level dwellers than many would care to admit. A carefully selected group of friends, belonging to a narrow age group, holding roughly the same interests form a world in effect closed. The incompatible person, whose presence cannot be avoided, becomes an interference first, and only secondly a human being. If grandpa called up and said he had nowhere to go, consternation would be the dominant response. His bothersome needs and constant presence would spoil things.

Since we all protect ourselves so well, this state of mind is like a disease of the nerves which shows itself only when aggravated by special circumstances. Single people might notice it in themselves when exposed to small children. They make noise, interrupt "adult" conversations, and restrict plans so that, however cute they might be, the bachelor sees them as an interference and wishes them away. The resentment, however mild, cuts communication between the bachelor and the child and blocks his mind from seeing that the child is a person, the very perception which would neutralize irritation. By the same token the bachelor might feel that undercurrent of resentment in a stolidly married group, as though he were a wild electron about to disturb all the neatly matched pairs, or as though a less-structured style somehow threatens to upset the domestic order. That shutter which closes one's mind to the individual is most readily triggered by old people. They instantly become members of a genus, typed as burdens, and therefore intrusions—people who mar the picture. They are perceived, at best, as inconveniences. As with children, the more deeply rooted the resentment and conde-

scension becomes, the farther one is from recognizing that they are whole people, the only cure for the mental cramp that insists they are undesirable.

The effect on the old hardly needs detailing. If they have not literally been cut off from the rest of life by being put in an institution, the shuttered eyes they see all around them will cut them off as surely as if they had been sent away. Unless they are extraordinary people, they will stagnate, drop out, and thus fulfill all of their companions' worst fears of tedium and inconvenience. Or, if they can, they may seek communities which consist entirely of old people without children, rowdy teen-agers or the busy middle-aged around to ruffle their composure. The effect on those who do the shuttering is not so obvious. When one hears about old people purposefully choosing to go off and live, unbothered, with each other, the choice seems like the bitterest gesture toward life, an act of clamping the self closed in a blunt declaration of the pointlessness of living. Some who do so may be beating a necessary retreat from the crushing anonymity of existing among unseen eyes, but perhaps many are simply following an early-developed pattern of seeking carefully protected, homogeneous setups for themselves. Perhaps they have long lost the capacity for adjustment to, and interest in, stages of life different from their own. The pursuit by young and middle-aged people of the completely compatible arrangement without, among other nuisances, old people, is really the same kind of refusal to be drawn out of oneself, a severing of vital lines of communication which logically would lead the person who lived that way to seek a life of isolation among age peers when they are old. As anyone knows who has been away from the very old or the very young for a while, the first thing to go is flexibility. But the greater loss is the ability to meet people expectantly, the impulse to

build the bridge and let the traffic flow as it may. The habit of using that impulse, which, like flexibility, quickly atrophies with disuse, is the habit of attributing value to the lives of others, the very quality de Beauvoir mentions as essential for the old themselves to maintain in order to make their lives worth living, and that seems so brutally rejected by the old who retreat into communities where they are safeguarded from the abrasion of other forms of life. There's no small irony in the likelihood that shuttered life in the perfect setup is among the worst imaginable preparations for one's own old age.

Ghandi and Senility

The point is not to like all old people, nor to use them indiscriminately to flex one's psychic muscles, but to meet them halfway, without condescension, for one's own sake as well as theirs. That they are "worth" this effort, worth knowing, is an argument which ultimately must appeal to faith against an ingrained skepticism. De Beauvoir's portraits of old characters, some dreadful, others magnetic, but all richly complex and struggling, reinforce that faith. From them one gets a sense of old age as a kind of essence of individual humanity, an often incredibly turbulent time of summation of all that the self has been, for better or for worse. Rather than a fading of contact with reality, old age seems for many of these people the most intense, unbuffered confrontation with it, where the consequences and value of what one has done with one's life are starkly apparent, unguided, less malleable to pet delusions than ever before. De Beauvoir does not flinch from the painful aspects, the cruelty of natural decline, and the unbearably irrevocable nature of past actions and their outcomes, sometimes the direct result of character weaknesses, as in the case of Lamartine; sometimes, as in the case of Ghandi, a bitter twist of fate, never within control, but just as

implacably final. The overriding effect of these entrees into particular old lives is not depression, however, but intense interest. One comes away not with a sense of reduced people, but of the old as one of the strongest ingredients in the human mix, without which youth and prime of life alone would make a blandly seasoned recipe. One comes out wanting to build bridges of communication to this tart stage of life and feeling that the aversion to doing so is the most counter-productive, self-coddling kind of squeamishness.

The bulwark upon which the faith that building and tending bridges to the old is worth it rests, however, not on evidence that some of them, at least are "interesting," but that in the spectrum of human relationships, those between people with a difference are among the most precious and often the most rewarding. For me, the draw between the small child and the octogenarian is a reference point, largely because I have experienced it and therefore value it and want it for others. Less abstract relationships which don't even include old people might also serve as a reference, however: the conceited ivy leaguer who finds he actually likes the shopgirl he has self-indulgently seduced, the sentimentalized but nevertheless real friendships that sprang up between widely varying types in the army in World War II, the unquestionably credible bond between Huckleberry Finn and Jim. In every instance the fact that the bond is made is a sign of health on both parts.

These points have all been made with the assumption that the old people who might be included in one's life are mentally complete. The habit of aversion to the old in general tends to lump the senile with the non-senile, the former somehow imbuing the latter with associations of frustration, blurring the fact that there is a world of difference between the two states—as much as if you yourself suffered brain damage or did not. The concept of a healthy old age, rather

than a norm, is thought of as the exception. Senility, on the other hand, is not at all well understood; rudimentary research indicates that in many cases it is not the result of inevitable deterioration but of psychological causes, like discouragement and isolation, none assuaged by the assumptions of the people around them. However, it remains that old people's minds often do deteriorate to the point of non-communication and that the grandparent can be incapable of relationships with anyone, becoming chiefly a person who must be cared for. This is the point at which the inflexible household becomes really incapable of perceiving the old person as anything but an intrusive burden.

Self-Congratulatory Pessimism

The care of infants is usually not considered a burden to be resented, but part of the business of living. Most mothers admit that taking care of a little baby is a pain in the neck, more or less ungratifying until the child becomes responsive, unbelievably time-absorbing and disruptive of one's "own life." Yet it's done pretty much without question. While old people do not offer the promise of your own immortality or any of the other emotional investments people make in their children, it seems to me that their care is part of the business of living, in the same way; that rudimentary life is just as sacred at either end of the life line. This is where old European or rural American communities become especially pertinent, for no one person is saddled there with an old person, nor on the other hand, closeted alone with her babies. If a doddering grandpa is taken into the modern colonial, his care, except for occasional extras, is most likely to fall entirely on the wife, and he will consequently be a truly disruptive, sapping burden in her life. There is no double-jointedness, no interlocking hinges of community responsibility among the rest of the family, let alone

the neighbors, to distribute the chore a little more evenly; no automatic sense that every grown person is son or daughter to every old person, just as they don't respond to the instinct to be the parent of every child.

Out of it all comes a spoiledness. We all get our backs up when people talk about the spoiledness of modern generations, but there's a grain of truth to the cliché and it's related to this fetid closeness, the perfect little world, over-concentrated on itself, bastioned against intrusion without room for the people pressed in it to really see and know each other. The children burst out, not looking back, but the atmosphere has spoiled their states of mind—they will make their perfect little setup, protect their freedom from imposition; they owe it to themselves. And so the play repeats itself with everyone the loser, a righteous self-centeredness the thief.

Coming of Age is not about the non-old relating to the old, but it makes one think in these directions. The book is a formidable collection of information on what the self and the world look like to those who are old. With a few exceptions, the author has not attempted to extract new ideas from her material, and where she does it is often with a typically French intellectual, rather self-congratulatory pessimism, which leaves one nowhere. For instance, shortly after the remark about the importance for the old of valuing the lives of others, she writes: "It is far better not to think about it [old age] too much but to live a fairly committed, fairly justified life, so that one may go on in the same path even when all illusions have vanished and one's zeal for life has died away." Why, one might ask. The alignment of materials, however, is not only a great service but rewarding reading in itself, a huge effort towards starting to recover that gift civilization seems to have lost somewhere along modern ways, those intimately connected abilities to feel at ease with the old age of others, and to learn to live it well ourselves. ■

POLITICAL BOOK NOTES

Public affairs books
to be published in July.

American-East Asian Relations: A Survey. Ernest R. May, James C. Thomson, Jr., eds. Harvard, \$15. These essays by 18 scholars offer both orthodox and revisionist points of view. Thomson's concluding piece is particularly fresh and thoughtful.

American Policy on the Division of Germany: The Clash with Russia Over Reparations. Bruce Kuklick. Cornell, \$8.75.

Army in Anguish. Haynes Johnson, George C. Wilson. Pocket Books, \$1.25. These articles are less impressive in book form, where their redundancies are more evident, than when they first appeared serially in *The Washington Post*.

Attica Diary. William R. Coons. Stein & Day, \$6.95. Written in the first person by a convict, and covering a period of one year and three months from March, 1970, to June, 1971, this book paints a clear picture of life in the prison community, but the riot period is not included.

Communes, USA: A Personal Tour. Richard Fairfield. Penguin, \$3.50.

Constitutional Change. Clement E. Vose. Lexington, \$15.

Crime: International Agenda. Benedict S. Alper, Jerry Boren. Lexington, \$7.50.

Drugs and the Public. Norman E. Zinberg, John A. Robertson. Simon & Schuster, \$8.95. A generally comprehensive report on drugs, drug experimentors, and drug controls.

The Dying Dollar. Gerald Krefetz. Playboy Press, \$7.95.

Eleanor: The Years Alone. Joseph P. Lash. Norton, \$9.95. A complete account of the great lady's activities after her husband's death. Since much of the information is insignificant, except to real Roosevelt fans, the author's stylistic deficiencies, which tended to be obscured by the fascinating story told in *Eleanor and Franklin*, are unhappily apparent.

Essays on Population Policy. Edwin D. Driver. Lexington, \$13.50.

Fat Cats and Democrats: The Role of the Big Rich in the Party of the Common Man. G. William Domhoff. Prentice-Hall, \$5.95.

FDR. Finis Farr. Arlington House, \$9.95.

Flower of the Dragon: The Breakdown of the U. S. Army in Vietnam. Richard Boyle. Ramparts. A fine, first-person account by a journalist whose internal changes mirrored those in the army he describes. He "loved" his first combat experience in 1965, but by 1971, was smuggling mutinous petitions from troops in the field to Washington.

The Great Executive Dream: The First Myth of Management Is That It Exists. Robert Heller. Delacorte, \$7.95. Good cartoons and a nice title are about all this one has to offer.

How the Bureaucracy Makes Foreign Policy, An Exchange Analysis. David Howard Davis. Lexington, \$12.50.

How to Start Your Own Private School—And Why You Need One. Samuel L. Blumenfeld. Arlington House, \$9.95.

The Nixon Theology. Charles P. Henderson, Jr. Harper & Row, \$6.95. The author, a chaplain at Princeton, examines the role of religion in Nixon's political life, including his stands against communism, pornography, abortion, and marijuana. Billy Graham's friendship is not taken as a sure sign of divine guidance.

Not Exactly A Crime: Our Vice Presidents from Adams to Agnew. Richard Curtis, Maggie Wells. Dial, \$4.95. A glib series of one-liners, some funny, some not-so-funny, about the men who have held America's number two post.

Papers on the War. Daniel Ellsberg. Simon & Schuster, \$8.95, \$2.95. There is enough brilliance in this collection of articles to make us regret that the seductions of celebritydom and the persecution of the Justice Department have combined to keep the author from settling down to write the major analytical work on Vietnam that he is capable of producing.

The Paper Revolutionaries: The Rise of the Underground Press. Laurence Leamer. Simon & Schuster, \$8.95, \$2.95.

The Peter Prescription. Laurence J. Peter. Morrow, \$5.95. With this book the author comes close to providing another illustration of his great principle. But there is occasional delight and enough real insight to make up for the phony profundity.

Political Science in Population Studies. Richard Clinton, William Flash, eds. Lexington, \$11.50.