

remained close friends and conspired to keep the family secret. Their solidarity provides a heartening contrast to this unhappy story of obsession and concealment.

Tomalin's elegant, coherent, original book, fired by a feminist analysis, has more obvious current appeal than Ackroyd's messy, inconclusive, and repetitive biography. Still, for all the exasperation that Ackroyd's book inevitably evokes, it stands as an awkward but ambitious attempt to come to grips with a great writ-

er. We may prefer to read the ingenious disinterring of a hidden woman's story, rather than an idiosyncratic new version of the genius who exploited her. And Tomalin's book is certainly skillful and enjoyable. But Ackroyd's cluttered and contradictory biography is, I believe, the more important, even if there were times when I could have happily taken the bread knife to it.

HERMIONE LEE is the author of *Willa Cather: Double Lives* (Pantheon).

## She the People

BY KAREN LEHRMAN

### Object Lessons by Anna Quindlen

(Random House, 272 pp., \$19)

For nearly three years devoted readers turned weekly to Anna Quindlen's "Life in the 30's" column in "The Living Section" of *The New York Times* for updates on her life (lawyer husband, two sons, Victorian rowhouse in Hoboken), reflections on her past (Catholic schooling, mother's death), and her feelings about being female. Quindlen was the thirtysomething girl next door, chatting about the ordinary and often intimate details of her life. The column was continually praised for its honesty, ingenuity, and courage, and when it stopped running in 1988 her fans wrote letters expressing hurt, anger, betrayal.

But she needed a break; covering herself was "emotionally exhausting." So she had another baby and wrote a novel. The *Times*, however, wanted Quindlen back, this time on its op-ed page, twice a week, discussing the issues of the day. The new column is called "Public & Private," and though it doesn't seem to have yet developed the soap-operatic following of its predecessor, it is widely read. Once again Quindlen is perceived as a fresh voice, a counterpoint to the stuffy, often abstract political analysis of her colleagues on the page. Her reputation and her style rest, in fact, on a proud anti-elitism, on her supposed rapport with the thoughts and feelings of ordinary people.

*Object Lessons*, her first novel, is also about ordinary people, a large Irish Catholic family in suburban New York experiencing a collective identity crisis. The story revolves around Maggie, who is

12. During one summer in the late '60s, her grandfather dies, her mother almost has an affair, her bitchy cousin gets pregnant, her best friend deserts her for a cooler crowd, and a boy likes her. Quindlen's foray into fiction builds on the narrative talents she showed in her punditry days, when she was the youngest reporter and the first woman to write the *Times*'s "About New York" column. In roughly a thousand words of detailed description, she managed to entice the reader into an often prosaic world, give it realistic contours, even impart some of the momentum of a story.

In the larger compass of a novel, however, Quindlen clearly has not figured out how to construct a fully imagined plot or to create credible characters. *Object Lessons* is very much a generic coming-of-age novel, for Maggie, for her family, and in a sense for the author as well. Caught between the cultures of an Irish grandfather who dotes on her and an Italian mother who ignores her, Maggie goes through the summer testing her loyalties to each, and finds that she's most comfortable (surprise!) just being herself. As Quindlen writes in her last line, Maggie learned that "the voice she was hearing [inside her head] was her own, for the first time in her life."

It's an unwitting comment on one of the central problems of the novel. Quindlen struggles unsuccessfully for control over the voice of her protagonist, which fluctuates distractingly between improbable naïveté and world-weary cynicism. The difficulty is a familiar one in first novels that bear an autobiograph-

ical burden, as this one plainly does. Establishing imaginative distance from a younger self, however disguised, is not easy.

Her other characters rarely rise above caricatures: there's the gruff and authoritarian grandfather who calls his grandchildren "imbeciles," and there are his mindlessly obedient sons and their insipid suburban housewives. The only intelligent, independent females (other than, presumably, Maggie) are Aunt Margaret, who is a nun, and Maggie's best friend's beautiful sister, whose own maturation is marked by the wearing of diaphanous clothes with minimal underwear. No wonder Maggie has trouble envisaging an adult life for herself. Quindlen offers an array of women whose lives have been circumscribed in one way or another by their "feminine" natures, and she can't seem to decide how much to celebrate and how much to condemn their plight. The turning point for Maggie's mother, for example, comes when she realizes that her ability to accept her fate as tireless mother of a large brood and to forgive her despotic father-in-law and his family for all their abuse—her ability, in short, to be passive, compassionate, and unselfish—made her "stronger" than her rebellious husband.

This apparent rationalization of often self-destructive, stereotypically female traits parallels the facile, melodramatic *Ladies' Home Journal* style of the book (he "kissed the frown from between her eyebrows"), which is clearly below Quindlen's standards. In fact, the most perplexing question the novel raises is, to whom is it supposed to appeal? Is Quindlen intentionally writing down, aiming at an audience of ordinary people (say, suburban housewives)?

Probably not. But condescension is not altogether foreign to Quindlen's writing. It's the danger lurking at the heart of her larger enterprise. To assume the role of literary and journalistic conduit for unsung Americans is to run the risk of a patronizing tone (especially when you're a star *New York Times* reporter with a dream job) and an oversimplifying perspective. In her "Life" columns, Quindlen suffered from the customary myopia that afflicts confessionals. Self-analysis parading as generational analysis can't help being presumptuous. In fact, it's a convention of the genre: in exchange for her commitment to her readers' mundane concerns, Quindlen earned the right to assume their commitment to hers.

The issue of Quindlen's tone and perspective has acquired a new dimension

in her "Public & Private" columns, which will be read long after her novel has sunk from sight. Here the larger pretensions and problems become clearer. Her journalistic career has been based on the belief that the woman's voice—the voice of compassion, humanity, softness—is missing from newspapers in general. She has now been given the chance to make it heard not just in the confines of the "women's pages" (of which the "Living" section is really just a restyled version), but on the op-ed page, where "hard," that is, male, analysis reigns. "Perhaps along with everything else, newspapers, magazines, television need to be the back fences for people, now that those fences are gone," Quindlen told a gathering of fellow journalists in a lecture last year. "We used to come off as authority figures, and I think softening up can only make us more attractive."

In her "Life" columns, Quindlen seemed at times to be trying to shock *New York Times* readers with her "femaleness," her daring intimacy. Exhibitionism was a way of establishing the common woman's touch; no subject was too personal to discuss. (One column detailed the various aspects of her son's "secret life.") She still sometimes flaunts her openness, but her larger objective now seems to be showing readers the "woman's" way of understanding political issues: emphasizing the personal more than the political; looking at the world emotionally, not rationally; making everything into an object lesson. "I've never been very good at looking at the big picture," she once wrote. "It has been customary to take people's pain and lessen our own participation in it by turning it into an issue, not a collection of human beings." And in another column she explained her modus operandi: "Whenever my response to an important subject is rational and completely cerebral, I know there is something wrong with it. . . . I have always been governed by my gut."

Humanizing political issues, of course, is a worthy and often neglected pursuit, and Quindlen can be quite good at it. Indeed, the "Public & Private" pieces that most resemble her "New York" columns in their colorful reporting are a welcome departure from the often dry policy memoranda that accompany them on the page. One was a painful description of crack babies at a Bronx hospital, another was about an unusual project for disadvantaged kids run by nuns. Though Quindlen sometimes succumbs to mawkishness and can't resist a sermonizing note, these columns succeed because she doesn't try to wring a general point

about the world from her discovery of one part of it: she arrives, she evokes a scene, she leaves.

Most of her columns, however, offer a lesson to be learned. Either Quindlen will generalize from a specific incident (elevating the private to the public), or she will take an important issue like the budget or the recession and tell us what ordinary people think, or more accurately, feel about it (reducing the public to the private). Quindlen's approach represents a repudiation of the notion of critical distance. She is a remorseless sentimentalist who ends up trivializing matters of considerable importance.

Consider a column from last October, which discussed a documentary made about the meatpackers' strike in Austin, Minnesota, in 1985. "The people at the Hormel plant believed in a certain kind of America," Quindlen tells us. "They went on strike because the company wanted to cut wages to stay competitive." Now their children live "on rice and kitchen-table speeches. . . . A grown man sits in front of [the] camera and says, tears running into the ruts of his face, 'All I want to do is go to work.'" Quindlen then extrapolates from this scene of individual pain to the proclamation that the nation is in a depression. She doesn't know how "economists define a depression" so she looks the word up in Webster's, which says it is "'a period of low economic activity marked esp. by unemployment' as well as 'a state of feeling sad.' That covers it, I think." Except that it doesn't begin to.

The reverence for ordinary people is an old device of New York columnists, and Quindlen may be, in her way, the first woman to join the company of Hamill, Breslin, McAlary, and the rest of the bartender-as-philosopher-king crowd. But her pose of ordinariness (who *are* these ordinary people, anyway?) is often harder to tolerate. Quindlen adduces ordinary people as proof for her pronouncements, as if it were obvious that they see the world as she does. In another moist complaint about the national economy, in which she deprived herself of the use of a dictionary, Quindlen wrote that a "recession committee" meets nearly every week in her supermarket. When "the bill is \$20 higher than it was a year ago," the women at the check-out counters silently declare a recession. The ironic tone is deceiving. It doesn't seem to matter to Quindlen that she gets rudimentary economics wrong: higher costs are the sign of inflation, not recession (a period of reduced economic activity that tends to hold prices down).

What's important is that she get her point across: "Women experience the economy on what you might call a reality level. We buy bread." Presumably men, who must be buying less delicate things like houses or college educations, experience the economy theoretically.

Even when a private individual actually finds herself in the middle of a public debate, Quindlen can't seem to strike a balance between empathy and analysis. Instead she self-consciously refuses to discuss the issues, abstract and practical, at stake in the debate, and assumes that bringing her sensibility to bear on the thoughts and the feelings of the central character is revelation enough. In a column about the Baby M case, she presents herself as the one honest witness who has been missing from the scene. Describing her visit with Mary Beth Whitehead-Gould, the biological mother, she writes: "It would be good for everyone in the business of passing judgment . . . to see her . . . staring out into a backyard full of toys, wondering whether her children will have to give up someone they love because once, in the white glare of the world court, their mother refused to do the same."

By defining the post-feminist woman's voice in politics as one that "communicates" the problems of the world to us, and renouncing the assistance of law or logic, Quindlen has staked out a position in the feminist debate over the competing claims of gender equality and gender difference. She evidently wants to offer a more comprehensive woman's view than Ellen Goodman, who writes about so-called women's issues (child care, abortion, domesticity) but makes no pretensions to reach for anything grander or to offer a "feminine" analysis. And she evidently expects to be taken no less seriously as a political analyst than Meg Greenfield, whose commentary barely hints at gender.

The result, however, is a journalistic world in which women are continually constrained by their "femaleness." This is reflected not only in the perspective of the columns, but in her style and choice of issues. Though Quindlen clearly set out to write about all political issues, most of her columns focus on "women's issues," or on such problems as homelessness, child poverty, teen pregnancy. She routinely complains that only women care about these issues, but her treatment of them perpetuates the fallacy that they are only women's issues.

Her columns are riddled with ancient stereotypes, with housewives who raise the children, and do all the shopping and cooking and cleaning. And the style that she has adopted betrays her clichéd

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## Secretary Baker's Peace Mission

Are he and the President putting pressure in the right places?

In the wake of the Gulf War, which many now believe we ended too early, Saddam Hussein and his army have inflicted the most horrible genocidal slaughter on the defenseless Kurds. But the President and Secretary Baker initially paid only cursory attention to this disaster, even though it is partly of our own doing. They are mostly fixated on the so-called "Israel-Palestinian conflict" and they are bringing renewed pressure on Israel to yield "land for peace".

### What are the facts?

■ The Secretary may be handicapped by the fact that, until his recent visits, he had no real knowledge, no "feel" for the country and its unique problems. That is the more regrettable since Israel is certainly the closest (and perhaps only reliable) ally the United States has in the entire region. If he had deeper knowledge, he would realize that in the absence of any reliable and enduring peace with the Arab countries, Israel could not give up any of its strategic heartland, the so-called "West Bank". From the heights of the Judean hills, which he would have Israel yield to the Arabs, one can literally overlook Zion Square in Jerusalem, Ben Gurion Airport, and most of Israel's population centers, industrial plant, and military installations. One shivers at the thought of what would have happened to Israel if Saddam Hussein, instead of having launched his relatively innocuous Scud missiles from 450 miles away, could have positioned his armor, his planes and his missiles in the "West Bank" or on those Judean mountain ridges.

■ There are those who claim that, in these days of airplanes and missiles, territorial depth is of no military significance and that Israel should therefore not hesitate to relinquish the "West Bank" and Gaza in order to attain peace. But that is fallacious reasoning. Israel, according to the assessment of every knowledgeable military person, would be naked and indefensible if it were to yield those territories. If Israel did not control those territories it would, in case of surprise attack, be cut in half at its

narrow waist before it had time to mobilize. Why the President and Secretary Baker continue to press this suicidal course on its most reliable ally in the area is a mystery. Is it because they don't really understand the murderous intentions of the Arabs toward Israel? The goal of the Arabs is not the establishment of a "Palestinian State" on the "West Bank". No, the real goal of the Arabs, embedded in the Charter of the PLO and never repudiated, is the total annihilation of the state of Israel. The presence of the "infidel Jews" in their midst is an unacceptable affront to the Arabs. The Palestinian state is a sideshow. Its purpose is to serve as a launching pad for the last "jihad" — finally to chase the Jews into the sea "where they belong".

■ And there are those who say that Israel doesn't really need any strategic depth. All that is needed would be guarantees by the United Nations and a mutual security treaty, which the United States would probably grant if Israel were to yield to pressure and would give up the "West Bank". The United States is undoubtedly the best friend and the greatest benefactor that Israel has. But Israel simply can't afford to entrust its security to a third party. Even with the best of intentions, the United States is far away. It took our country several months, and under ideal conditions, to build up a force to fight and defeat Saddam Hussein. If Israel were attacked — not just by Iraq, but by probably five or six other Arab countries, no help could possibly arrive in time if the enemy were poised, not beyond the Jordan, but on the outskirts of Jerusalem and within a few miles of Tel Aviv.

Our country has saved both Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from total destruction and from becoming provinces of Iraq. It is therefore disappointing that the President and the Secretary of State decided to lean, not on the Arabs but on Israel in order to bring about peace in the Middle East. One could have hoped for some gratitude at least from those two countries. Secretary Baker, as a first step in his peace mission, could have asked the Arabs to terminate their state of belligerency against Israel, to end their commercial boycott against Israel that has been in effect for over 40 years (long before Israel came into the administration of the disputed territories), and to renounce the slanderous equation that "Zionism is racism". But there is no leaning on the Arabs who, just barely having escaped their annihilation, are now as insolent and as arrogant as before. By leaning on Israel and by the constant repetition of the shopworn mantra of "land for peace", the President and the Secretary of State are endangering the only democracy in that wide area of the world and are instead giving comfort to the tyrannical Arab regimes, who are no friends of ours. The pressure is being put in the wrong place and it is applied in the wrong direction.

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assumptions about these women. It also suggests that they are the audience she has in mind. She's fond of soap opera allusions ("Time has stopped. So do our hearts, each time a clinch on 'One Life to Live' is punctuated by the words 'We interrupt this program to bring you a special report [about the war]'"), and her metaphors are typically homey, no matter the subject: "Most people agree that Saddam Hussein is pond scum and that he can't be permitted to take Kuwait as though it were the lunch money of the littlest kid in class." Or, "The ground war took less time than it takes to get over the flu."

Men in Quindlen's columns have not moved much beyond the platitudes of the '50s either. They're controlled by their bosses, they don't have time for the kids, they don't want to change diapers. (She once devoted a whole column to the idea that men need women around to eat right.) Unlike their female counterparts, however, these men are continually criticized. One "Life" column actually proclaimed that "Women are Just Better." Another divided the adult male species into irresponsible yet fun Boyfriends and boring yet dutiful Husbands. A recent column compared men to "servile and salivating" dogs (while women are like "free and independent" cats).

In proclaiming the superiority of "female" qualities, Quindlen is very much in a post-feminist vogue. It's unclear whether she believes that these virtues are genetically determined, or whether she accepts the prevailing psychological interpretation of other theorists, such as Carol Gilligan, who argue that an infant daughter's sexual identification with her mother fosters a sense of attachment to others. Both theories try to turn the tables on the traditional disparagement of these qualities, but they end up with the same retrograde implications. You can argue that the heartless public world needs enlightenment from the guardians of the domestic and the private sphere, but it's an argument that can easily backfire: if the realm of the home is so rich and so pure, why should women be eager to leave it? Hasn't the "superior" quality of selflessness often allowed women to become victims of exploitation and harassment by their employers (let alone batterings by their husbands)? If women do have a greater capacity for intimacy and relationships, why does it follow that this "strength" should be applied to all aspects of life, especially at the expense of rationality? Surely the world is a lot more complicated than the "web of relationships... sustained by a process of communication" that Gilligan

has argued women believe it to be.

Quindlen seems dead to the fact that she is battering upon some of the hoariest and most demeaning images of women. The limits of her perspective were perhaps nowhere so clear as in her recent writing about the Gulf war, during which she presented herself not merely as Woman, but also as Mother. Here, too, she seemed taken by the fashionable theory that instructs us that mothers, because of their mothering, are our ideal teachers, uniquely qualified to tell us what's wrong with the world. Mothers know how to help the homeless, the minorities, the handicapped, the aged—all because they've had to rear children.

**T**he centerpiece of motherhood politics is the issue of war and peace. Life givers can't be life takers, and so on. Quindlen's treatment of this issue exposes the inadequacies of maternal analysis. "War has a human face," Quindlen wrote in January. "This is a good thing. It is a good thing to write a story about people as well as programs and policies because it makes us understand. . . . All of this war will be one little person after another." Certainly it needs to be asked of a war whether it's worth a single human life. But that's hardly the end of thought on the matter. Looking at individual soldiers doesn't quite help us to understand the larger moral, historical, and political issues involved. War is of course a puerile, uncivilized way to resolve conflicts. But only rational analysis, which Quindlen avoids, can determine if a conflict can be solved without war.

Quindlen clearly believes that if pacific, life-affirming women ran the world, we would never get into these messes. That would be nice, but this logic (so to speak) cannot account for Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi, and Golda Meir, none of whom flinched from the use of force. Were they coerced by patriarchal power structures? OK, then why do so many mothers—oozing "biophilia," that essential maternal trait—fail to raise peace-loving sons? Perhaps that is the influence of the fathers. Or perhaps males are genetically programmed for violence. If so, how are our women leaders supposed to relate nonviolently to the men who might still run a country or two?

The women who lead states should earn their position not with some innate or learned peacefulness, but with an ability to discuss and decide difficult matters rationally. And the women who write political commentary should be read not because they have some gender-based talent for empathy, but because they have something to say. Our standard,

arid political discourse would surely benefit from a certain amount of immersion in concrete human experience; but this is not the same as sentimentality, and it is not women's work. In her insistent presentation of herself as a type—"a woman columnist with children and an urban feminist sensibility," as she puts it—Quindlen betrays her lack of trust in herself as a writer capable of detachment even from womanhood, as a thinking human being with a mind that can get beyond the body. "Perhaps it was a particularly female thing about me," she once wrote, "but I did not feel qualified, when I was young, to be an individualist. I felt that by birth I was part of a group." Maybe it's time that Quindlen, like Maggie, began to listen to her own voice. It might prove to be one of her more useful object lessons. ●

### CORRESPONDENCE *continued from page 6*

sities have speech codes. I have no idea whether that figure is accurate. However, my own experience is not in accord with Mr. Kinsley's argument as to who or what was involved in creating university speech codes. In the 1970s the Smith faculty adopted a code designed to protect invited speakers from being shouted down or being prevented from speaking by force. The adoption of the code, which was overwhelmingly supported by liberals on the faculty, came after a number of nasty incidents. I would hope that Mr. Kinsley supports such speech codes, civil libertarian that he is.

On the other hand, some of the newer codes, two of which were overturned by the courts, have attempted to interfere with speech by stating that any stereotype (such as that men are, in general, stronger than women) is punishable even up to being fired from the university. The Smith faculty again voted overwhelmingly to reject a code of that kind that the administration sought to press upon us, and the great majority of liberals agreed that it should be rejected.

I trust that Mr. Kinsley, when he thinks about it, recognizes the difference between these two kinds of codes. He doesn't seem to in his column, and he gives conservatives far too much credit when he asserts that they were the authors of both types of faculty initiatives. Indeed, as the writings of Irving Howe, Eugene Genovese, and Nat Hentoff demonstrate, liberals and many radicals at least are as concerned with threats to academic freedom as are conservatives.

In any event, thanks to publications like *TNR* and other journals, some of the advocates of repression are now saying

that they really didn't mean it after all. That's all to the good.

STANLEY ROTHMAN

*Northampton, Massachusetts*

The writer is Mary Huggins Gamble Professor of Government at Smith College.

#### To the editors:

Michael Kinsley observes that conservative students are more visible now than in his own salad days. But that does not prove what he thinks it does. In fact, conservatism is gaining strength in reaction to the radicalization of the curriculum and of student life.

Mr. Kinsley turns the charge of orthodoxy against those who want to retain required courses in Western culture. This, which would be clever if it were original, merely reflects the prevailing dogma, that the new regimen of uniformly radical studies represents a diversity of supposed female, black, Third World, and homosexual points of view, while the great works of Western civilization present only a single (white, male) point of view. Surely Mr. Kinsley has actually read some of the latter works and has only forgotten for the moment that they present a true diversity of ideas, including revolutionary ideas and liberating principles now being trivialized and distorted on American campuses.

The wealth of knowledge, the enormous diversity of ideas, and the vigorous debate embodied in the Western tradition are the enemies of the shallow radicalism and narrow orthodoxy that now reign in the academy. That is why the proponents of the latter have as their first priority to destroy the former.

THOMAS SHORT

*Gambier, Ohio*

The writer is associate professor of philosophy at Kenyon College.

### Rights to life

#### To the editors:

Your Notebook item "Carter Xiaoping" (May 20) unfairly implies that the former president sold out his principles on human rights by agreeing that socialist nations such as the People's Republic of China honor human rights in a different and compelling way. But hundreds of us heard Mr. Carter make exactly the same argument in August 1989, in Atlanta, to the American Political Science Association. The problem is not that he is a born-again "Beijing apologist"; it is that he has never understood the difference between a human (or better, natural) right and desirable social policy. In other words, he never had any principles on human rights to begin with.

KEN MASUGI

*Washington, D.C.*