Amis buys his round of poison

Blokeish bad humour from the lounge bar

CRAIG BROWN

Kingsley Amis

MEMOIRS
392pp. Hutchinson. £16.99.
0 09 174533 0

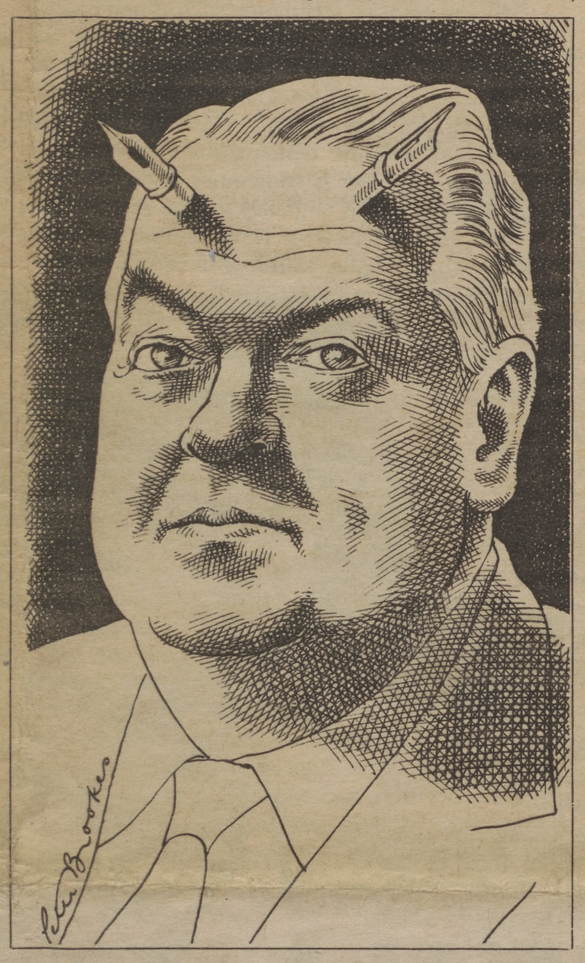
One of Kingsley Amis's most commonly praised talents is to catch hold of words floating in the air in pubs and at parties and to hold them up to ridicule through constant repetition. No one who read *Jake's Thing*, for instance, could ever again use the word "Cheers" without first placing around it as many ironical quotation marks as he could muster.

Over the years, "thing" itself has become an Amis word, along with "sort of thing" and "or something" and "that kind of thing". Having first been employed primarily in direct speech in his novels, largely by his confused male heroes, these shorthand symbols of robust good blokeishness have gradually seeped into Amis's own voice. In *Memoirs*, there is a "thing" on almost every page. In the very first paragraph of his preface, he writes that, "Writing directly about my own [life] would anyway not appeal to me, even if I had a good memory for that kind of thing." The fourth paragraph begins, "The kind of thing I have written here . . .", and a little later in the same paragraph we are told, "I have invented dialogue, but nothing that is material or is not the sort of thing that would have been said at the relevant moment." It comes as a pleasant surprise when the address and date at the end of this two-page preface is crisply given as "Primrose Hill, May 1990", rather than "Anyway, Primrose sort of Hill thing, Mayish 19-bloody-90. Or something."

The preface makes it clear that the book will not be a connected narrative, but a series of sketches, mostly about people "I have known more or less well". Amis will, he writes, be keeping himself "away from centre stage". The things and the more-or-lesses also make it clear that this stage-right narrator, this Amis bloke, will be rabbiting on in anecdote, assuming the whiskery tones of a bluff and seemingly trusty retired major, of the type that so often crops up, somewhat sketchily drawn, in the works of Agatha Christie.

Amis's chosen tone, decked in the chumminess, tetchiness and naughtiness of the lounge bar, appears relaxed and all-embracing, but is in fact extremely limiting. It is perfectly designed for prickly and very funny descriptions of self-aggrandizing strangers. Among these strangers, each lampooned and dismissed in two or three pages, are Lord Snowdon, Arnold Wesker, Roald Dahl and Tom Driberg. Amis met them once or twice, found them abnormally irritating and/or absurd, and now wipes them out with blissfully nasty anecdotes, related with his singular skill for the mimicking of affectation. In these sketches, the author's impatience with his victims seems to raise his perception of conversational idiocies and physical peculiarities to almost astral heights, from where he looks down and cackles. Enoch Powell's eyes "were gleaming, but not in the corners". Roald Dahl, advising Amis to turn to children's books ("That's where the money is today, believe me"), shakes his head and says, "I hate to think of a chap of your distinction having to worry about money at your time of life." Tom Driberg chases Martin Amis five times around a bed before clapping him on the shoulder, saying "Fair enough, youngster" and departing. Lord David Cecil "probably had a desk-compartment with a coded label meaning FORMS FOR FUCKING FOOLS WHO ARE FED UP WITH ME JUST POCKETING MY FEE AND WANT A SERIOUS SUPERVISOR". Mark Thatcher is guilty of "over-attentive conduct" with his cigarette-lighter. These sketches of fleeting encounters with the famous are well matched to the saloon-bar tones, for their mercilessness is not encumbered with friendship, and the targets fit well into the savagery of the anecdotal form. Any anthologist of twentieth-century gossip would find perfect examples of the genre in these sections of *Memoirs*.

But when he ventures beyond the confines of gossip, Amis still remains lumbered with his blokeish bad humour, his thingy sort of style. Occasionally, he hoists the white flag. Iris Murdoch has been, he says, "a pal for decades", and there he stops. She is a woman, she is intelligent, and he likes her: these three qualifications mean, it would appear, that he is unable to find a way of including her. When he does write of old friends he admires – George Gale, Philip Larkin, Peter Quennell and one or two others – he either ruins it all by inserting a wantonly offensive piece of information into his appreciation, or else his prose puts on its Sunday Best, becomes stiff and formal and cranks out the old hymns he elsewhere spends such care in lampooning. "There is nothing to beat his welcoming smile and handshake," he writes of Quennell, "his reliable cheerfulness undimmed by some nasty surgery a couple of years ago and its continuing effects." This could be lifted from a speech by a rather distant personnel manager before awarding a watch to a cleaning-lady on the occasion of her imminent retirement. But at least here the personnel manager struggles through this appreciation without swerving into abuse. In other appreciations, notably of Larkin, it is as if Amis is swimming slowly but surely under water, carefully slogging through the praise stroke by stroke, when all of a sudden he feels he can't go any further without



rising to the surface and taking a quick slug of the air of misanthropy. Though he maintains that Larkin was his best friend and his favourite, or at least second favourite, poet, the only extracts he quotes from his verses are included to show that he wasn't quite all he cracked himself up to be. One extract is from a dirty verse, and is succeeded by the comment, "That too I am fairly sure Philip would not have wanted to see published in his lifetime, perhaps ever, but I think it comes in well here, before we get down to the serious stuff . . .". Another is from "Aubade", after which Amis scorns the extremity of Larkin's fear of death with this almost military wigging: "depression among the middle-aged and elderly is common in the early morning and activity disperses it . . . so if you feel as bad as you say then fucking get up, or if it's too early or something then put the light on and read Dick Francis". Having ticked off Larkin for meanness, and emotional parsimony, and fear of failure, Amis once again puts into print something that he knows his best friend would have hated, a silly story of drunken incontinence. "He went on to extract from me some sort of promise not to go round repeating it, which I interpreted as a ban on any sort of publication", explains Amis. "But now I consider myself released from that undertaking . . . ." That "some sort of" in the phrase "some sort of promise" is most telling: it means that so long as you throw a clubby sheet of pub lingo over any promise, it is immediately transformed into "some sort of promise" and can then be broken for a bit of a chuckle.

Amis's most venomous bitchiness is, however, reserved not for best friends, or family (though he describes his granny as "a large dreadful hairy-faced creature"), or even worst enemies, but for old friends who, for one reason or another, never achieved the success that once seemed their due. John Wain, John Braine, James Michie, Philip Toynbee and Bruce Montgomery are all kicked savagely, dead or alive, their main crime having been worldly failure. There are suggestions that the author even considers death itself as some sign of failure, for he takes a particularly repulsive pleasure in standing beside graves mouthing the language of mourning while all the time tapping a merry beat with his feet. "Into limbo too went Philip, even before his death", he writes of Philip Toynbee. Of Carson McCullers he simperingly declares, "But one must not allow any sort of grin to enter here, in view of the sufferings and failures of Miss McCullers's short life; she died aged fifty in 1967, having evidently published only one book after the work I mention, which had come out when she was thirty-four." After a jaundiced appreciation of John Braine, in which he declares his embarrassment at having one of that author's "unreadable" books dedicated to him, he recalls, "My last and saddest memory of John" which, inevitably, portrays him as a drunken bore at Bertorelli's. Given the widespread view that Amis's first novel was also his best (even the most enthusiastic reviewers tend to gush with what must seem to the author depressing regularity, "His best since *Lucky Jim*"), it seems that the special care he takes to beat up those contemporaries whose bright futures now lie behind them could be a means of bolstering his own success, of rubbing that knighthood and those sales in their mouths, lest they question how far he, too, has progressed. Similarly, his extraordinary memory for times long past when A did not buy his round, or he had to buy lunch for B, eventually calls his own generosity into question. Which is the meaner, the man who forgot his wallet, or the man who thirty years later remembers the man who forgot his wallet?

Particularly when writing of his period as a don, Amis tries to have it both ways. It is hard to square the grouchy old philistine with the great educator, for whom Cambridge supervisions "offered the only context I have found in which serious, detailed and exhaustive discussion of literature is socially practicable", yet both rub shoulders in these pages. Almost every book mentioned is "unreadable", or, as in the case of *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, "a piece of pretentious bullshit". Donne is "intolerably convoluted"; *The Aspern Papers* by Henry James is "the only work of his that I have ever read to its conclusion". Yet Amis often boasts of his great interest in literature, "a rarity then as now".

One of the most bizarre side-effects of the formulation, or simplification, of the Amis persona into a conduit for autobiography lies in his tailoring of the past so as to fit more comfortably his paunchy attitudes of the present. Respect, love, interest or understanding that he once held towards others is now deemed never to have existed. Thus, in 1957, in an essay reprinted in *What Became of Jane Austen?* (1970), he was able to write this about his one meeting with Dylan Thomas, who, having grown too drunk, was cold-shouldered by Amis and his gang:

> I am ashamed now to think how openly we must have seemed to be dropping Thomas, how plain was our duty not to drop him at all. Our general disappointment goes to explain our behaviour, but does not excuse it . . . . At the time I thought if he wanted to detach himself and talk to the students he would have found some means of doing so: I have since realized that he was far too good-natured ever to contemplate giving anybody the cold shoulder . . . . One of us, at any rate, should have found a way of assuring him that he was being regarded that evening, not with a coltish mixture of awe and suspicion, but sympathetically. Then, I think, we should have seen that his attitude was the product of nothing more self-aware or self-regarding than shyness.

Rewriting the same account thirty years on, Amis excises this passage, substituting,

> I will cut the account short at that point. There was a return to the pub but still no pub performance. Perhaps he thought we were not worth it. Very likely we really were not worth it. Who cares? . . . Thomas was an outstandingly unpleasant man, one who cheated and stole from his friends and peed on their carpets.

The style has slackened, the sympathy and the regret have been expunged, Thomas is written off, truth has gone tabloid, and all for the sake of a fancy-dress posture. It is often said of actors that off-stage they turn into their roles, and of dog-owners that they grow like their dogs. Likewise, Amis has created his autobiographical persona along the lines of one of his most comically pitiless characters. I rather think it might be the elderly gent in *Ending Up* who pours urine over his old friend as he lies sleeping so as to foster the suggestion of his enemy's incontinence, hoping that by so doing he will soon have the house to himself.

Exercise

When I suddenly made out I was near to the edge,
I could balance still, and not shake or shiver,
But I couldn't tell with mind or hand or foot
How near it was; or for that matter
If what I took for the brink was in fact the brink;
Or on the other hand whether
An opening-out of the sky around me
Made it *seem* like the brink.

And naturally I knew this was all pretend,
But I couldn't remember how many or few
Imagined yards I'd left before I would take
One step too many, and fall down over or through
Crash and finish the game.
I had to be sure it was true
That the path behind could lead me down again.
I had to find voice enough to *Stop the Game*!

ALAN BROWNJOHN

The George Burns of the counter-culture

PHIL BAKER

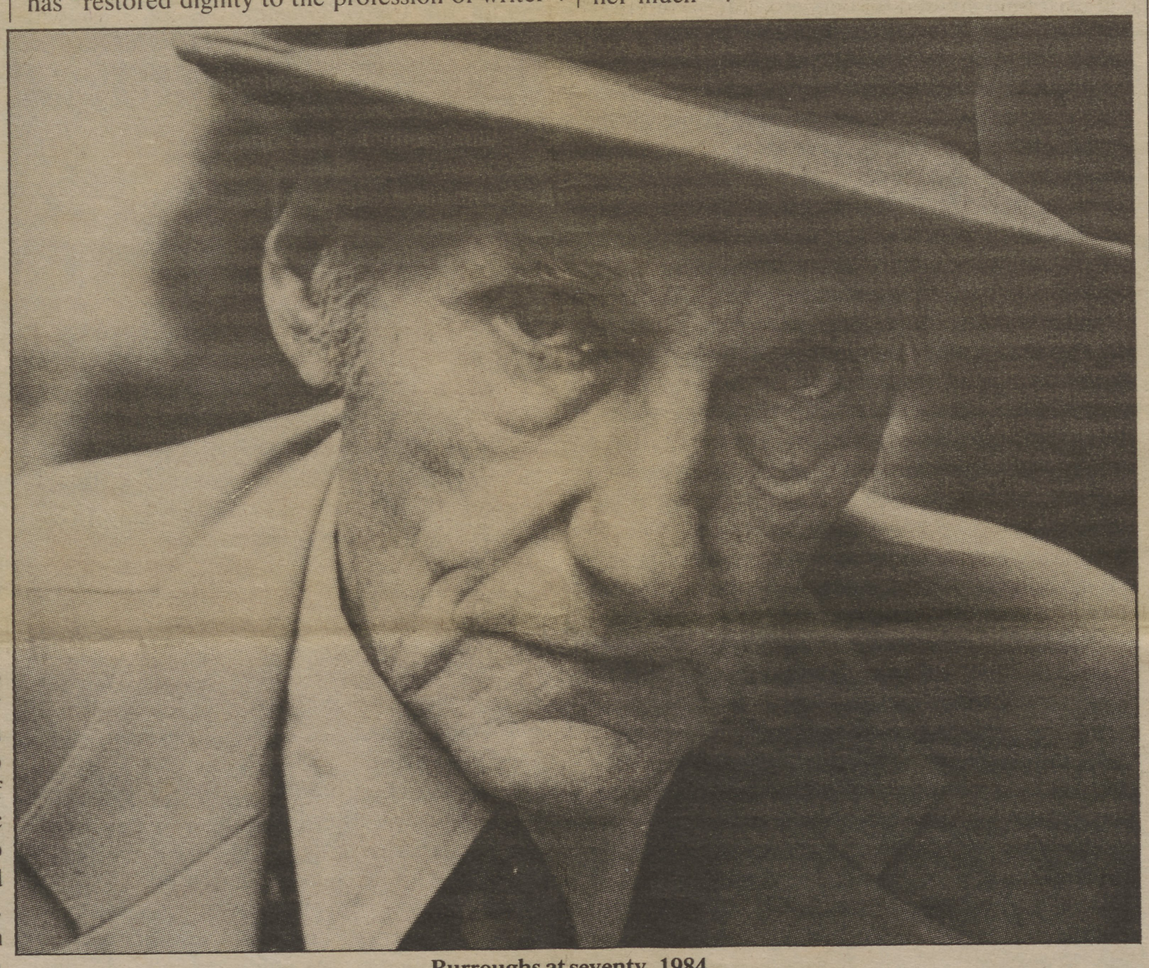
Ted Morgan

LITERARY OUTLAW: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF WILLIAM BURROUGHS
659pp. Cape. £20.
0 370 31586 3

William Burroughs is descended from Yankee inventors and Southern preachers, with Uncle "Poison" Ivy Lee on the preaching side of the family pioneering what we now call PR: "Poison's" business included $33,000 a year from I. G. Farben to improve Hitler's image in the United States. Burroughs was expensively and miserably educated at Los Alamos Ranch School under a regime of pederastic frontiersmanship, and the Los Alamos atom-bomb project later caused him to feel linked with Hiroshima in a way which focused his nostalgic temperament on the America which he thought existed before the country's "atomic loss of innocence". He once asked in a restaurant for "a bass fished in Lake Huron in 1920". Skewed innocence is integral to Burroughs's personality: when a student at Harvard, he still claimed to believe that babies were born through the navel.

Ted Morgan in *Literary Outlaw* traces Burroughs's experimental descent into criminality and drug addiction, and details his years in Mexico, Tangier, Paris and London. He felt that Mexico was his kind of place, and he seems to have been right; after killing his wife there, he spent only thirteen days in prison, and his lawyer sold him an ounce of heroin. London was less congenial; his evenings at the Angus Steak House in Piccadilly Circus were solitary ones, though later he lived with a rent boy who was alcoholic and violent but who had the gift – greatly valued by the master of "cut-up" – of talking gibberish in his sleep. Psychic experimentation and a belief in magic are shown to be central to his work – with writing books and sending curses two as aspects of the same activity. Burroughs also believed himself to be an expert on psychoanalysis and considered taking it up as a career: the latter making it all the more disappointing that Morgan tells us so little about his analysis with Freud's former colleague Paul Federn – one of several notable omissions.

Morgan employs techniques such as inner monologue and stream of consciousness with tact and fluency to enhance his casual and mimetic style. He leans heavily on indirect speech from Burroughs's autobiographical books and on 100 hours of taped interviews, and the demarcation between biographer and subject is sometimes uncertain. This may account for his tendency to take Burroughs at his own estimate, as when he writes that his subject has "restored dignity to the profession of writer". Literary criticism is not Mr Morgan's strong suit. He claims that the hardboiled reportage of *Junky* is in the tradition of *Tristram Shandy*, and writes as if he has been recently converted to the idea that Burroughs might be a major author. Despite this, his book is highly readable. Even the walk-on parts have good lines, and some of the dialogue of the elderly queens and "good ole boys" is as hideously memorable as anything in Burroughs's books. It more than validates his subject's claim to be a recorder and not an inventor (misquoted here in a passage beginning "I am *not* a recording instrument . . ."). Burroughs's self-experimentation recalls De Quincey's fearless surgeon who inoculated himself with hydrophobia. With death and abjection all around him, the stoical Burroughs is an extraordinary survivor, "the George Burns of the counter culture", and he surely owes this to the conservative and puritanical streak which causes him to wear a tie and frown on daytime drinking. Norman Mailer once said that Burroughs resembled "a Vermont farmer who has been married to his wife for sixty years, and the day she dies someone says, 'I guess you're going to miss her a lot, Zeke,' and he says, 'No, never did get to like her much' ".



Burroughs at seventy, 1984.

Inside life

A. M. DANIELS

Taki

NOTHING TO DECLARE: PRISON MEMOIRS
216pp. Viking. £15.99.
0 670 83276 6

A little suffering is like a bit of what you fancy: it does you good. In December 1984, Taki, the *Spectator*'s privileged chronicler of the follies of the rich, went to prison for three months for having imported twenty grammes of cocaine into Britain for his own use. In this memoir of his brief incarceration, he recounts how he emerged from Pentonville a wiser, better and perhaps even a happier man.

One of the reasons *Nothing To Declare* is so engaging is that it is without self-pity. Taki makes no excuses for himself: it was, in effect, "a fair cop, guv". On his own admission, his behaviour was foolish, self-indulgent and criminal; he does not argue that it was the result of intolerable psychological or social pressure, or a childhood trauma, or that the use of drugs, at present illegal, should be permitted and that really he was fighting for a more liberal society.

This freedom from humbug enables him to describe the squalid and disgraceful conditions of British gaols without affecting righteous indignation about them or turning prisoners into unsung heroes or unacknowledged resistance fighters in the class war. Taki thinks that prisoners are the principal authors of their own misfortunes, and it is precisely their failure to accept personal responsibility for their misdeeds that prevents their rehabilitation. They prefer to think of themelves as victims of "the system", which is why they whine and whinge so much; yet there is a profound dishonesty in their world outlook, for in their heart of hearts, they know that what hurts them about prison is not its injustice but rather its justice. It is injustice, says Taki, that is tolerable; Soviet dissidents prove it.

Yet, there is a difference between suffering injustice for a cause, and suffering injustice by accident or through perjury. Perhaps I am naïve to give credence to any of the prisoners I have met, but my impression is that perjury and victimization are far more common in prosecution cases than we like to suppose. Taki sometimes seems to forget that his privilege protected him through all the stages of the criminal justice system, and that a man with his powerful connections is unlikely to be treated in the same way as a semi-literate, unemployed denizen of a slum housing-estate.

The contrast between the life he was leading before his imprisonment and his life in Pentonville could scarcely have been greater, but Taki adapted with resilience. He had, after all, survived wartime Greece and spells as a war correspondent in Vietnam and in Lebanon. His prison memoir is based on a diary he kept (illegally), and is interspersed with witty and pointed reminiscences of his previous existence as a socialite. The richness of his memories, as well as the brevity of his prison sentence, must have sustained him "on the in"; but the memories of most prisoners serve only to embitter them further. Behind most of them lies an ocean of neglect, brutality, squalor, ugliness and deprivation. Taki recognizes that such a background promotes criminality; but also that most people who suffer it do not turn out criminal. This is a puzzle, perhaps the central puzzle of criminology, but Taki is wise enough not to attempt any solution to it.

Taki being Taki (as he himself puts it), he is never less than amusing, and even when he is serious he avoids solemnity by a wide margin. Some of his opinions will no doubt upset *bien pensant* liberals, though even they could not accuse him of mealy-mouthedness. He is an unashamed elitist and makes no claim to love humanity as a whole; his remark that prisoners, especially black ones, are egotists, will not please everyone, and will be dismissed out of hand as the ravings of a neo-fascist – which he is not. In fact he is a moralist. Satire requires a moral standpoint, and for years he has satirized the rich. He is similarly outraged by the prisoners' lack of self-knowledge. His memoir is slight, but amusing and honest, and in these canting days that is high praise.

Experimenting with femininity

SUZANNE RAITT

Herbert Lottman

COLETTE: A LIFE
344pp. Secker and Warburg. £17.99.
0 436 25746 7

Colette on stage was mesmerizing. "A prodigious spurt of energy, a lyrical offering of herself", wrote her husband's friend Bonmariage; and a Brussels reviewer, writing about the infamous play *La Chair*, chose to describe "the violent ripping of the tunic that lets gush out the tasty fruit of the breast". In performance Colette's body seemed to demonstrate the satiation of many appetites; and she herself responded with intensity to all promises of pleasure: to women and to men, as well as to the luxuries of the natural world.

Sidonie Gabrielle Colette was born in rural Burgundy in 1873. Later on in life she was to mythologize her childhood home as an earthly paradise. When her family was forced to leave their village, in 1890, Colette, already careless and obsessive, offered herself to the journalist-dandy Willy, fourteen years her senior. Returning years later in bitterness to justify her choice, she wrote that "a man without scruples turns an ignorant girl into a prodigy of dissolution". But the "ignorant" Colette had already grown her hair five feet long, so that heads turned in the street.

Colette's marriage to Willy, in 1893, taught her many things. It took her to Paris; it exposed her to betrayal and infidelity; and it demanded that she write. For in 1895 Willy opened a "novel-factory"; and Colette was one of his first pupils.

Later, in *My Apprenticeships* (1936), she would berate Willy for imprisoning her and exploiting her talent. But the speed and the fluency with which she filled her school notebooks with the famous *Claudine* novels suggest that Willy was allowing her to indulge – perhaps to discover – another kind of gluttony. Willy wanted the "spicy details" of school; and Colette obliged, living in a twilight world of memory and fantasy somewhere between Colette and Claudine. The success of *Claudine at School* in 1900 sent budding Claudines, and lesbian couples, flocking to the Willys' flat. Willy received them, elsewhere, in a bachelor apartment.

In 1905, the Willys separated, and Colette, now an actress, toured Europe under the protection of her lover the Marquise de Belbeuf, known as Missy. In *The Pure and the Impure* (1941) Colette wrote of a woman's "certainty in caressing a body whose secrets she knows"; Missy managed Colette's public image, as writer, as actress and as lesbian. But it was to secrecy that Colette returned. Lying to Missy, she gorged on what she called the "rather extraordinary carnal energy" of Henry de Jouvenel (she later slept with his son). Colette and Jouvenel were married in 1912. Colette looked on their daughter, born in 1913, as a strange biological puzzle. Sex, for her, was not to do with other people.

The senses were her passion, and language was a kind of sixth sense. She wrote greedily, as she ate: *Chéri* (1920), *Gigi* (1944), and numerous novels, stories, and articles. The sensuality and delicacy of her prose, sadly hardly quoted in *Colette: A life*, are celebrated. In her last years, crippled by arthritis and cared for by her third husband Maurice Goudeket (who was interned by the Germans during the Second World War), her lust for life was unimpaired. She died, in 1954, gesturing towards the window and crying "Look!"

Not much of her incandescence is allowed on to the careful pages of Lottman's book. Cautious and reliable, Lottman seems uneasy, as well he might. For Colette lived a series of endless projections: as peasant, as cat, as Claudine, as lesbian. Colette's images, whether her own or other people's, suggest that her life is best understood as an experiment in femininity, compulsive, restless, and combative. But here, the question of her identity nags at the narrative, rather than impelling it. In a story about repletion, we are continually frustrated.

Lottman's preoccupation with Colette's "innocence" is misplaced. We are not her confessors (although at the end of her life she would wonder "where to lie henceforth? Or to confess?"). We are her posterity. We need to understand who she was and what her actions and words meant in the context of her day. Lottman summarizes the complex publishing history of *Retreat from Love* with: "for better or worse . . . we read the book today with the naughty parts left in." But Colette was not "naughty": she was not, for most of her life, a child. Lottman's indecision about his own relation to this crude and enigmatic figure prevents him from attempting any analysis of her cultural significance. We already have Joanna Richardson's sane and detailed biography (1983), and Michèle Sarde's psychoanalytic account of Colette's life and sexuality (1978). It is difficult to see what Lottman felt he was adding to these. But perhaps it is a tribute in the end to Colette, that even from the grave she gets under our skin.

Life as an unsolved whodunit

PETER SHERWOOD

Josef Skvorecky

THE MIRACLE GAME
Translated by Paul Wilson
436pp. Faber. £13.99
0 571 15267 8

The three contemporary Czech prose stylists best known outside their own country could hardly be more different. While Bohumil Hrabal's storytelling is so deeply rooted in the poetry of his native tongue that he may be the only one worth learning Czech for, Milan Kundera's philosophical flights seem all too comfortable on the Continent. Josef Skvorecky, based in Canada for more than twenty years, occupies some intriguing middle-ground. His considerable and varied output is often Czech in theme and emphasis, yet it is highly accessible in style and concerns, even in translation. It is no surprise to learn that Skvorecky's unpretentious but undoubtedly daring attempt to span East and West has a solid foundation in his work as a publisher, whose smuggled-in, small-format volumes of Havel, Kundera, and many others, provided vital transfusions for the anaemic intellectual life of his homeland in the years of "normalization" after 1968.

The nineteen years that have passed since Skvorecky wrote and published *Mirákl* have seen Czechoslovakia's dream revolution come and go, and the appearance of an English version now is inevitably a harsh test of its qualities. The novel reintroduces Danny Smiricky, Skvorecky's jazz-loving, skirt-chasing, whodunit-obsessed not-so-*alter ego*, who is perhaps more familiar to the English reader from *The Engineer of Human Souls* (the sequel to the present work, but translated in 1985), though he made his first appearance in *The Cowards* (1959), the novel whose language and view of the Second World War marked a breakthrough in postwar Czech writing. The setting is the Communist takeover of Czechoslovakia in 1948, with young Smiricky landing a dream job at a girls' school out in the sticks, where through post-coital exhaustion he misses the event of the title: the stirring of a wooden statue of St Joseph in the local church. The Party denounces the "miracle" as a counter-revolutionary attempt to dupe the masses, while the parishioners claim that a secret police ploy has divinely misfired and rally round the charismatic local priest, who dies under interrogation. Officially buried but never forgotten, the case is re-opened in 1968 and as the full story of machinations with magnets, pulleys and pegs unfolds to the clanking of tanks during the Soviet-led invasion, it turns – perhaps a little too effortfully – into a metaphor for the "miracle" of the Prague Spring itself.

As the novel skilfully juxtaposes the takeover and the invasion through spectacular cinematic jump-cuts, a marvellous panorama of Czech life over two decades emerges. Skvorecky's characteristic combination of intimate knowledge and detached irony is always enjoyable and usually convincing, whether it is a single evocative line (the writer Bukavec "read his resolution in a perfectly beautiful voice crying out in the wilderness") or the fully-rounded, profoundly sympathetic portrayal of Danny's school principal Ivana Hrozna, a Marxist with a heart. The novel teems with well-drawn figures, from jazzmen to schoolgirls, intellectuals to priests, pious old ladies to true Communist believers. None the less, its high points are the manic set-pieces which encapsulate in all its painful absurdity life behind the Iron Curtain in the early 1950s and for far too long thereafter.

These resist summary in the way the best anecdotes do, but outstanding among them are the Heuriger-induced revelations of the visiting Russian writer Arashidov about the mechanics of getting a left-wing English writer's book translated and published in the Soviet Union; these say more about literary life under hardline Communism than many an academic treatise. And millions forced through what passed for an education system in those days could vouch for the bitter truth at the heart of Danny's hilarious account of his students' Social Science exams.

Inevitably, some detail has been sacrificed for the sake of the wider theme. Thus while it is true, for example, that under bleakest Stalinism any Western author was anathema, it is a pity to illustrate this with Hemingway, whose *The Old Man and the Sea* was hailed as a stylistic-symbolic masterpiece from the early 1950s onwards and is still probably the only one of his works known to Central and East European monoglots over forty. Still, there is no one with a clearer understanding and deeper loathing of the spiritual wretchedness of Communism as practised by the Stalinists and their successors; at least, no one who is as much fun to read. For the English-reading public this is largely thanks to fellow-Canadian Paul Wilson's often inspired translation into a North American idiom of which Skvorecky, himself a translator and a professor of English, may justly be proud.

In fact, though this novel comes recognizably from the land of Kafka and Hašek's Schweik, it owes even more to Skvorecky's love of American literature and to a nostalgia for the 1960s which persists in Czechoslovakia to this day. These elements are distinct sources of strength in the book (though the hero's adolescent view of his nubile charges has not worn well), but their ultimate failure to gell is a major weakness. This shows especially towards the end, when after more than 400 pages the wit and exuberance can no longer sustain the increasingly explicit burden:

> She laughed.
>
> "Life is an aphorism, right? But aphorisms work because the wit in them overshadows reality. They are half-truths."
>
> Yes, you're right, Laura, I said to her, but only in my mind. Concentration camps are a half-truth, full employment is a half-truth. The life of the body is a half-truth; the death of the soul a half-truth. But what, Laura, is the whole truth?
>
> There was nothing I could do but try to resolve this *nescio* in an old, tried-and-true fashion. I put on a wry face. Life is a whodunit, the perpetrator is truth, and no-one ever runs the perpetrator to ground, so the whodunit is a bad one. That's an aphorism too.
>
> Is it also a half-truth?

Readers may be interested to note that the pile of books shown in the dust-jacket illustration for *The Miracle Game* includes copies of Lenin's *The Development of Capitalism* – in Hungarian translation – and the Hungarian periodical *Building the Party*.

Out of the darkness

RADHAKRISHNAN NAYAR

David Dabydeen

THE INTENDED
245pp. Secker and Warburg. £13.99.
0 436 20007 4

The main concern of David Dabydeen's first novel is the social and cultural atomization of Britain's younger generation of coloured immigrants. Narrated in the first person, it tells the story of a boy from the Hindu community of Guyana, transplanted when about ten to a run-down district of south London, leaving his family behind him. He spends his teenage years in a Borstal and his desperate yearning for family, as well as some kind of sustaining cultural identity, pervades this work. A major theme of *The Intended* is the precariousness, the largely make-believe nature, of the Indian cultural identity of his original community in Guyana. In London, the boy is utterly marginal in English society, but scarcely less so in the Asian one.

The only thing which gives him a solid footing in life is academic aptitude – especially for literature – which provides him with serious, authentic values, a sense of how life is perhaps actually lived in some England away from the fetid swamp of the permissive society as found in a fictional south London. Two principal characters, friends of the hero, are fellow-Asians Shaz and Patel. The first becomes a pimp; the second takes to making cheap pornographic films. In part simply mercenary, they are also victims of an all-pervading cultural decadence, to cope with which requires unusual intellectual and moral strength – such as only the hero has. Shaz and Patel are drawn convincingly and without a trace of sentimentality. Bits and pieces of "Asian" virtues cling to them: for example, Shaz is paying his mother's mortgage from the money he makes from his whores. When the hero is finally about to leave for Oxford, he presents him with a hundred pounds and admonishes him never to come back to Balham.

The most arresting character in the book is indubitably Joesph, a Rastafarian whom the hero befriended in Borstal. Joseph has read nothing; but hearing talk about *Heart of Darkness*, he becomes obsessed with the idea of making a film about it. This leads him to act out grotesque scenes of make-believe film production with a stolen video camera. He is hooked into a private version of Rastafarianism, of which he can give only the vaguest definition: "all he wanted to do was to learn black history and spread love and feelings to everybody". Dabydeen gives us Joseph's crazy interpretations of Conrad straight:

> "And don't you think", he said, "that when Marlow say nothing about Kurtz in the end, is because nothing left to say, because Kurtz become nothing? He become a word, just a sound, just the name 'Kurtz', like the colour 'black'? Conrad break he down to what he is, atoms, nothing, a rumour, a black man."

With this extraordinary but believable character, the author seems to be saying that that "high" civilization, one of whose expressions is the Conrad story, pushes such people into darkness. The complex reasons for that state of affairs is one of the novel's subjects.

This impressive first novel shows an unusual combination of qualities: ruthless presentation of people and situations, deep concern, and a flair for linguistic imitation. The author's seriousness, and his eschewing of softening fantasy, recall V. S. Naipaul's works about Asian immigrants, but Dabydeen operates on a far grimmer social terrain.

Fractured glasswork

ROGER CARDINAL

Gabriel Josipovici

THE BIG GLASS
119pp. Manchester: Carcanet. £12.95.
0 85635 905 X

Reminiscing in 1946 about the origins of his masterwork "The Bride Stripped Bare by her Bachelors, Even", (commonly known as "The Large Glass"), Marcel Duchamp acknowledged the inspiration of Raymond Roussel, whose curious play *Impressions d'Afrique* he had seen performed in 1911. "The Large Glass", that legendary synthesis of calculation and Dada nonsense, begun in New York in 1915 and "definitively incompleted" in 1923, may thus be supposed to draw at least in part on the principle of *transposition d'art*. "I felt", Duchamp recalls, "that as a painter it was much better to be influenced by a writer than by another painter."

Gabriel Josipovici's novel turns a neat mirror-trick by carrying "The Large Glass" back into the verbal medium, thereby continuing a practice that dates back to his homage to Pierre Bonnard, the triptych, *Contre-jour* (1984). The mode of transposition Josipovici favours is distinctive; rather more than a verbal commentary on the visual work, but not quite a fictionalized biography. What he does first is dip freely into the pictorial motifs, critical readings and biographical data associated with the original work of art, using especially the notes Duchamp himself provided in the *Green Box* of 1934; he then arranges these borrowings within an entirely new frame, displacing the facts of Duchamp's eight years' toil in New York with the story of an artist named Harsnet who initiates *his* so-called "Big Glass" in a Clapham studio in July 1967.

As though to ensure it will not be taken too literally, Josipovici signals the fictional nature of his text in a manner reminiscent of such earlier experiments as his split-level story "Mobius the Stripper" (recently reprinted in *Steps: Selected fiction and drama*). *The Big Glass* is a tale jointly told by two narrators. The artist Harsnet kept a personal notebook during the period of fabrication of his "Glass"; an associate, the critic Goldberg, now transcribes this text on an Olivetti portable, fulfilling what he sees to be a "sacred trust". These narratorial antics throw up irresistible echoes: of Max Brod publishing Kafka's secrets; of Sartre's fictive editors annotating Roquentin's confessions, of the Chinese-box structure of Thomas Bernhard's *Gehen*, a similar experiment in reported speech. Every now and then Harsnet's voice gives way to that of his amanuensis as the latter interpolates his Goldberg variations in the form of marginal notes or letters to Harsnet, which set up a secondary perspective on events. The ornate textual packaging invites us to spot the shifts of voice, watching for faults or refractions of meaning, collating insights into Harsnet's private self at the same time as we monitor his creative stratagems.

The artist of this portrait emerges as a cold-hearted fellow, who humiliates his bride by hiring a lookalike to show up at the registry office in his stead and inserts insulting remarks about Goldberg in the very document he knows the critic will read. A quirkiness reminiscent of Samuel Beckett's monologues comes across in Harsnet's asides, about mundane incidents in the local launderette, or about his making an inventory of the entire contents of his jacket pocket in 1959. Such trivia offset the high earnestness of his commitment to "The Big Glass". The novel is the epic tale of this work, seen less as an artefact of glass, metal and scratched silver than as a property of its maker's mind. Harsnet's nightly notations are a spiritual diary, *The Big Glass* a mirror of his intense aesthetic and metaphysical ponderings.

Harsnet thus equates to that modern type which Jean Starobinski has named the "cerebral hero"; he tenaciously affirms his lucidity, rejects all compromise, strives for an act of radical refusal, some ultimate Dada gesture. Fantasizing about his work as an icon of moral rigour, Harsnet imagines its multiple symbolic impact: the two transparent panes are a "mirror of reality", then a crystal ball, finally a corrosive challenge that will annihilate all museum art. An aura of fanaticism steals up. Harsnet seems scarcely to sleep in his efforts to sharpen his anti-cultural critique, and the implication is strong that he has in mind to kill himself once his *magnum opus* has been exhibited.

Josipovici's fiction both mimics and caricatures history when, unpacked at the Museum of Modern Art in Edinburgh, the panes are found to be smashed. The "advent of the unexpected" triggers off an unlikely zest in Harsnet, who welcomes the chance to play again with the broken toy he had affected to disown, and to participate in its last-minute leap from the cerebral into the emotional. He is overwhelmed by this final, unplanned symbolism: "Only by being shattered could the glass *come alive*."

Despite some infelicities, such as the awkward entry into the fiction of such real-life figures as Saul Bellow and John Cage, *The Big Glass* merits respect for its measured treatment of the theme of creative transcendence, and its moral and aesthetic lessons about the lifting of emotional taboos and the limitations of rigid planning. It remains an open question whether Marcel Duchamp, that ironic iconoclast, would have relished its overtones of redemption; he would probably have enjoyed the book's dour prose, in which cliché is constantly stripped bare by a caustic terseness.

The next two titles which will be published in Bloomsbury's "New Fiction" series on March 25 are *Death of a Soap Queen* by Peter Prince (277pp. Paperback £5.99. 0 7475 0800 3), which was first published in 1990, and *The Champion's New Clothes* (146pp. Paperback £5.99. 0 7475 0830 5) by the Glasgow writer Barry Graham, whose first novel *Of Darkness and Light*, was published in 1989. Forthcoming titles in the series will include *Whilom* by Robert Watson, *The Alchemist* by Mark Illis, *Dangerous Fictions* by Ita Daly and *Coming First* by Paul Bryers.

How the Gestapo policed the Third Reich

RICHARD BESSEL

Robert Gellately

THE GESTAPO AND GERMAN SOCIETY: ENFORCING RACIAL POLICY 1933–1945
297pp. Oxford: Clarendon Press. £35.
0 19 822869 4

One of the more startling revelations which followed the collapse of the German Democratic Republic was the discovery of the true size of its Ministry for State Security – the notorious "Stasi". The former East German regime employed nearly three times as many full-time Stasi officials to control roughly sixteen million Germans as the Gestapo had employed to watch over many times that number (as well as millions of foreign workers) under Hitler. This juxtaposition offers a new slant on the history of the Nazi secret police (the word Gestapo comes from *Ge*heime *Staat*s*po*lizei – meaning Secret State Police), which for decades has been regarded as synonymous with police terror. Why did Nazism apparently require less policing than "real-existing socialism"? How could so small a secret police force – a mere 32,000 full-time employees in 1944 – have effectively terrorized the German population and enforced the criminal policies of the Third Reich?

Robert Gellately completed the manuscript of *The Gestapo and German Society* before the GDR collapsed, but these are precisely the sorts of questions he seeks to answer. After having carefully examined the case records of the Gestapo in Würzburg in Lower Franconia (one of only two places – the other being Düsseldorf – where such files were not destroyed at the end of the war), Gellately has come up with some profoundly disturbing answers. He demonstrates that the Gestapo was far too small "to execute the surveillance of the vast majority of the population", and that "at least some degree of active participation of 'ordinary' citizens was required for the function of most policing or control organizations in Nazi Germany". At first sight, it may seem harmless enough when Gellately observes that "no police can be entirely dependent upon fear engendered by brutal methods, and certainly not the Gestapo". However, his conclusion is chilling: that "it mattered not so much whether the activities of Hitler and his henchmen were popular", nor was it necessary "for Germans to become raucous in their anti-Semitism": the successful enforcement of Nazi racial policies required "that a sufficient number of people come forward, for whatever reason, to offer information when they witnessed non-compliant acts of any kind". And, unfortunately, they did.

The core of Gellately's book concerns how the numerically weak Gestapo enforced the regime's discriminatory policies against Jews and, once the war started, against foreign workers. The key, according to the author, was that so many Germans were prepared to denounce their neighbours, colleagues and relatives for suspicious or oppositional activity, for treating Polish labourers decently or having sexual relations with Jews. Gellately is not the first historian to stress the importance of denunciations for the operations of the Gestapo; Martin Broszat, Detlev Peukert and Reinhard Mann (to whose study based on the Düsseldorf Gestapo files Gellately readily admits his debt) all did so a decade ago. But his volume breaks new ground by exploring systematically how the Gestapo enforced Nazi policies with the aid of denunciations by "ordinary" Germans.

Much of the book consists of descriptions of cases which crossed Gestapo desks; the reader is taken through one case-file after another, and there is little in the way of analysis. Nevertheless, Gellately's observations are valuable and disturbing. Not only does he demonstrate that the Gestapo could not have been effective without the help of the German population; he shows how successful this was in cutting Jews off from their neighbours thus enabling indifference to their fate to become widespread. He also shows how the Gestapo was able to enforce policy in the most private of spheres: sexual relations. Here he underscores the importance of the Nuremberg Race Laws, for after 1935 anyone observed in an ordinary, civil relationship with a Jew of the opposite sex risked being denounced for breaking the law and landing in the hands of the Gestapo.

The discussion of the policing of foreign labourers who were hauled into Germany during the war also is most informative, and presents some revealing contrasts. This became a major security problem for the Nazi authorities, and gave the Gestapo a new field in which to exercise its brutality once the Jews had been shipped off to their deaths. While the Gestapo's treatment of foreign labourers was vicious – especially as the tendency to dispense summary justice and simply to kill the accused increased during the war – the population, in Lower Franconia at least, seemed generally to be more sympathetic to the plight of Polish workers than they had been to the plight of German Jews. Whereas denunciation and Gestapo terror successfully cut the Jews off from the rest of German society, Gestapo brutality became progressively less effective in doing the same to foreign workers (many of whom shared Lower Franconia's Catholic religion, were peasants rather than owners of businesses and provided needed labour for the Germans).

In a sense, the Gestapo's *modus operandi* should not be surprising. All police forces rely on tip-offs and co-operation by the public. What was unique about the Gestapo was not that it relied on the public, but that it was used to enforce such criminal policies and that, in the progressively more lawless environment of the Third Reich, it was able to act outside the law as judge, jury and (literally) executioner. As Gellately points out, the Gestapo consisted of relatively few fanatical Nazis: there was no great purge of the police in 1933, and the Gestapo was comprised largely of career policemen. It was, in effect, professional policing gone mad.

This suggests an area which might have been explored at greater length. If the Gestapo's methods were in many ways normal, if its personnel consisted largely of career policemen, and if – as Gellately states in his conclusion – "a responsible account" of the Gestapo "must also consider the internal dynamic of this police force", then perhaps more space should have been devoted to discussing its pre-history and the general development of police methods in Germany. Were the "political police" dependent on denunciations in Weimar Germany as well? How were questions of sexual morality policed before 1933? Answers to such questions might help place the methods of the Gestapo and its internal dynamic in context. Gellately's main concern is to examine the enforcement of the Nazis' racial policy, and he does that extremely well. Yet it also may be worth considering the Gestapo's history as part of the longer-term development of professional policing, which stretched back before 1933 and continued beyond 1945.

Local loyalties

A. J. NICHOLLS

Celia Applegate

A NATION OF PROVINCIALS: THE GERMAN IDEA OF HEIMAT
273pp. Berkeley: University of California Press. $39.95.
0 520 06394 5

In her thought-provoking and well-researched book, Celia Applegate describes the development of the *Heimat* concept in the Rhineland province of the Palatinate, or "Pfalz", between 1815 and 1955. German patriots devoted much time and energy to furthering the notion of *Heimat*, by which they meant the sense of being rooted in a locality – normally a rural or provincial one. This gave people a distinctive character and thus marked them out from others. Through understanding and appreciating one's *Heimat* one became a better citizen and a better patriot. According to Applegate, this interest in *Heimat* created "a new mythology about the region's contribution to nationhood". Love of *Heimat* implied loyalty to the nation-state. *Heimat* was something good, and even sacred. It might therefore seem that those areas of the world which were not *Heimat* deserved less consideration. For this reason, there has been a tendency in Anglo-Saxon historiography to view *Heimat* enthusiasts in the same light as antisemites or other racist cranks who could be seen as forerunners of National Socialism. There is also the view that obsession with *Heimat* turned Germans away from the pursuit of political emancipation and encouraged passivity or introspection.

In fact, as Applegate demonstrates, a simple-minded equation of *Heimat* with Nazi ideology would be unfair and misleading. The *Heimat* concept appealed to a broad spectrum of Germans, including categories of people, such as Roman Catholics and Social Democrats, who are normally regarded as particularly resistant to the blandishments of German fascism. Nazis, on the other hand, regarded local particularism with distrust. She also points out that *Heimat* enthusiasts did not turn their backs on politics. In the Weimar Republic, for example, active supporters of democracy could well be committed believers in the importance of *Heimat*.

Nevertheless, Applegate's account of events in the Pfalz demonstrates how state officials manipulated the concept to strengthen the authority of the State. From 1815, the Pfalz formed part of the kingdom of Bavaria, whose officials tried to build up a consciousness of *Heimat* in order to instil loyalty towards the Wittelsbach monarchy. By glorifying provincialism, they hoped to legitimize the State. Since the Pfalz had little genuine connection with Bavaria, the relationship between the province and Munich was often strained. Indeed, Wilheim Riehl, the ethnologist employed by Bavaria's King Maximilian II to produce a description of his country and its people, was privately contemptuous of the Pfälzer, regarding them as an awkward lot, suffering from a "false and destructive singularity". The aim of government policy should be to wean them away from this particularist tendency and turn them into loyal Bavarians. Folklore was seen as useful because it was a means of reconciling different social groups which otherwise might come into conflict. The official hand was very evident in attempts to cultivate a sense of *Heimat* in the Pfalz, even if the hiking clubs and beautification societies which proliferated in the late nineteenth century were genuinely popular.

After defeat in the First World War had shattered the tranquillity of the Pfalz and led to its occupation by the French, official concern to stimulate *Heimat* consciousness was intensified. Although the occupation did not involve ceding this area to France, fear of French-supported separatism remained strong. The governments of the Reich and of Bavaria were often at odds in the early 1920s, but they were united in resisting French encroachments. Funds were found to support cultural propaganda in favour of Germany, and stress on the need for loyalty to *Heimat* was a natural component in such activities. The policy was apparently successful, since the French left the Pfalz empty-handed in 1930.

Applegate claims that the notion of *Heimat* was also used by Republican enthusiasts to teach Germans that they enjoyed a common cultural heritage and that their newly acquired democratic rights were to be seen as part of the *Heimat* tradition. *Heimat* did not imply an ivory-tower isolation from politics, but it did mean attempting to play down political and social conflict in the interests of local harmony. The concept may well have been harmless enough in itself, and Applegate is surely right to stress the complexities of the issue. But one cannot help wondering whether an exaggerated respect for *Heimat* was not just another piece of intellectual baggage inherited from Wilhelmine Germany which helped to inhibit the emergence of a liberal and democratic consensus during the Weimar period. The Nazis, for their part, ruthlessly exploited *Heimat* sentiment without making any concessions to regional particularism. After Hitler came to power, *Heimat* groups were subordinated to Nazi associations and the Pfalz itself became part of a border region referred to as the Westmark.

This enabled the *Heimat* associations to re-emerge in 1950, claiming to be untainted by association with the Third Reich, even though many of their members had collaborated with the Nazi regime. Stress on the love of *Heimat* remained strong in German schools and, once again, officials were to the fore in stressing the need for traditional ties to German localities. Bavaria's role was now taken over by that of the new Federal state of Rhineland-Pfalz. But the concept of German families rooted in their local landscape could hardly hold good in the Federal Republic. For one thing there were the millions of uprooted refugees from other parts of the Reich. For another, the Americanization of West German life increased social and physical mobility to such an extent that provincial traditions became anachronistic. It is not without interest that, since the 1960s, the largest employer in the western Pfalz has been the US Government.

A home recital in 1930s Germany. The photograph is reproduced from Dieter Franck's *Die Welt der dreissiger Jahre* (238pp. Munich: Beck. 3 406 30781 7).