
The Young, the Radical and the Ugly

Michael Wolff: *White Kids*; Summit Books; New York.

Louis Filler: *Vanguards and Followers*; Nelson-Hall; Chicago.

by Edward J. Walsh

A marvelous setting into perspective is accomplished by *White Kids*—a gentle first novel—and *Vanguards and Followers*—a thorough and authoritative history of what have been called “youth movements” in America. Together they form a picture of the 1960’s that is ugly and sad, and the 70’s, when the seething wave of youth “consciousness” receded, revealing its mental sludge and maimed victims.

The 80’s will be a decade of looking back. There has been a deluge of books that grabbed at various short-lived delusions of the 60’s and beat them to death as evidence of new “lifestyles.” Charles Reich’s *The Greening of America* was a good example. He and his ideas are now long forgotten, succeeded by the literature of the hot-tub set, the “assertiveness” books that are still making a killing at health-food stores, and retailers of jogging suits.

It is true that these successive flood tides of brutish psychology had an impact in America, though its depth is still being assessed. The glare of inane political ideas and shabby art and literature that are the residue of the 60’s and 70’s confronts any serious writer who seeks earnestly to tell the truth about American life. Thus it is terribly difficult for an honest writer to write honestly these days. He must look for the truth that lasts, that has never changed, for the strength, simplicity and beauty of American idealism, scarred and obscured though it has been in recent decades by an onslaught of

lies masquerading as new ideas. Indeed, one likely assumption on opening Wolff’s *White Kids* is that another young writer has failed, and produced another junk-food paean to jaded denizens of the 60’s culture. The title suggests kinship with the song “White Boys,” featured in the 1968 Broadway musical *Hair*, that expressed more clearly than anything else the political and social grotesqueness of the “youth” movement.

It may be that Wolff set out to write something different than the subtle, elegant book he ended up with. Perhaps he originally wanted to sit in Greenwich Village and produce an account of how the average American is enjoying the Age of Aquarius. Instead, he traveled across the country—the book is only semifictional—visiting people he had known, and meeting others he had not. His first stop is his home town, not named, an old manufacturing city a bus ride from New York; one guesses Paterson, New Jersey—a community of Italians and Presbyterians. Wolff visits former friends, including the father of a local girl who was killed in a battle between terrorists and police in the fiery end of the Symbionese Liberation Army in Los Angeles. The town is a world of supermarkets and churches, schools and factories, of people who grew up there and stayed there. Not everyone, he learns, abandons the blue-collar backwaters for California and New York—though left-wing radicals and writers always do.

He goes then to San Francisco to investigate the aftermath of a horrible crime, the murder of a young woman by her brother, and encounters the people who composed their circle of friends: young, liberal, “involved” in making the social rounds of their banal lives. A twenty-year-old girl with Philadelphia Main Line roots works as a stripper; others, educated and chic, pass their days as coffee-house waitresses and

bookstore clerks, or writing books. And yet Wolff puts in the mouth of the young stripper an offhand but truthful remark: “The mark of a community is whether it can adjust.” This community, in its depressing way, is adjusting to the death of its friend, the rich young woman who played “Scarlett and Zelda and Jackie Bouvier.” Her brother shares a cell with Tex Watson of Manson family notoriety. The illusions are dead and gone. These people are surviving, peaceably though confusedly. Wolff sadly moves on.

He moves on to the later 70’s where his only caricature, Brandon, the complete narcissist, is lost, floundering amid religious fundamentalism and boring wealth. It is to Wolff’s credit that he is gentle with this pitiful victim of the Me Decade, but it may be, too, that he envies Brandon his good looks, his money, his success with women. For Wolff is not a disinterested bystander, he is looking for something to write about. He leaves New York again to meet John and Margaret, newlyweds en route to Florida on their honeymoon. After the cartoon-like Brandon, there is something ineluctably genuine about John and Margaret: ordinary people ordinarily named, with an impulse to unaffected, uncalculating generosity. We *know* they are real: there is a substance and vigor in them that reminds us of others like them we have all known. And we are struck with subtle force by the realization that there are plenty of genuinely good people, unpretentious people, in our own worlds who do every day what is right and fair. It is an exhilarating discovery for Wolff, one that we suspect remains with him.

The final chapter is the best: Wolff the free-lance writer decides to investigate, of all things, talent, competence and bravery in the U.S. Army. He interviews senior officers at places that are culturally light-years from the usual world of the New York magazine writer: Fort Bragg, North Carolina, Fort Camp-

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bell, Kentucky and Fort Benning, Georgia. At Benning he meets Lieutenant Terhune, infantry officer, general's aide and bachelor, a status which, in the Old Army, is still a mark against him. He spends casual days with Terhune, talking about Army life, parachuting, running, taking part in war games. The camp routine of the Army in 1979 is much as it was in 1969 or 1939: dull, repetitive, exhausting, but constant, lasting. It is here that Wolff closes, having learned that life beyond Manhattan continues largely unchanged and unaffected by the tantrums of social reformers, avant-garde politicians and writers who produce boring, standardized manuscripts meant to change the world. That there is a people, a nation of profound *moral* strength that survived the mass assault of the misfits of the 60's and the misanthropes of the 70's is the lesson Wolff learns for himself.

Louis Filler's *Vanguards and Followers* is a backward glance of a different sort. He is a competent historian of American culture, and he provides a perspective on many significant, and some less than significant, nonconformists of American history. Emerson and Whitman wrote long poems about youth, and Poe was a young man when he left his imprint on literature. A host of other flamboyant figures—Charlotte Gilman, Virginia Woodhull and Hutchins Hapgood wrote of and discussed such topics as appealed to “youth” in the 1960's, and were lost in obscurity as others, equally obscure, took their places. Earlier American history, in short, is filled with people who espoused sexual liberation, carefree drug use, pornography, pacifism and violent revolution. Filler has an appropriately matter-of-fact attitude towards them since, in perspective, the majority were idle esthetes, academic scribblers or drunken journalists whose ideas never got anywhere. By the 1950's, however, things began to change. Jack Kerouac was read and idolized by millions of teen-agers,

the first children of the television generation, bored at the prospect of life that offered no challenge except doing better than their parents in material terms. Older generations, at least, had the Depression and a world war to overcome. Youth in the early years of the Media Age had jitterbugging. There must be more to life than that. Events soon proved them right.

It is crucial that Filler has distinguished between “vanguards” and “followers” because, as he tells us in his

“[*Vanguards and Followers* is] an appalling scatter of vignettes and observations basted together by the dubious premise that youth movements throughout American history are unified by virtue of being American. The writing is shallow, incoherent, sentimental and often misleading . . .”

—*Nation*

history of youth movements, those at the front of the line in the protest marches could not always be considered “young” even by the most generous yardstick. In the Catholic Church, of course, the guitar Masses and height-of-fashion habits were the creations of middle-aged priests and nuns, not the young ones. The new left had Tom Hayden and Joan Baez, but Dr. Spock, the Berrigans and Rev. William S. Coffin were no spring chickens. Filler's best portraits of youth, and his saddest, are those of young people as victims. In Haight-Ashbury, at the peak of the flower-child craze, he writes that:

“Tales were endless about the variety of people who swept in and out of the area, the numerous drugs they used, the filth which attended their labors. The indiscriminate coupling, concentrated in Haight, as some called it, among the educated as well as the uneducated, gave a new strength to VD and made it a notorious product of Sixties social history.”

As we watched, the 60's youth movement crashed in tragedy and despair, probably on some particular day in 1973. Filler traces its development closely and perceptively, from the first stirrings of anti-Americanism of cer-

tain civil-rights activists, Stokely Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver among them, which poured out in the hate and violence of the Black Panthers and SNCC. Vietnam, meanwhile, became a catalyst for whites, who addicted themselves to the drugs that were the glue that kept the counterculture together. As time passed, civil rights and war paled as causes, and rock festivals (Woodstock, Monterey) and riots (Chicago) gave the hippies and the radicals a common ground, and brought forth

new leaders like Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, who were more interested in promoting mass slavishness to drugs than civil dissent. The youth movement veered sharply away from rationality; while some deserted to work within the political process for Eugene McCarthy and Robert Kennedy, the true disciples of Rubin-Hoffman-Hayden gathered in Chicago in August 1968. “Yippies” allied with the SDS to tear apart the Democratic National Convention, and, simultaneously, the illusion of youthful “idealism” as the force behind the movement. The SDS was destroyed by internecine warfare as the Weathermen, with their helmets, clubs, flak jackets and Viet Cong flags took charge.

Filler's research is impeccable and he reveals much that has not been noted about even this oft-told tale, such as the close links and mutual admiration between Jerry Rubin and Charles Manson. Manson, widely considered a psychotic aberration, actually moved in the same professional circles as Sharon Tate and his other victims as a pornographic film producer and scriptwriter. Dope was the common ground for Manson and those he killed; they, in fact, were indulging in various drugs when Manson's family arrived that grim night. The circle was complete. On the far left, as

Filler tells us, it was considered "bad taste" to discuss the Manson connection. The violence continued and increased with the Weather Underground bombings of the early 70's. But the movement was crumbling.

Vanguards and Followers is most instructive in chronicling the cultural roots of the movement. Filler studies its causes and its effects asking why, of all the antisocial lurches of nearly two centuries of American mass movements, this cataclysm of youth and the not-so-youthful in the 1960's had become the most effective assault on normalcy and tradition. He blames it partly on the previous generation: war, racism and presumptuous materialism were not the doing of these well-fed children, but these factors pushed them in new directions. The masses of young people in earlier times faced only the immediate concerns of work and survival. But, he explains, this view of youth as victims leaves them without hope or alternatives. While the youth were always followers, the "vanguard" was a misshapen ideology that grew not from middle-class Babbitry, but from liberal intellectual vacuousness.

Filler suggests that society's *acquiescence* in the values and tastes of the counterculture, for the first time in history, raised it to respectability and pushed it to bizarre and deadly excesses. He reminds us that the *New York Times* panned John O'Hara's *Pal Joey* in 1941, though O'Hara had done nothing to rationalize his shabby protagonist. However:

"In the 1960's the *Times* treated as distinguished such authors as Paul Goodman, Norman Mailer, William Burroughs, Henry Miller, and Gloria Steinem, and published articles written with uncontrolled hatred of the United States and adulation of such a figure as Jimi Hendrix, who had presumably exposed its failings."

The American counterculture of the 60's, unlike its predecessors of other

periods, had the intellectuals of the establishment on its side. University presidents routinely ordered the R.O.T.C. off their campuses at the first hint of radical activity. Sociologists called for acceptance of the drug culture, and Judge Julius Hoffman of the Chicago Seven trial was scorned and ridiculed by the major press outlets. Radicals cavorted before TV cameras as the networks did their bidding. The beacons of American society, rather than condemn the worst of the counterculture, encouraged it.

Filler, unlike Wolff, is utterly bleak in his assessment; he has a keen ear for hypocrisy, and hypocrisy was nearly everywhere in public debate in those days. The "movement" was not de-

stroyed; the fanaticism burnt itself out, but some of its worst features were absorbed without discrimination into the disheveled ethos of American life. The consequence is that we will face this battle again.

Wolff, the younger writer, is optimistic, which is as it should be. His poignant narrative is full of hope for individuals trying to live their private lives with some sense of the lessons of the past, but outliving, perhaps, the worst memories of nihilistic battles recently fought. Two serious works, these, that touch the aching question of our age, the question of spiritual survival, but leave it circumspectly unanswered. □

The Culting of America

Gita Mehta: *Karma Cola*; Simon & Schuster; New York.

by Roger W. Fontaine

Gita Mehta's *Karma Cola* is a slim volume of anecdotes—some amusing and some instructive. The theme, of course, is East meets West or rather East merges with West, hence *Karma and Cola*, hence utter confusion. On occasion the vignettes offered by Miss Mehta are neither funny nor instructive. At times the humor is plainly forced, and the reader can best detect this fact from the chapter titles. Two will suffice: "Being Hindu Means Never Having to Say You're Sorry," and "Om Is Where the Art Is." Om?

Still, this collection of short stories—photographs really—of the Euro-American expatriate community living in India during the late 1960's gives another variation on Cultures in Collision. In this case, the principal variation explains when one culture adopts

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and translates another culture into its own language and then proceeds to retranslate it into the original language, the native speaker is left with a garbled text and a confused message. The author has her best moments recording the speech of the expatriate American down and out in places like Delhi and Bombay. Karma is the favorite word—dare I call it a concept—and is stretched to mean anything, thus rendering it meaningless.

The cast of characters are as one would imagine in say, *Abbot and Costello Meet the Mad Guru*. Mostly they are aimless American youths looking for drugs and sex and a meaning to it all. There are many in India who, for a price, are only too happy to supply all of the above—especially the last. No surprises there, and Miss Mehta does not tell us much beyond that. And that is too bad. She, on occasion, is almost ready to tell us more, but never quite gets to it. This is even more distressing because one gathers from the writing that she has had ten years to reflect—in London where she has wisely decided to live.

I would suggest therefore some of the