

THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW			
Best Sellers			
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In 1897, Ellen White wrote that "Literature and cheap fiction of every order is circulated like the leaves of autumn; and the minds of thousands are so taken up with irreligious, cheap trash that there is no place in the mind for solid reading" (Ms. 46, 1897, p. 1, as found in Manuscript Releases, vol. 6, p. 263). What kinds of books are on the "Best Sellers" list now, 100 years later? That question guided a group of Adventist English professors as we divided up the top 10 list of hardback fiction best sellers from the New York Times Book Review, March 17, 1996. Each of us agreed to write a review covering the moral/ethical and aesthetic aspects of the book in question.

Some brief introductory observations may be useful.

- The list is volatile. Three months later (June 9), only *The Celestine Prophecy*, at number nine, re-

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Adventist English Professors Savage the Best Sellers

by Scott Moncrieff

mained from our top 10; *Primary Colors*, our number one, was number 12—the rest of the list was out of the top 15. Most of these books have the shelf life of unrefrigerated yogurt.

- Crime/detective/mystery stories and hijinks among the rich and famous seem to be the most popular ingredients. Refreshingly, titles by Dr. Seuss and Shel Silverstein are on the June 9 list.
- The authors are better at creating exciting plots than interesting characters. We set out with hope, as each devoted reader

does at the beginning of a journey, yet wary. For the most part, our hopes were disappointed, our fears confirmed.

Nevertheless, we had a good time writing the reviews. It's important for Christians to give some critical attention to what is captivating the popular imagination. From time to time, it's worthwhile to detail why bad is bad, and it's a wonderful spur to one's creative spleen. But we don't want to rest there. In a future article, we plan to recommend some recent books we've especially enjoyed.

Primary Colors

Primary Colors, by Anonymous (Random House, 1996).

Reviewed by L. Monique Pittman, Pacific Union College

My first taste of politics came in the 10th grade. I had been elected class president, but almost immediately my identity betrayed me; our class advisor informed me that a female president and male

vice president would be unbiblical, and I would have to step aside in favor of the second-place, but appropriately gendered, candidate. Perhaps something about the posturing and self-fashioning that accompanies politicking forces those involved in the profession to confront the fissures and contradictions in their own identities. Recognizing the link between questions of identity and the business of

campaigning for public office, *Primary Colors* attempts to explore the soul-searching of a relatively young political advisor who must determine whether to compromise his personal ethics for the success of his candidate.

Primary Colors chronicles a democratic presidential primary campaign suspiciously similar to Bill Clinton's, and caused quite a fluster for some months as politicians and reporters scrambled to identify the Anonymous responsible for the novel. Told by Henry Burton, a campaigning manager for the Bill Clinton stand-in, Jack Stanton, the novel explores the motives of politicians and the principles they blithely obliterate to satisfy their need for power and public admiration. Henry Burton joins the campaign team as a skeptical political advisor, but gradually succumbs to the persuasive sincerity of Jack Stanton, who seems eager to right the social inequities plaguing late 20th-century America. As the campaign faces sex scandals and disappointing primary results, Burton gradually recognizes that even Stanton reconciled himself to the endless dissimulation of the politician, and Burton must decide if he still believes enough in the worth of Jack Stanton to sacrifice his own values for the sake of the campaign.

I wish I could say that *Primary Colors* convinces its readers to care about Henry Burton's journey to disillusionment, but I can't. Too late, we understand the depth of Burton's admiration of Jack Stanton and his disappointment in Stanton's human frailty. Too late, we learn enough about Burton's background to sympathize with his own struggle to understand himself. Anonymous hoards significant information—whether Stanton fathered an illegitimate child, whether Stanton truly cares about improving the United States,

and whether Burton will remain with the campaign—in order to maintain reader suspense. Anonymous carefully structures chapters to juxtapose markedly dissimilar incidents and to leave readers guessing about the outcome of certain episodes; however, all this suspense backfires as the reader loses interest in the novel's action and flounders in the mire of a rather disappointing prose style.

The Horse Whisperer

The Horse Whisperer, by Nicholas Evans (Delacorte, 1995).

Reviewed by Douglas Jones, Andrews University

The last time I rode a horse, the animal stopped in the middle of the trail, lay down, and rolled over—with me still in the saddle. I feel there's a parallel between my last horseback ride and reading *The Horse Whisperer* by Nicholas Evans. Much of the reading was enjoyable, much of the book was engaging. But toward the end of it I felt let down and put upon.

The novel centers around the potential help that Tom Booker—the horse whisperer—can provide Grace Graves, a young girl, and her horse, Pilgrim, who has been maimed in a freak accident. Grace's mother, Annie, knows that if Booker can heal the horse, Grace's physical and emotional scars will also be healed.

I found the psychological thread in *The Horse Whisperer* to be the most rewarding. Not only does Evans portray the poignancy of the Graves family's coping with tragedy, he explores the fragile tautness of the mother-daughter relationship with respect. Ultimately, though, the novel is a study of manipulation: Annie Graves always gets what she wants, and she wants her daughter whole again. She also

I finished the book asking myself whether I knew more about the state of politics in America than I had learned in the 10th grade. I'm afraid the answer is No; most humans understand at an early age that politics involves the endless reshaping of identity, and if we need this concept confirmed we can look to far greater, more accomplished writers than Anonymous for such information.

wants the horse whisperer.

The theme of manipulation is deftly underscored through Booker's abilities to understand equine sensibilities and then nurse the damaged Pilgrim back to his former strength and glory.

The book recalls the power (diluted, however) of Peter Shaffer's play *Equus* and the randy schmaltziness of Robert Wallers' *The Bridges of Madison County*. It would seem that Evans was intent on commercial success, and the book's long-time presence in the best sellers' stables is evidence of his achievement. But I don't think the novel is lasting art. Its gait is uneven. Stylistically, *The Horse Whisperer* plods, then gallops, then plods again. While many of the setting descriptions, especially those of the Booker ranch in Montana, are handled with precision, Evans' diction, I think, is inconsistent. And the book's ending is worthy of daytime television drama.

The Horse Whisperer falls short of its promise to explore the mystical bond between human and animal. Instead, it sinks finally into tawdry exploitation—of its characters and its readers. I'd much rather recommend Cormac McCarthy's *All the Pretty Horses* (1992) to readers who want to experience the emotional bonds between horse and rider in a novel of artistic integrity.

Absolute Power

Absolute Power, by David Baldacci
(Warner, 1996).

*Reviewed by Terrie Dopp Aamodt,
Walla Walla College*

It's tough to write inside-the-Beltway fiction because the real thing is by turns so exciting, overripely scandalous, and banal that fiction pales by comparison. David Baldacci partially succeeds in carving out a fictional niche in Washington, D.C., thanks to an ever-boiling plot. His characters are less interesting. More of that anon.

The world of absolute power revolves around the U.S. president, Alan Richmond, and his vast chorus comprises mendacious corporate lawyers, the well-padded, well-paid vassals to the unbelievably rich, who in turn control both domestic and foreign policy. The president has enough power to seduce the young wife of his mega-billionaire friend, Walter Sullivan, but the drunkenness of the amorous pair leads to tragedy, and she, regrettably, gets killed, all in the way of the world.

Covering up the event might have succeeded except for an unbelievable coincidence: An undetected burglar, Luther Whitney, witnesses the slaying through a one-way mirror.

The president is abetted by his ambitious, amoral female chief of staff, Gloria Russell, while Luther's champion is Jack Graham, a former public defender who seems to be on the verge of selling his soul to a prestigious law firm and to his principal client, his fiancée's father.

Luther's estranged daughter, Kate, a fierce prosecutor of burglars, complicates matters because she once was engaged to Jack.

The tale spins out in a straight-

forward moral/ethical framework. The bad guys all worship the equation: money = power = sex. The good guys hold some kind of value system outside that equation, although the sources are never clear.

The men—both good and bad—are men, brave and bold. The women are neurotic, emotionally fragile, and given to throwing up in tense situations, torn between their powerful ambitions to succeed in a man's world and their need to be traditionally feminine.

The pleasures of Baldacci's bad guys are disgusting rather than delicious. The topic requires a number of steamy sex scenes, but the author apparently is not enjoying himself—most of them take place

"off camera," which makes me wonder if the inevitable movie will achieve a PG-13 instead of an R rating, the four murders and two suicides notwithstanding.

Aesthetically, the going is quite a bit trickier. The plot invites pursuit even though it's soon clear that Luther will get blown away and Jack and Kate will probably survive. In this time-deficient age, though, I have to care about the characters enough to keep flicking those pages. And none of the men and women who people this book are sufficiently complex or admirable to complement the plot. It would take one powerful piece of fiction to pull me voluntarily from the tales of Watergate, Iran Contra, Clarence Thomas, and Anita Hill. *Absolute Power* didn't do it for me.

The Celestine Prophecy

The Celestine Prophecy, by James Redfield (Warner, 1993).

*Reviewed by Andrew P. Woolley,
Southwestern Adventist University*

Feeling nostalgic for the Sixties? Paranoid about the Nineties? Nervous about the coming millennium? Want to combine all these feelings? If the answer is Yes, then *The Celestine Prophecy* is for you.

On a spiritual quest, the narrator goes to Peru, looking for a manuscript written around 600 B.C. that contains nine Insights. Unfortunately, no one possesses the entire manuscript. Each Insight (except the ninth) has been copied and passed around, but the narrator must find each person and gain one Insight before he can discover the next. It's a dangerous journey—evil sources, particularly the government and the church, want to keep the manuscript suppressed because of its great spiritual en-

lightenment.

The nine Insights are a combination of pantheism, Eastern philosophy and religion, and pop psychology, with elements of Emerson, Darwin, and D. H. Lawrence thrown in. They reveal that as people are becoming more aware of coincidences, they will look for a new spiritual age. Once they begin searching, they discover fields of energy, created from the first vibrations in the universe; each level of being evolved by vibrating up from a lower level. The individual may connect and vibrate in tune with the universe (Insights 3 and 5). On the other hand, he may be distracted into power struggles or may be held back by "control dramas," patterns learned in childhood (Insights 4 and 6). Or, he may be distracted from an insight by becoming "addicted" to another person (Insights 7 and 8).

The intellectual level of information here is that of a nodding

pass through Survey of Civilization. For instance, part of the Second Insight is an awareness that people were once spiritual. Then, the Protestant Reformation and the Industrial Revolution made these believers materialistic, seeing the physical world only as a commodity. Until Einstein, the Third Insight says, people weren't aware of the fields of energy that can be bent by individual communion.

The appeal of the spirituality of the Insights (there's also a workbook available) is its ease. One begins noticing coincidences. One tunes into the vibrations of the universe. One advances the cause of human evolution by vibrating to the next higher level. This is not a spirituality of hard-won battles; it's certainly not a spirituality of intellectual rigor and thought; it's not even a spirituality of physical discipline.

Characterization is nonexistent. The narrator remains nameless and faceless. We see no evidence that

the insights change him; his typical response is "I don't know," so that those with knowledge of the next Insight can explain it to him. The explainers are simply markers on the journey, conduits for explanations. There is no attempt to make them individuals; they just talk. Theoretically. Tediously. The style is excruciating. College professors talk about "hanging around," "being blown away," and "checking it out." Witness this curious event in a restaurant: "Our dinner arrived so we paused for several minutes as the waiter poured more wine, and to taste each other's food." Ironically, in a book praising the energy in physical beauty, the description is vague.

Nothing is sensually palpable. The Peru of this book is not vivid mountains and valleys; even Machu Picchu is just big blocks of stone.

A sequel about the Tenth Insight is being published. What's the Tenth Insight? Don't read the first book.

Christian redemption story: God will restore order in a world where disorder (sin) has been temporarily in control. Does our mystery reading indicate that we are being seduced by a rationalistic substitute for the redemption story? Or does our love of mysteries speak oddly of our loyalty to the traditional Adventist world view?

Parallels with *The Great Controversy* may explain why Adventists enjoy mysteries so thoroughly. Ellen White and Conan Doyle (who created Sherlock Holmes), both wrote their redemption stories against a Victorian backdrop that saw disorder enter the world through foreigners with "criminal minds." Ellen White's moral enemies were often Catholics, immigrant disturbers of Protestant order in 19th-century America, and among Doyle's cruellest villains were Mormons from Utah. Christ, of course, restored heavenly order by paying the legal penalty we deserved for breaking divine law, and Christ's arch-enemy Lucifer seems victorious before Christ returns from the dead. Sherlock Holmes used reason to restore order when society's systems (i.e., Scotland Yard) failed, apparently surrenders his life for the greater good when he dies with his arch-enemy, Moriarty, and returns from a literary tomb.

If 19th-century mystery novels reveal something of the world in which our church began, does the popularity of *The Cat Who Said Cheese* tell us anything about ourselves today? Braun gives right-leaning readers what they want. Disorder comes from a world outside small-town America, whose traditional family values are worth more than fortunes and need protection.

Strangers from other cultures are suspected at first, but are embraced when they support the traditional order; eccentrics are lov-

The Cat Who Said Cheese

The Cat Who Said Cheese, by Lilian Jackson Braun (Putnam, 1996).

Reviewed by Norman Wendth, Atlantic Union College

The *Cat Who Said Cheese* maintains Lilian Jackson Braun's formula: Koko, the smarter of central character Jim Qwilleran's two Siamese cats, yowls at key moments or knocks books off shelves as he helps "Qwill" solve the latest mystery.

As the title indicates, this time Braun's entertaining theme is America's love affair with "gourmet" food, especially the Gruyere, Brie, and feta cheeses that Koko and Yum Yum devour. Pickax, a small town "400 miles north of everywhere," is sponsoring a "Great

Food Expo" of new food specialty stores and restaurants with "modern" versions of traditional Pickax dishes. The important "expo" in this plot, however, is the bomb that goes off in the hotel. Apparently intended for a mysterious woman guest, it kills a young hotel housekeeper. Then a possible witness is murdered.

The popularity of *The Cat Who Said Cheese* raises issues familiar to students of popular culture, and should raise questions for Adventists. Years ago, W. H. Auden pointed out that mysteries console readers by showing rational processes restoring order in a society where disorder (murder) has been temporarily in control. But some Adventists see Auden's satisfying mysteries paralleling the traditional

able until they reject society, when even long-time locals become distasteful.

Murders may occur in Pickax, but no one the reader knows enough to care about ever dies. Those guilty of disrupting Pickax eventually—and voluntarily—re-

veal their crimes, sometimes because they are filled with genuine remorse. Post-modern tastes are foolish, although we often can learn from the contemporary world if we pick and choose carefully.

I wonder if Braun attends church . . . and if so, whose.

business losses and a broken nose. One of the reasons I was able to read this book so quickly was that the characters and their struggles were painfully predictable. At no point did I feel regret, knowing that soon I would have to let these characters go. At no point did I pause to ponder a particularly well-crafted prose passage. Though Spencer tries to raise feminist concerns by sketching an independent heroine, she blatantly undercuts these efforts by repeatedly holding up for our appreciation some lines from Longfellow describing men and women as "Useless each without the other." Such sentiments are more than sloppy; they are dangerous. *That Camden Summer* is a book waiting to be made into a mini-series. The week it airs will be a week I happily catch up on my composition grading.

That Camden Summer

That Camden Summer, by LaVyrle Spencer (Putnam, 1996).

Reviewed by Beverly Matiko, Andrews University

I am a slow reader. Most of my Monday morning e-mail from Fairbanks or Allentown, Boston or Portland begins with "I read a book this weekend that I think you'd enjoy. . . ." My response is typically a confession that I spent most of Sunday on the *New York Times Book Review*, and that it will take me the rest of the week to get through the paper's remaining sections, even with skipping Business.

Because I am a slow reader, I was unprepared for how quickly I turned the pages of LaVyrle Spencer's *That Camden Summer*. And it wasn't because I couldn't put the book down. I wanted badly to put it down even before I began the first chapter. A list of the author's earlier novels suggested that I was clearly in the realm of the popular romance: *A Heart Speaks*, *Separate Beds*, *Twice Loved*, *November of the Heart*, and more than a dozen more. *That Camden Summer* would have satisfied my early adolescent reading tastes; at 41 it annoyed me.

Spencer sets her story in Maine, 1916. Roberta Jewett, the heroine, is a divorced woman who has moved back to her hometown with plans of supporting herself and her daughters as a traveling nurse. She must contend with the

prejudice of the townsfolk, including her own family, who are convinced that divorce must be the woman's fault.

Roberta's presence clearly challenges their preciously preserved status quo. The resulting story is part *Petticoat Junction*, part *The Brady Bunch*, part "Harper Valley PTA." Spencer's is a world where the good are rewarded with love and marriage, while the evil suffer

Guilty as Sin

Guilty as Sin, by Tami Hoag (Bantam, 1996).

Reviewed by Renard Doneskey, La Sierra University

One would think that, with a title like *Guilty as Sin*, Tami Hoag's latest novel would at least give a token nod to the genesis of evil or seek to explore its religious ramifications. However, not only does she fail to explore the nature of evil—contentedly leaving it as an unsolvable mystery that even the book's priest cannot fathom—but she never considers "sin" at all, at least in the traditional religious sense. Instead, she serves up unbelievable characters and plot clichés.

The plot revolves around District Attorney Ellen North, who tries to solve a series of crimes that begins with a small boy's kidnapping, allegedly by one of the small town's most upstanding citizens,

psychology professor Garrett Wright.

Along the way she must battle a former lover-turned-adversary defense attorney, an incompetent and politically motivated supervisor, a sex-for-information sheriff, and an obnoxious true-crime writer, Jay Brooks, who practices seduction more than journalism. These are the good guys.

The evil characters receive much less attention, remaining shadowy throughout, partly to keep the suspense (who really has committed these crimes?) and partly, I think, because Hoag already has enough evil in the "good" characters and doesn't need much anywhere else.

Hoag's novel straddles the line between a psychological thriller and a mystery, but lacks the best elements of either genre. In psychological fiction, we want characters who would behave as we would behave if we were in their situation. Here the characters behave

exactly as characters do on a TV miniseries—bearing little relation to life as we know it. The defense attorney annoys us in just the way we expect him to—he's arrogant, self-righteous, and concerned only with winning rather than justice. The priest shows his humanity as other priests have since *The Thorn Birds* (and it was cliché then)—he wears jeans and flannel shirts and falls in love. The D.A.'s love relationship develops along the lines of a Harlequin romance, with North first being repelled by, then strongly attracted to, Brooks.

Besides failing to develop realistic characters, Hoag also fails to surprise us with the story line. In mystery fiction we want a well-developed plot and enough plot twists that we can't guess the perpetrator too early. Also, we look for a detective at least as intelligent as we are. The popularity of Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot, Peter Wimsey, and other such detectives stems from their ability to make us marvel at the connections they make

between things we miss.

Just the opposite situation develops here. I knew who was involved in the crimes before reaching the halfway point. Further, I made connections that D. A. North and the police fail to consider.

Obvious things, too. Example: North's car, parked in a snow-covered parking lot, has been vandalized, with an obscenity scratched into the door and the tire slashed. Three police officers and North are baffled at how to determine who might have done the deed. Meanwhile, I'm talking out loud directly to the book: "Follow the tracks in the snow!"

Problematically, *Guilty as Sin* delivers exactly what you would expect it to. Despite its flaws, it does entertain—in a mind-numbing way. It's diverting. And the final 100 pages create considerable suspense. However, reading the novel reminded me why I don't read much popular fiction. *Guilty as Sin* is a best-seller—and it just isn't very good.

disappointing reading experience on a number of levels. Its literary qualities lack the stamp of good fiction. Immature portrayals give readers characters with little appeal or depth. Harris overloads the narrative with details that add nothing to plot movement; for example, a phone call between Sean and his sister is interrupted by call waiting for no apparent reason other than an attempt at authenticity. Style and editing issues could distract the most inattentive of readers.

Among the slender pleasures in this novel readers can count the distinctive African-American banter, particularly among the female characters. Two minor characters also deserve special attention. Gina DeMarco, the fast-talking publicity agent who represents Zurich, is far more engaging than either of the two main female characters. But the star of the show is MamaCee, Zurich's grandmother come to Chicago from Warm Springs, Mississippi, to take care of her "baby" during the hearing. Her visit to an upscale Chicago beauty salon emerges as one of the most memorable scenes in the book.

Harris attempts to treat some social issues in *And This Too Shall Pass*: alcoholism, rape, and particularly the struggle of gay believers to maintain their faith in the face of rejection by organized religion.

But the seriousness of these concerns is diminished by their juxtaposition to salacious, explicit descriptions of casual sexual activity, both homosexual and heterosexual. And the answers are facile. When Sean finally turns/returns to God, he is "rewarded" by Zurich's affection. Harris's coupling of a simplistic religious outlook with his less-than-critical portrayal of a life-style that includes a crass use of language, troubled relationships, and sex without commitment, will not satisfy the serious Christian reader.

And This Too Shall Pass

And This Too Shall Pass, by E. Lynn Harris (Doubleday, 1996).

Reviewed by Meredith Jones-Gray, Andrews University

Four young African-Americans on their way to the top make up the ensemble cast of E. Lynn Harris' *And This Too Shall Pass*: Zurich Robinson, the virtuous-to-a-fault starting quarterback for the Chicago Cougars, an NFL expansion team; Mia Miller, the first African-American female sportscaster on Chicago's TV Channel 3; Tamela Coleman, attorney with a prestigious Chicago law firm; and Sean Elliott, a gay freelance sportswriter in New York City.

An omniscient narrator rotates

among the four major characters, gradually weaving their lives together. Mia accuses Zurich of raping her; an alcoholic, she was too drunk to remember what really happened when she was assaulted. Tamela is assigned to defend Zurich but struggles to preserve her objectivity in the case because it triggers memories of a college incident in which she heard, in her boyfriend's rooming house, four football players gang-raping a young woman and did nothing to stop them. Sean, who is writing an article on the emergence of black quarterbacks, suspends his formal interviewing of Zurich until the rape case is resolved but finds himself falling in love with the quarterback.

And This Too Shall Pass offers a

McNally's Puzzle

McNally's Puzzle, by Lawrence Sanders (Putnam, 1996).

Reviewed by Winona Howe, La Sierra University

I've never read an entire book by Lawrence Sanders before, although I've thumbed through some of his previous 27 titles while killing time at airports. But now, I was on assignment for *Spectrum*; I went to Crown Books and bought my 25-percent-off copy of Sanders' *McNally's Puzzle*. I'm glad I got the discount.

I enjoy reading murder mysteries. The concept of good triumphing over evil combined with an intricately plotted puzzle is, for me (as for many readers), irresistible. As Carl Hiaasen, another author of Florida suspense fiction remarked, they are satisfying because "for once the bad guys get what they deserve." Fictional detectives are often tremendously concerned with moral questions, such as the appropriate response to the evil that exists in the world. Archy McNally, however, the protagonist of *McNally's Puzzle*, doesn't spend his time pondering weighty questions like this. He is too involved with other weighty questions: What should he order for dinner? What should he wear today? What incredibly clever thing can he say next? This book didn't tempt me to examine moral questions either. My thoughts tended to be along the lines of: Archy? Binky (Archy's dim-wit sidekick)? Are people still stuck with these names from the 1940s? Even in south Florida?

Archy's investigation is centered at Parrots Unlimited, a "psittacine supermarket." He compares the brightly colored, exotic birds to the flamboyant, shallow people who inhabit south Florida, an epiphany

which is probably the intellectual high point of the book for both protagonist and reader. Archy is not a mental heavyweight; after all, it takes him 200 pages to discover that there is a market for smuggled parrots and macaws. There are a few murders in the book but, because of the cartoonish quality of the hero's mental and physical peregrinations, the violence never seems real. The novel seems like the print equivalent of a television summer replacement show: trivial, boring, and silly. Furthermore, Archy is correct about the characters who inhabit the pages of *McNally's Puzzle*—they are like the denizens of Parrots Unlimited, most of whom merely preen and squawk. I found it hard to believe that *McNally's Puzzle* is the sixth (or even the second) book in Sanders' McNally series. I found it hard to believe that

thousands of readers could derive that much pleasure out of the incredibly arch tone, the humorous condescension, the nuggets of recondite information, and the inside jokes that the hero employs.

If you like classic Florida mysteries, read the Travis McGee series by John D. McDonald; if you prefer a more contemporary Florida scene, try the Matthew Hope series by Ed McBain. If you are intrigued by the name Archy (better make that Archie), read the Nero Wolfe series by Rex Stout. There are a host of mystery authors whose protagonists are engaged in the search for justice and truth and concerned with the question of how this search fits into the context of today's world, authors such as Tony Hillerman, Ruth Rendall, P. D. James, Sue Grafton, Ross McDonald, and Elizabeth James. The list is extensive, but it doesn't contain Lawrence Sanders. I can't recommend *McNally's Puzzle*.

Rogue Warrior: Task Force Blue

Rogue Warrior: Task Force Blue, by Richard Marcinko and John Weisman (Pocket, 1996).

Reviewed by Scott Moncrieff, Andrews University

"Vengeance is mine," thus saith the Lord. For 300 pages, however, the Rogue Warrior trespasses on the Lord's territory, taking a terrible revenge on bad guys from Key West to Rancho Mirage.

The action centers around this Navy SEAL's attempts to stop a conspiracy/revolution masterminded by California billionaire L. C. Strawhouse (Ross Perot with a grudge), while simultaneously protecting his backside from sinister goings on among the new military opportunists in Washington who dislike his unconventional methods.

Some readers probably enjoy the passages on weaponry and fighting technique. There is specific (and presumably knowledgeable) description of dozens of weapons, combat clothes, and finer points of staking out, storming a hijacked aircraft, killing a "tango" (bad guy) without excess blood spray, and so on. Another presumed attraction is the inside glimpse at the way the CIA, NIS, NSA, and other government organizations operate: opportunism, petty politicking, personal vendettas—except for a core of misunderstood and underappreciated guys like the hero. Then there is the simplified and ego-gratifying picture of good and evil. Ever been cut off in heavy traffic? Lost out in a romantic triangle? Had your toes stepped on? If you could (a) be

certain that you were the wronged party and (b) could visit a terrible vengeance on the perpetrator, you would be the Rogue Warrior. The rest of us Walter Mittys can read the book.

Men who communicate through “one-fingered salutes” and gutter sarcasm (this is to friends!), and who don’t relate well with women at all will find themselves on fantasy island. The main characters—Rogue Warrior and his homogenous band—are men; women appear only in a few cameos and degrading epithets, with one or two minor exceptions. Dialogue rarely rises above grunts and gestures. Conversely, the words flow endlessly from Rogue Warrior’s first-person narration.

To give authors Richard Marcinko and John Weisman their due, the tactical angle of the book is often interesting, as are the surprising and sometimes skillful references by the narrator to Kafka, Gilbert and Sullivan, Shakespeare’s Henry V, Gauguin, and others.

But let’s not get carried away. This is a pernicious book. It’s not just that if the F-word were removed it would be 30 pages shorter. It’s not just the assumed co-dependency between being a macho man and having a degraded view of women. It’s not just the glorification of being a Rogue, free from society’s restraints, yet smugly justified by one’s private moral code. It’s also the demonic world view of a character who finds his

highest fulfillment in revenge, a character without purpose or pleasure in a world without “enemies.”

If Marcinko and Weisman had written *Pride and Prejudice*, it might have gone something like this:

Mr. Darcy slipped on his fleeced-lined Nomex balaclava, snapped his Beretta M-92 pistol in its hidden shoulder holster, and hefting his Remington 870 riot shotgun, with 100 rounds of double-O buckshot slung around his shoulder, headed for Longbourne. That *\$!@ Mr. Wickham had better not be lurking in the *&^%\$#@ bushes.

It’s just one more reason to thank God for Jane Austen!