

with an urgent belief in the fablelike nature of social force. The description of the mill trike in which Tucker goes in a "hired special" and comes out a gangster is thrilling, as are the descriptions of the night the lottery is fixed, the way a murder is planned, the disintegrating marriage of one character, the frenzied breakdown of another. But the narrative drive of the novel is not stronger than Wolfert's agenda, and in the end the ever-present agenda wears beyond redemption.

For 130 years writers of genius—from Zola to Gissing to Dreiser—have felt compelled to write directly about the injustice of class and, invariably, their rage

(both noble and neurotic) has driven them to write, very much as Ira Wolfert has written, in a rhetoric that force-feeds the reader on the inhumanity of "the system." But in these writers, narrative drive *does* overtake the agenda. The irresistible attraction to psychological veracity is in constant evidence. Flesh-and-blood people swarm across the page. We feel them: trapped, buried, screaming. Because we *feel* them, the novels live.

Tucker's People does not let its characters live; it subverts them steadily with its relentless simplifications. Finally, the absence of complexity is the only presence the disinterested reader is registering. ■

Rerun 2: After the Prom

JENNIFER BAUMGARDNER

MEMOIRS OF AN EX-PROM QUEEN. By Alix Kates Shulman. Penguin. 273 pp. \$12.95.

Prom queens and Miss Americas are the feminist version of a mammy—a symbol of everything that is unthreatening to the sexist status quo. Face painted and hair teased, they compete with their sisters, parading in front of men like so much meat...you know the rap. In 1969, Alix Kates Shulman

turned her keen eye to the unliberated female experience and began writing *Memoirs of an Ex-Prom Queen*. Published in 1972, the novel elicited shock and unbridled good notices from the same feminists I recognized twenty years later from my women's studies classes. Kate Millett declared, "Hurrah for *Prom Queen*! I loved it," while Marge Piercy noted that "Shulman is gorgeous on the agonizing and unending adolescent anxiety about face and body." Meanwhile, a male reviewer cautiously urged men to read it, reasoning that "men owe it to themselves to see themselves...as their wives and girlfriends perceive them."

Fast-forward to the second wave of the second wave. It's 1997 and the post-NOW feminist institutions like *Ms.* magazine and the Ms. Foundation for Women are counting a quarter-century in the empowerment business. Yet many second-wave pioneers are greeting this birthday with ambivalence. "Shall I rejoice that the novel...remains sufficiently alive to the times as to warrant a new, celebratory edition?" asks Shulman in her new introduction, pinpointing the dilemma. "Or should I bemoan the conditions that keep its social satire current?"

Before we decide whether to raise a glass

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or a picket sign, a bit about the book. *Prom Queen* is the engaging story of Sasha Davis, typical girl, as she struggles to squeeze out her identity within the tight girle of patriarchy. Her tale begins in the middle: "in a railroad station in Europe...about to cut free of my first husband, likely against all reason." Yet Sasha is nothing if not reasonable. She knew, as most girls did and perhaps still do, that beauty was her gift and the source of her passive-aggressive power. "You can't get away with this shit forever!... Someday it'll all catch up with you," wails a high school sorority sister, and Sasha receives the girl's wrath as her first proof that she's beautiful. Lovely enough to be crowned queen of the prom, our heroine bounces from feminine trial to tribulation, alternately led astray by her brains and loins (and in the case of an affair with a wise old college professor, both). For Sasha is not just pretty, she's bright—her father treated her to chess and the classics of literature; her undergrad affair with philosophy is as passionate as with any of her twenty-odd lovers. As a teen in the fifties in the stifled but sturdy Midwest, Sasha also knows enough to evade spinsterhood by age 20. She marries twice—first pragmatically, to a priggish grad student, and next romantically, to a rake. After the first marriage comes V.D., frigidity, a shrink and deferment of her Ph.D. The second brings love, illegal

abortion, breeding, boredom, Dr. Spock and, I think, self-actualization.

It should be clear that Sasha scarcely evades a single trap of womanhood. But both the snares and the radical insights of *Prom Queen* have been tamed by time. For example, an older feminist writer of my acquaintance said that in 1972 she was stunned and inspired by Shulman's upbraiding of that most paternalistic of surrogate fathers, Dr. Spock, in the chapters describing Sasha's induction into the cult of motherhood (Shulman says in the introduction that Spock may have revised his famous *Baby and Child Care* partly in response to her novel). Although I gather that Spock's crime was more symbolic than actual—he was the *male* expert, lecturing *women* on motherhood and assuming no paternal involvement; but advising the mother not to pick up the baby whenever he fusses or to go to a movie if she finds she's feeling depressed are hardly mother-blaming diatribes—the Spock chapters are evidence of how sensibilities have changed since 1972. Further testament: A quick survey of my women friends yields the data that none put a husband through any kind of graduate school by slaving away at a drudgish job, none had an illegal abortion and none are worried about being old maids. Three girlfriends *have* had disastrous affairs with professors, but the teachers were women.

But *Prom Queen's* stale notes are really very few. The book is still fresh, not for its politics but for its brilliant rendering of a female coming-of-age story. Every paradox of womanhood is skillfully described, from the first push out of the apple tree at the hands of boys to Sasha's realization after a tragic haircut that she can't recapture her prom-queen (young) self. "I should never have cut it. Suddenly I understood why older women wore their hair in styles of decades past.... They were trying to objectify their memories, like women living through their children," says Sasha after the hairdo epiphany. "But neither could be done."

The generational conversation invited by *Prom Queen's* reissue is an important one, since it's clear that the publishers are banking on my peers seeing themselves in Sasha, alleged unliberated woman. Hence Shulman's dilemma and, indeed, the paradox of contemporary feminism: Relevance is tantamount to failure. If we take Sasha's story as a metaphor for an enforced feminine ideal, a covering of our real selves or even a symbol for passive behavior, *Prom Queen's* reappearance does seem to speak of feminism's ineffectiveness. Yet consider this: Shulman's own



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feminist identity shared some of those same prom-queen proclivities. In 1972 she was the mother of two, an older member of the famed radical feminist group Redstockings and already somewhat renowned as the author of the radical "A Marriage Agreement," which was printed everywhere from *Ms.* to *Life* (the Agreement provoked a typical rant by that second-wave class bully, Norman Mailer). But in a recent essay Shulman revealed that her marriage, upon which the famed egalitarian agreement was built, had been a mess. She and her husband were terribly estranged and yet stayed together, partially for the children but also in order to keep up appearances. Shulman recalls feeling fearful of what conservatives would do with the news of a divorce. Even feminism, it seemed, provided little room for anything short of the ideal.

Like Sasha's daughter, I am the child of a prom queen. Well, homecoming queen, actually, crowned in Grand Forks, North Dakota, in 1960. By the time I came around in 1970, my mom was also an ex-prom queen, having discovered feminism. When I hit my teens, she snatched *Cosmopolitan* from before my eager eyes and slapped *Ms.* in its place. She tried to pass on the raised consciousness she had so recently achieved. Yet despite the empowering ideology—which I carried proudly and used as a shield against high school social warfare—somewhere in the farthest and most secret reaches of my heart, the desire to be queen still reigned. Which is where we stand this quarter-century later: facing the fact that feminism didn't altogether remove the desire to be a prom queen, it just opened up other jobs. ■

THEATER

Milking It

LAURIE STONE

In the middle of Karen Finley's latest performance, *The American Chestnut*—a collage of monologues, *tableaux vivants* and projections—she screens a video of herself furiously squeezing her nipples and squirting breast milk onto a black sheet of paper. Titling it "Nursing Painting," she riffs on Jackson Pollock's spatter art, famously compared to pissing in snow. Many in the audience at New

York's P.S. 122, where the show was staged for twelve evenings in September, laughed knowingly. The escapade is consummate Finley: perverse, rhetorical, eye-catching and dissonant.

For me, too many emotions were triggered for laughter to erupt unjammed. I was embarrassed for Finley because her satire was blunt and because her materials required nakedness (while Pollock could reserve his body from public view). I also felt elated by her bravado and by her insight that spurting breast milk onstage was more of a taboo than bloodletting, pissing or perhaps even shitting. There is always some hardware left over from the do-it-yourself kit of her shows, some screws and bolts that don't get incorporated. But at its best, Finley's art rips big, unspoken and difficult-to-articulate secrets out of closets. It is the commonness of what she taps that makes her disturbing. If she were revealing some fringe predilection that crawled out of the rainforest and applied to one careful of denizens, who would give a damn?

She's disturbing, too, because she so

enjoys smushing around in body fluids and thrusting them in people's faces, as in her notorious capers of shoving canned yams up her ass and slathering chocolate over her body. Finley embraces behavior most people would warm to in dogs, chimps and young children but that, in adults, sets off alarms. Hers is an art of retrieval: of turning found experience into subjects, defeat into mastery, marginality into an edgy focal point. She would probably press fewer buttons if she leaked shame and turned her exhibitionism into an act of abasement, but because she has gone through that and come out the other side, her pieces are encounters with unapologetic female flesh.

She cavorts in various stages of undress in *Chestnut*, which she summarized in a recent phone conversation as "a day in a woman's life," acknowledging that the woman was fragmented into many personae, some cannier than others. Nakedness has been a feature of all her shows and has in part incited the unusually clamorous rage hurled her way, especially by Jesse