

# Conservative educator expresses hope, but she fails to fulminate

By CHRISTOPHER LEHMANN-HAAPT  
N.Y. Times News Service

**THE TROUBLED CRUSADE.** American Education 1945-80. By Diane Ravitch. 384 pages. Basic. \$19.95.

At the end of her detailed, coolly analytical history of education in America since World War II, Diane Ravitch finally succumbs to an illustrative vignette. It concerns a young black man from Mississippi who returned to his hometown in 1980 and saw the deterioration of the black high school that he had happily and productively attended in the late 1960s.

One expects the vignette to conclude with a blast by the author of the liberal do-gooders and proponents of federal intervention in local affairs who might be construed to have been indirectly responsible for a sorry state of educational affairs. For Mrs. Ravitch — a faculty member at Columbia University's Teachers College, and the author of "The Great School Wars" (1974) and "The Revisionists Revised" (1978) — has been known to be critical of educational reformers, and if ever there was an age of massive educational reform in America, the postwar period was it.

But Mrs. Ravitch fails to conclude her vignette with a fulmina-

## Turning the pages



tion. Instead, she trails off into slightly platitudinous expressions of hope for the future, and concludes: "If it seems naively American to put so much stock in schools, colleges, universities, and the endless prospect of self-improvement and social improvement, it is an admirable, and perhaps even a noble, flaw."

NOW THERE seems to me a slightly wistful note to that conclusion — a quality of whistling past what the author may secretly regard as the graveyard of education. One gets the feeling that anyone less scrupulous in her regard for historical accuracy would have vented rage and shaken her fists at certain gods of disorder. After all, one would have to search long and hard to find a better case of good intentions backfiring.

From a certain point of view, what is recounted in "The Troubled Crusade" is every conservative's fear of what befalls a freely functioning community system when Big Government gets its hands on it. For in the 35-year history that Mrs. Ravitch covers,

the long-deferred dream of federal aid to education could be said to have been corrupted into a nightmare of bureaucratic meddling and muddling. Within the same period, what began as an attempt to eliminate race as a consideration in educating individuals ended up with precisely the opposite result, namely, with individuals being judged according to attributes they held in common with various groups.

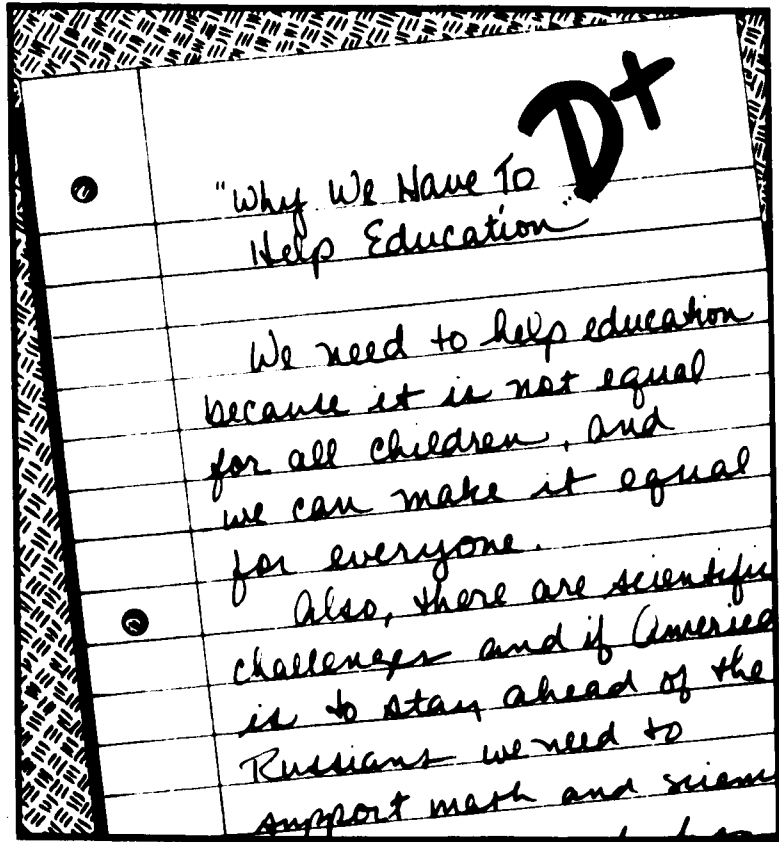
By the time Mrs. Ravitch reaches the end of her tale, she is drily describing how the promotion of plans to teach native languages to ethnic minorities had the net result of reducing foreign-language programs in American schools. Really, at times her narrative assumes the aspect of a very dark comedy, and one fully expects her to pronounce some dire moral at the end.

BUT SHE never does. What seems to have happened — I am only guessing, of course — is that she trapped herself. Having set out to write such an objectively detailed account of the period that the villains would betray themselves, she discovered that there really were no villains. Everyone behaved with the best of motives, she seems to be saying — from proponents of progressive education in the 1930s to defenders of the rights of the handicapped in the '70s. It was just that the winds of

history kept shifting and changing the landscape. There was the cold war and Vietnam and the Berkeley free-speech movement and the sudden infatuation with English experiments with the open classroom.

There was Sputnik and curriculum reform and the Great Society and the Nixon administration's support of affirmative action, which promoted group rights over those of the individual. Everything affected everything else, as it has a habit of doing. So instead of writing a moral drama, Mrs. Ravitch had to build an accurate model of history. That left her with her somewhat punchless title, "The Troubled Crusade," and her slightly bland conclusion that what means well may in the very long run do well.

BUT IT leaves the reader with a refreshingly clear and objective review that lends valuable perspective to a confusing period in the very recent past. When you come to think of it, everything under the sun and moon impinges on the issue of education, and it is an act of intellectual courage to acknowledge as much and take it fully into account. What we get in this history of schooling is a troubled mind brooding on recent disasters. The problems do not resolve themselves into nostrums, and so the mind goes right on brooding.



"From a certain point of view, what is recounted in 'The Troubled Crusade' is every conservative's fear of what befalls a freely functioning community system when Big Government gets its hands on it."

## Integrity marks McGinniss' anatomy of a murder

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N.Y. Times News Service

**FATAL VISION.** By Joe McGinniss. 863 pages. Putnam. \$17.95.

As I began reading Joe McGinniss's "Fatal Visions" — the latest nonfiction work by the author of "The Selling of the President," "Heroes" and "Going to Extremes" — I wasn't certain I was really up to another true-crime investigative report in the approximate style of Truman Capote's "In Cold Blood" and Norman Mailer's "The Executioner's Song."

It wasn't already knowing the outcome of the so-called Green-Beret murder case that bothered me. For although the story of Dr. Jeffrey R. MacDonald and his conviction in 1979 for the 1970 murder of his pregnant wife and two young daughters had of course been extensively covered in the media, I had succeeded in forgetting whatever details I knew, as I invariably manage to do whenever reading a nonfiction book that depends to any degree on suspense for its power to absorb the reader. It was the tantalizing not-knowing that I think I dreaded — the ultimate and inevitable inability of McGinniss to get inside his subject's head and tell us exactly what was going on there. Either that, or he would duck that particular matter and ponder the significance of McDonald's crime to the condition of the American psyche, which I wasn't in the mood for either.

BUT I was wrong in my foreboding. McGinniss does a masterly job of reviving one's interest in the crime and leading us on through his narrative reconstruction, which consists of Jeffrey MacDonald's tape-recorded autobiographical notes; transcripts of the various legal proceedings; third-person accounts told from the viewpoint of several key figures in the case, including Freddy Kassab, MacDonald's father-in-law, who was to become a form of hellhound following the murder suspect's trail; and the personal testimony of the author, who was invited by MacDonald to get to know him intimately and tell his story, with the

Although I've grown increasingly uneasy about the practice of psychohistory, I think that McGinniss has delivered the goods. After all, he did have access to the detailed psychological profile that was drawn of the doctor, and after all he got to know him intimately. In any case, the fascinating theory he poses seems plausible enough.

presumed result that, regardless of the outcome of the trial, a book was bound to exonerate him.

What draws us on, initially, is the combination of the horrific brutality of the murders, the seemingly strong circumstantial evidence against the suspect, and the quality of the sections called "The Voice of Jeffrey MacDonald," which, coming as they do from a supposedly intelligent, sophisticated man, are suspiciously clichéd, inarticulate and even evasive. How can he possibly clear himself, we have to wonder at first. How can the Army's investigative hearings NOT lead to court-martial proceedings? How can it be that at the start of "Fatal Vision," where McGinniss first meets MacDonald nearly a decade after the hearings, he is only then facing his first legal trial for the murder of his family?

THEN, AT those Army hearings, the defense's case is sprung and the tables are reversed. Suddenly we learn how ineptly the Army's Criminal Investigation Division (CID) has handled the case and that there is apparently solid ground for MacDonald's version of events, which is that he and his family were attacked by a gang of hippies, including a woman carrying a candle and saying, "Acid is Groovy!" and "Kill the pigs!" When the Army dismisses the charges against MacDonald, the only question that remains is what McGinniss has left to write about for nearly 500 pages.

Then when Kassab and the CID discover stronger evidence against the doctor and reverse the tables

again, we find ourselves wondering once more about contradictions between the suspect's unexceptionable personality and the viciousness of the crime. And if he did it, did he know that he did it? And under any circumstances, would he possibly confess?

From this point on, you are on your own, because, even though you may recall that MacDonald was eventually found guilty in 1979, "Fatal Vision" turns up a lot that's new about the case. I have only a few points to add. First, although I've grown increasingly uneasy about the practice of psychohistory, I think that McGinniss has delivered the goods. After all, he did have access to the detailed psychological profile that was drawn of the doctor, and after all he got to know him intimately. In any case, the fascinating theory

he poses seems plausible enough.

SECOND, I did have the sense at times while reading "Fatal Vision" that I was being manipulated by the narrative — that is, material was being withheld or revealed largely to make the story more dramatic. But without having gone back over the book carefully enough to make a considered judgment, I suspect that a case can be made that the shifts in point of view are reasonably true to the way the case developed and that the drama is therefore legitimate. If McGinniss has contrived his arrangement of the material just a little bit, I guess we can forgive him out of regard for the effectiveness of his drama.

Finally, there are the questions that must rise concerning the author's relationship with his subject — a relationship that, the subject hoped, was developing into a real friendship. Even though the subject's ulterior motive was clearly to use that friendship for the purpose of proving his innocence, there are bound to be those readers who feel that McGinniss has exploited and betrayed a friendship. In some of his previous books McGinniss has not always made it so clear where he stood in relation to his subject. But "Fatal Vision" smells of integrity, and that's one of the many things about it that make it irresistible to read, even if its vision of the human soul is somewhat bleak and frightening.

## Paperback picks

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### MASS MARKET

Mass-market paperbacks are softcover books sold at newsstands, variety stores and supermarkets, as well as in bookstores. This listing is based on computer-processed reports from 2,000 bookstores in every region of the United States.

1. THE VALLEY OF HORSES, by Jean M. Auel.
2. MASTER OF THE GAME, by Sidney Sheldon.
3. ACCEPTABLE LOSSES, by Irwin Shaw.
4. DIFFERENT SEASONS, by Stephen King.
5. TOUCH THE DEVIL, by Jack Higgins.
6. MAX, by Howard Fast.
7. SPELLBINDER, by Harold Robbins.
8. CLOAK OF DARKNESS, by Helen MacInnes.
9. JADE, by Pat Barr.
10. 19 PURCHASE STREET, by Gerald A. Browne.
11. THE CASE OF LUCY BENDING, by Lawrence Sanders.
12. THE CLAN OF THE CAVE BEAR, by Jean M. Auel.
13. LACE, by Shirley Conran.
14. FRIDAY, by Robert A. Heinlein.
15. TRULY TASTELESS JOKES TWO, by Blanche Knott.

### TRADE

Trade paperbacks are softcover books usually sold in bookstores and at an average price higher than mass-market paperbacks. This listing is based on computer-processed reports from 2,000 bookstores in every region of the United States.

1. THE COLOR PURPLE, by Alice Walker.
2. THURSTON HOUSE, by Danielle Steel.
3. COLOR ME BEAUTIFUL, by Carole Jackson.
4. LIVING, LOVING LEARNING, by Leo Buscaglia.
5. LIFE EXTENSION, by Durk Pearson and Sandy Shaw.
6. BLOOM COUNTY, by Berke Breathed.
7. LINDA EVANS BEAUTY AND EXERCISE BOOK, by Linda Evans.
8. WHAT COLOR IS YOUR PARACHUTE? by Richard Nelson Bolles.
9. ROYAL SEDUCTION, by Jennifer Blake.
10. MISS MANNERS' GUIDE TO EXCRUCIATINGLY CORRECT BEHAVIOR, by Judith Martin.
11. WRAP ME IN SPLENDOR, by Ellen Tanner Marsh.
12. THE TAO OF POOH, by Benjamin Hoff.
13. THIN THIGHS IN 30 DAYS, by Wendy Stehling.
14. GARFIELD EATS HIS HEART OUT, by Jim Davis.
15. THE RAPTURE, by Hal Lindsey.

## Best sellers

N.Y. Times News Service

The listings below are based on computer-processed sales figures from 1,800 bookstores in every region of the United States.

### FICTION

1. POLAND, by James A. Michener.
2. CHANGES, by Danielle Steel.
3. THE NAME OF THE ROSE, by Umberto Eco.
4. AUGUST, by Judith Rossner.
5. HOLLYWOOD WIVES, by Jackie Collins.
6. THE RETURN OF THE JEDI, adapted by Joan D. Vinge.
7. WHO KILLED THE ROBBINS FAMILY, created by Bill Adler and written by Thomas Chastain.
8. WINTER'S TALE, by Mark Helprin.
9. CHRISTINE, by Stephen King.
10. THE LITTLE DRUMMER GIRL, by John le Carré.
11. THE SEDUCTION OF PETER S., by Lawrence Sanders.
12. THE AUERBACH WILL, by Stephen Birmingham.

### NON-FICTION

1. IN SEARCH OF EXCELLENCE, by Thomas J. Peters and Robert H. Waterman Jr.
2. MEGATRENDS, by John Naisbitt.
3. THE ONE MINUTE MANAGER, by Kenneth Blanchard and Spencer Johnson.
4. ON WINGS OF EAGLES, by Ken Follett.
5. CREATING WEALTH, by Robert G. Allen.
6. OUT ON A LIMB, by Shirley MacLaine.
7. JANE FONDA'S WORKOUT BOOK, by Jane Fonda.
8. BLUE HIGHWAYS, by William Least Heat Moon.
9. NOTHING DOWN, by Robert G. Allen.
10. MOTHERHOOD: The Second Oldest Profession, by Erma Bombeck.
11. THE BEST OF JAMES HARRIOT.
12. GROWING UP, by Russell Baker.



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## Poland's a tragic heroine in Michener's latest epic

The heroine of "Poland," the latest historical novel by James A. Michener, has to be one of the most tragic in fiction. She is assaulted, abused, violated and almost wiped off the face of the earth. And even at the end of the novel, she's still deeply mired in trouble.

She is not a woman, however. She is a nation. Her name: Poland.

During most of her history, other powers descended on her like starving vultures. First, in 1241, the Tartars rampaged through the land, killing and burning. Then, over the years, the Teutons, Cossacks, Prussians and Swedes, among others, took turns ravaging her. During World War II, the Germans occupied her and exterminated many of her citizens in concentration camps.

Why did the nation remain so vulnerable for so long?

"She had evolved no way to defend herself with a stable government, regular taxation and a dependable army," Michener writes. "And in her

weakness she had endeavored to initiate freedoms which threatened the autocracies which surrounded her."

In this book, Michener traces several thousand years of Polish history through three fictitious families: the wealthy Lubonskis, the petty noble Bukowskis, and the peasant Buks.

AFTER WRITING more than 30 books over four decades, Michener seems at home with his literary specialty: writing thoroughly researched historical epics with huge casts of characters. His narrative, if not exactly inspired, flows smoothly with the sureness that comes only from much experience.

Compared to some of his other tomes, "Poland" is leaner and tighter, and thus more sharply focused. With that nation likely to stay a controversial place, this book should come in handy for anyone seeking perspective.

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