
PAPERBOUNDS

SON OF THE MORNING STAR: Custer and Little Bighorn. By Evan S. Connell. Harper, 1985. 441 pp. \$8.95

Death almost certainly made Gen. George Armstrong Custer (1839-76) into a hero, "an American Siegfried," as biographer Connell dubs him. Without his dramatic demise at the Little Bighorn in the summer of 1876, his reputation would have rested on a number of dubious distinctions: graduation at the bottom of his West Point class; a reputation for "berserk" cavalry charges during the Civil War; strained relations with his peers and superiors; and extravagant vanity (expressed in buckskin coats, gold-laced trousers, cherry neckties, and his flowing reddish-gold curls). Connell neither vilifies nor romanticizes his subject; instead, he assembles the various and often conflicting accounts into a carefully considered whole. He also trots forth the huge supporting cast—soldiers and scouts, journalists and politicians, and, most colorful, Custer's truly larger-than-life Indian adversaries. Connell offers a picture of the Old West that is fascinating in its bleak everydayness, a world "stupidously dull, and when it was not . . . murderous."

KANDINSKY IN MUNICH: The Formative Jugendstil Years. By Peg Weiss. Princeton, 1985. 268 pp. \$22

If abstract art owes its origins to any one artist, it owes them to Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), the Russian-born painter who combined bright colors, bold lines, and irregular shapes in works bearing little resemblance to observed nature. Weiss, an art historian at Syracuse University, traces Kandinsky's style to the two decades he spent in Munich around the turn of the century. In the ateliers and

salons of the city's bohemian district, Kandinsky, an erstwhile lawyer, mingled with Thomas Mann, Richard Strauss, and other notables. But what attracted him most was the city's Jugendstil (youth style) movement, with its "reverence for the painting as a work of art . . . without reference to the real world." With such works as "Improvisation XIV" (1910), he became known as the "artist who wanted to paint pictures without objects." Weiss's well-documented analysis clarifies Kandinsky's artistic evolution. It also shows how Munich, in the early 1900s, gained its reputation as the "Athens on the Isar."

WATERLAND. By Graham Swift. Washington Square, 1984. 270 pp. \$6.95

The Fens of east England serve novelist Graham Swift as Yoknapatawpha County served William Faulkner: less as a geographical backdrop than as an active force shaping people's lives. The history of the Fens—the mighty reclamation projects, the periodic floodings, the rise and fall of local family dynasties—emerges in the elaborate rendering of what is, in effect, a murder mystery. The narrator, a history teacher soon to be sacked from his job at a London comprehensive school, begins his story with the appearance of a dead body at the lock tended by his father. A score of dark questions arise. The narrator then delves into his family's past, itself a tale riddled by mysteries: Why, for instance, did his mother, descendant of the powerful local brewing family, marry his father, a World War I veteran of humbler stock? Mysteries ramify but ultimately lead, as in all Gothic novels (including Faulkner's), to a secret at the center of the family house. But a final question lingers after the end of the narrative: Does knowledge of the past comfort or weaken those who seek it?