
PAPERBOUNDS

MICROWORLDS. By Stanislaw Lem. Harcourt, 1986. 285 pp. \$5.95

Born in Lvov, Poland, in 1921, and educated as a doctor, Lem has slowly become known to American readers through his highly philosophical science fiction. Books like *Eden* (1959) and *Solaris* (1961) are as noteworthy for their treatment of ideas (e.g., cybernetics) as for their fantastic plots and settings. Repeatedly throughout these 10 discussions of science (and other) fiction, Lem voices his low opinion of a genre that he believes is a "hopeless case—with exceptions." One noted exception is the recently deceased American author Philip K. Dick. Despite the "trashy elements" that clutter his books, Lem praises Dick for foreseeing a future in which, thanks to biotechnological innovations, "every pedestrian will be forced to solve for himself such contradictory problems as 'objectivity' or 'subjectivity' because his life will depend upon the results." Among other offerings is a shrewd evaluation of Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges: A brilliant "epigone," Borges created a body of literature that employs devices of the fantastic to resurrect traditional Western values; thus, says Lem, his work "is located in its entirety at an opposite pole from the direction of our fate."

DISTURBER OF THE PEACE: The Life of H. L. Mencken. By William Manchester. Univ. of Mass., 1986. 348 pp. \$8.95

Last of Mencken's many literary legatees and protégés, Manchester gained his first critical triumph in 1951 with this witty account of his mentor, the man who once looked him straight in the eye and advised him to burn his first novel. Manchester shows Mencken (1880–1956) the prickly dissident pronouncing his disdain for the provincially snobbish and ignorantly puritanical. Mencken's long career at the Baltimore *Sun* began in 1899, when the 18-

year-old cub reporter turned in his first story, about a horse thief. During his association with *The Smart Set* and *The American Mercury*, he acquired his first enemies: Anglophiles, Christian Scientists, prohibitionists, and Tennessee creationists at the Scopes "monkey trial" of 1926. The mistaken belief that Mencken was a liberal stemmed from his passionate defense of the free press, and from his contempt for Anglo-Saxon America. More than any Irishman, black, Pole, or Jew, Mencken loathed the "Wasp" mythology, and routinely savaged the "booboisie."

WHY NOTHING WORKS: The Anthropology of Daily Life. THE SACRED COW AND THE ABOMINABLE PIG: Riddles of Food and Culture. By Marvin Harris. Touchstone/Simon & Schuster, 1987. 208 pp. \$7.95 and 289 pp. \$6.95, respectively.

Harris's brand of anthropology, "cultural materialism," has both avid fans and foes. Like Marx (though without his historical fatalism), Harris looks at a society's base—the kind of work people engage in, and how work is organized—to determine why people act the way they do. In *Why Nothing Works*, Harris, now a professor at the University of Florida, reveals how such things as "cults, crime, shoddy goods . . . porno parlors, and sex shops, and men kissing in the streets" are related to America's "hyperindustrial" economy—bureaucracy-heavy, highly centralized, and service-oriented. *Sacred Cow* shows Harris working in a somewhat lighter, broader vein, as he muses upon the eating and drinking habits of people around the world. Why do some people, particularly northern Europeans, love milk while others, such as the Chinese, despise it? A society's ratio of genetically determined lactose absorbers to nonabsorbers provides the answer, says Harris. If the other food riddles he addresses lack such neat (or genetically based) answers, they are no less intriguing.