

PAPERBOUNDS

SIMONE WEIL: An Anthology. Edited and introduced by Sian Miles. Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1987. 290 pp. \$8.95

Born in Paris in 1909 into a middle-class Jewish family, Simone Weil attended France's prestigious *Ecole Normale Supérieure* and worked variously as a teacher, an industrial worker, and a farm laborer before heading off to fight in the Spanish Civil War in 1936. She died of tuberculosis in 1943, having spent her last years in London working for the French provisional government. During her short, busy, and chaotic life, Weil managed to write—brilliantly, according to minds as diverse as Jean-Paul Sartre and T. S. Eliot—about religion, politics, society, the plight of the modern industrial laborer, literature, and even mathematics. The thread uniting her work was Weil's relentless quest for knowledge of God. Her undogmatic, anti-mystical approach involved a dismantling of the prideful self as the first step toward a spiritual life. "There is," she wrote, "absolutely no other free act which it is given us to accomplish—only the destruction of the 'I.'" Presenting 18 samples of Weil's work, Miles, a professor at Keele University in England, shows how Weil's quest has become a convincing theology for 20th-century skeptics.

AMUSING OURSELVES TO DEATH: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business. By Neil Postman. Penguin, 1987. 184 pp. \$6.95

American TV can't be all that bad, its defenders say. They point to the fact that even its critics cite good programs—documentaries, high-culture drama imported from Britain, educational programs. Postman, a professor of communications at New York University, is unmoved. It's the

medium, not the subject, that matters, he insists, echoing the late Marshall McLuhan. And the medium is rapidly lowering the level of the "public discourse" in America. Even those shows widely hailed for their instructional value, such as "Sesame Street," do little more than encourage children "to love television," says Postman. If people learn by what they do, young Americans are learning to watch TV. The result: a "shrivelled" culture, where complexity, the real give-and-take of argument, and any sense of context or history beyond the presented image are fatally absent.

HONOR AND VIOLENCE IN THE OLD SOUTH. By Bertram Wyatt-Brown. Oxford, 1987. 270 pp. \$7.95

"I wish to live under no other government," wrote Robert E. Lee just days before the South's secession, "& there is no sacrifice I am not ready to make for the preservation of the Union save that of honor." Honor made him a Confederate, of course. But why? In this abridgement of his prize-winning *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South*, University of Florida historian Wyatt-Brown masterfully dissects the complex social code that bound, and gave meaning to, the lives of white Southerners, rich as well as poor. He looks at the connections between honor and the various notions of family, chivalry, and hospitality, as well as its problematic ties to the practice of slaveholding. Most revealingly, Wyatt-Brown shows how honor figured in the ritualized violence of the South, those grim public spectacles of tarring-and-feathering or lynching. Whole communities, he notes, eagerly took part "to protect traditional values and conventions against forces outside as well as within. . . ."