

musical limelight by John Lomax and his son, Alan. During the 1930s and early '40s, the Lomaxes traveled tens of thousands of miles and made thousands of recordings for the Library of Congress of obscure songs and singers. In time they won acclaim for preserving America's endangered folk-music heritage. What has not been understood, says Filene, a Yale graduate student, is how much their personal vision, shaped by the left-wing politics of the period, helped to define the very "tradition" they were purportedly just documenting.

The elder Lomax, a widower who had lost his bank job in the Depression, and his son Alan, who was 17 when they made their first expedition in 1933, were looking for "a particular brand of old-fashioned, rural folk music that they felt exemplified the country's creativity and vitality" and which they feared was being overwhelmed by commercial music and urban culture. They looked for "uncorrupted" songs in remote cotton plantations, cowboy ranches, lumber camps, and segregated southern prisons. When they found songs that didn't fit their conception, they simply ignored them.

To enhance folk music's popular appeal, they excluded powerful songs such as "Sistren an' Brethren," in which southern blacks threatened revenge against their white oppressors, from their best-selling

book *American Ballads and Folk Songs* (1934). When the Lomaxes did find the sort of folk music they liked, Filene says, they sought to gain an audience for it, "even if doing so involved rounding off the music's rough edges and creating a false public persona for the singer."

That was what happened in the case of Leadbelly (Huddie Ledbetter), whom they discovered in 1933 in Louisiana's Angola Prison, where he was serving time for murder. In promoting Leadbelly, the Lomaxes "focused on his convict past and depicted him as a savage, untamed animal," while at the same time portraying him as "the voice of people."

The Lomaxes, realizing that Leadbelly's commercial appeal depended upon the perception that his songs were "pure folk," tried to eliminate obvious pop influences from his performances. They also toned down his original songs. Under their influence, Leadbelly removed suggestive lyrics from a song about his youthful desire to enjoy the pleasures of a red-light district and added a new ending to the song in which he "begs his mother to forgive him for his past behavior."

"The Lomaxes claimed to be impartial folklorists who documented an existing tradition," Filene concludes, "but they had a personal vision that has powerfully influenced how Americans remember their musical heritage."

## *Aliens Capture Sci-Fi Literature*

"Big Ideas and Dead-End Thrills" by Thomas M. Disch, in *The Atlantic* (Feb. 1992), 745 Boylston St., Boston, Mass. 02116.

Science fiction in the past 15 years has entered a whole new dimension of popularity. Starting with *Star Wars* in 1977, Hollywood has turned out one hugely profitable sci-fi extravaganza after another. Meanwhile, in the literary zone, sci-fi books, along with their horror and fantasy kin, have regularly moved onto the bestseller lists. All this might seem cause for great rejoicing among sci-fi enthusiasts, but Disch, theater critic for the *Nation* and author of *334* (1972) and other science-fiction novels, looks upon it as an odious in-

vasion of the book-snatchers. Publishers, he contends, have turned the genre as a whole into "one of the major symptoms of, if not a causal agent in, the dumbing-down of the younger generation."

In the early 1970s, Disch had complained that, as things stood even then, the genre could best be understood as "a branch of children's literature." He deplored the limitations that resulted from the juvenile nature of the readership and favored "an aesthetically and intellectually mature science fiction, written by grown-

ups for grown-up tastes." "New Wave" writers such as Norman Spinrad and Disch himself tried to create such fiction.

But at the same time, powerful editors such as Ballantine's Judy Lynne del Rey had a very different agenda, according to Disch. They saw "an enormous untapped market. Del Rey and those who followed in her footsteps discovered and groomed writers like Stephan Donaldson, Terry Brooks, and Piers Anthony, who could scale down [J. R. R.] Tolkien or [Isaac] Asimov from the seventh- or eighth-grade reading levels of the overeducated [1950s] and create tetralogies suitable to the diminished reading skills of today's children." Other publishers started issuing series of low-grade novels, such as the continuing *Star Trek* series, which could be produced by "hack" writers rather than "name" authors.

The popularity of sci-fi movies and TV

shows has been of little help to writers of original science fiction, Disch says. Most hit sci-fi movies of recent years have been written by "director-writer-producer teams who have dealt with [science fiction] as a pool of imagery, tropes, and plots in the public domain, which can be cobbled together as well by one creative team as by another."

Many veteran science-fiction writers have failed, or refused, to adapt to the changed market situation. A "goodly number" of them have left the field, Disch reports. Samuel Delaney, for example, now teaches at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, and writes mostly nonfiction. John Sladek, who wrote novels about robots, now is an executive in a firm that designs real ones. Disch himself does not plan to stop writing science fiction. But he insists that most sci-fi these days is strictly kids' stuff.

## OTHER NATIONS

### *A Different Sort Of Welcome*

"Immigration and Group Relations in France and America" by Donald L. Horowitz, in *The Bulletin of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences* (Jan. 1992), Norton's Woods, 136 Irving St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.

In France, as elsewhere in Europe today, immigrants have become a major "problem." Yet, despite frequent xenophobic outbursts, France, like the United States, has a long history of welcoming newcomers. The difference, according to Duke University's Horowitz, is that the French have no truck with the usual metaphors about a melting pot or mosaic.

Mass immigration to France began in the mid-19th century. From Belgium, Italy, and later Poland, foreigners came to work in the mines and factories that French peasants shunned. Belgians congregated in French factory towns, and, after World War I, Poles worked in the mines of Lorraine and Languedoc. After World War II, a new wave of immigrants came—from North Africa, the Iberian

peninsula, and Asia. North Africans have been heavily concentrated in and around the major cities of Paris, Lyon, and Marseilles. By 1975, one year after its border was closed to most immigration, more than four-fifths of the [3.7 million] foreigners in France had come from North Africa or Iberia, with Algeria and Portugal each contributing more than one-fifth. France also had, by some estimates, nearly one million illegal immigrants.

The French census and other official statistics divide the population into just two categories: "French" and "foreigners." There are no hyphenated Frenchmen. "It is possible to be an Italian in France, but it is not possible to be an Italian-Frenchman in the same easy way as it is possible to be an Italian-American," Horowitz notes. For-