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the year after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, an event that caused many behind the Iron Curtain to rethink their positions on communism. Wolf, a strong believer in the possibilities of a true socialist state, retreated into her writing, trying to transcend through literature the evil she now suspected lay around her. She watched as other writers opted to leave, staying on herself, apparently deciding that it was better to try to change things from within the country, however muted her voice might become as a result of government censors.

Now that East Germany is no more, can it be said that Wolf chose wisely? Can her writing survive the dual cataclysm of that regime's collapse and the stain of her former collaboration?

The evidence of her nonfiction, collected in *The Author's Dimension*, suggests that it cannot. In a final essay written just three months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, her pain is evident: Wolf lobbied briefly for the creation of a post-communist, democratic East German state; seeing her efforts frustrated, she abandoned her literary crusade, declaring that "the politicians and the economists have the floor now." In earlier pieces, Wolf's insights are occasionally brilliant, but the effect of the whole is that of a dated, sometimes self-serving historical document. By contrast, the fiction in *What Remains* may outlive the situations that inspired it. The poignant story "June Afternoon," for example, is intriguing precisely because it vividly brings to life a world that has passed out of our knowing. In it, the narrator is enjoying an idyllic afternoon in East Berlin, a peaceful moment that is interrupted by the sudden appearance of an American helicopter patrolling the border. Such intrusions, where the personal is forfeited to harsh social realities, are typical of Wolf's stories. The "forbidden fruit" her characters have eaten is not that of good and evil but the knowledge that they cannot escape living at a particular moment in history.

**CULTURE OF COMPLAINT:** *The Fraying of America.* By Robert Hughes. Oxford Univ. Press/New York Public Library. 210 pp. \$19.95

Hughes, a native Australian, has resided in the

United States for the last 23 years. A busy man, he has managed to write weekly art criticism for *Time* while producing several excellent books on subjects ranging from Modernism to Australian history to the city of Barcelona. A largely unabashed "pale patriarchal penis person," Hughes now jumps into the middle of America's current cultural war. The result is a witty, often rebarbative attack on the various inanities spewed forth by the two "PCs"—the patriotically correct and the politically correct. These three essays, originally delivered as lectures at the New York Public Library, might be described as an attempt to construct an unwimpy cultural liberalism, a bolder middle ground. With almost equal force, he swings right ("With somnambulistic efficiency, Reagan educated America down to his level") and left ("The world changes more deeply, widely, thrillingly than at any moment since 1917, perhaps since 1848, and the American academic left keeps fretting about how phallogocentricity is inscribed in Dickens's portrayal of Little Nell"). Hughes, moreover, rightly detects a symbiosis between the warring sides, characterizing them as "two Puritan sects, one plaintively conservative, the other posing as revolutionary but using academic complaint as a way of evading engagement in the real world." In his shrewdest essay, "Moral in Itself: Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy," he looks through the silliness of the Robert Mapplethorpe controversy. Drawing on historian Jackson Lears's critique of America's therapeutic culture, Hughes sees the elevation of Mapplethorpe's photography to the status of High Art as a secular variant of the view of art as "quasi-religious uplift," a notion grounded in the Puritan distrust of art that has no overtly moralizing purpose.

Useful and entertaining as all this is, Hughes might have subjected his own philosophical foundations—and his own middle ground—to closer scrutiny. A certain glib *Time-Life* phraseology—colorful, compact, and contrapuntal—can too easily substitute for real engagement. Yet when Hughes does reveal his own values—his veneration for craftsmanship, his belief in standards of artistic excellence—he does so with passion and conviction.