

more important in the broader picture."

If the sole aim of all the rural uplift was to halt the migration from farm to city, then the efforts have to be judged an utter failure. But,

Holt notes, America's farm families did enjoy improved health and education, a reduction in backbreaking work, and more opportunities for organized activities such as 4-H.

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## PRESS & MEDIA

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### *The News, With Feeling*

"The New Writers' Bloc" by Katherine Boo, in *The Washington Monthly* (Nov. 1992), 1611 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009, and "Mo Knows" by Leslie Kaufman, in *Washington Journalism Review* (Oct. 1992), 4716 Pontiac St., Ste. 310, College Park, Md. 20740-2493.

Washington correspondent Maureen Dowd is a talented and amusing wordsmith. During the Democratic primaries last year, Senator Robert Kerrey (D.-Neb.) emerged from her word processor with "large blue eyes and a light-bulb shaped head that give him the look of a bemused extraterrestrial." Another erstwhile presidential contender, Paul Tsongas, was turned into a turtle, "look[ing] around him with a slow, blinking bemusement at the vagaries of fate." Dowd did not invent impressionistic "New Journalism," but the fact that she practices it on the front page of what used to be called the "good, gray" *New York Times* is highly significant. According to Boo, a *Washington Post* editor, and Kaufman, an assistant editor of *Government Executive* magazine, Dowd and a host of imitators are transforming political journalism. The change, say critics, is not entirely for the better.

When the New Journalism emerged in the late 1960s, newspapers usually relegated it to the opinion and style pages. No longer. "Faced on the one hand with engaging a generation raised on MTV, and on the other with stiff competition from faxed newsletters, on-line news services, and CNN," Kaufman writes, "newspapers are being forced to reinvent themselves."

Dowd herself, who likes "to do stories that tweak and amuse," compares politics to Shakespearean drama. "It's one of the few arenas where you can watch character development." But is "character" all in politics? Showing, as Dowd did, how President Bush, while campaigning in Texas, marred "his pork-rind image with a prep-school tendency to say 'whoopsie daisy' and 'by golly,'" Boo notes, may well provide "a better feel for [the] geeky commander-in-chief than a dozen lesser profiles." Franklin Roosevelt was "another patrician who used cornball props . . . in an attempt to come off as a regular guy." Yet the policies of Roosevelt and Bush were worlds apart.

"I don't care about character reporting," syndicated columnist and former *Times* reporter Richard Reeves told Kaufman. "What politicians do or say in private is irrelevant. It is what they do and say in public that's important. We need less focus on character and more on ideas and issues." In its novelistic focus on the personal, that is what the New Journalism often fails to provide. In Dowd's preprimary profile of Kerrey (the "bemused extraterrestrial"), for example, the health-care issue—which was the centerpiece of his presidential campaign—somehow never came up.

### *Enquiring Minds?*

"Reading the Supermarket Tabloids" by Christopher Clausen, in *The New Leader* (Sept. 7, 1992), 275 Seventh Ave., New York, N.Y. 10001.

Editors at respectable newspapers like to look down their journalistic noses at the *National Enquirer* and other supermarket tabloids. After a close examination, however, Pennsylvania State English professor Clausen concludes that the "tabs" are not so far removed from the mainstream press as the latter would like peo-

ple to believe.

"The tabloids merely cater, albeit at the extreme, to American culture's obsession with personality and generally weak interest in abstract ideas, political or otherwise," Clausen contends. In capitalizing on that obsession, he points out, they are no different than the main-



To read is not necessarily to believe. Many tabloid readers may just enjoy tall tales.

stream media.

The six major tabloids, all published in Florida by two rival corporations, are a mixed lot. That very diversity, Clausen argues, suggests that the stereotype of the tabloid reader—"a gullible, semiliterate gum-chewer of lower-class origins and pathological tastes"—is just "a figment of the educated imagination, encouraged by the mainstream press to emphasize its superiority." If tabloid readers were *that* dumb, they would not be reading at all.

What do the 3.8 million mostly female readers of the *National Enquirer* get for their 95 cents? Of course, there are the inevitable Elvis stories ("Elvis & His Mom Were Lovers"). But readers also get a great many other celebrity features, often salacious in nature. Clausen judges that "many, possibly a majority, of the pieces inside [the] *Enquirer*—concerning greedy officials, the freak accidents of ordinary people, physical-fitness techniques, and the love lives of minor Hollywood stars—would not look out of place on the pages of the average daily newspaper."

The *Enquirer's* 3.4-million circulation sister, *Star*, ordinarily resembles *Parade* or *People*, Clausen reports. In January 1992, *Star* moved out of its usual orbit to break the Gennifer Flowers—Bill Clinton story. The mainstream press then picked it up. A *New York Times* analysis uneasily acknowledged that a "sympiotic relationship has arisen between the two extremes of American journalism."

Some tabloid fare is indeed quite extreme. The *Globe* (circulation: 1.2 million), in particular, tends to feature sadistic sex-killings and the like. The *Globe's* sister publications are less gamy. The *National Examiner* (805,000) is "a less slick version of *Star*, with a pronounced secondary affinity for the occult." And *Sun* (350,000) deals largely in "ordinary people who have . . . bizarre adventures." The *Weekly World News* (816,000), an *Enquirer* sister publication, Clausen says, takes "the sense of arch fun far beyond *Sun*."

Do tabloid readers believe everything they read? Not necessarily, says Clausen. But then, according to some surveys, neither do many readers of the mainstream press.

## RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

### *The Puritan Founders*

"Tocqueville's Puritans: Christianity and the American Founding" by Sanford Kessler, in *The Journal of Politics* (Aug. 1992), Journals Dept., Univ. of Texas Press, 2100 Comal, Austin, Texas 78722.

Thomas Jefferson and the Framers of the Constitution are usually considered America's founders. In his classic *Democracy in America* (1835–40), however, Alexis de Tocqueville put forward a different candidate: the Puritans. As the astute French visitor saw it, says North Carolina State political scientist Kessler, a people's character is more important than even the best-written constitution, and it was the Puritans

who first brought the "spirit of freedom" to America and who decisively shaped the national character. The Constitution worked, in Tocqueville's view, "largely because the Puritans made a critical mass of Americans self-governing, public-spirited citizens before the document was written," Kessler writes.

Christianity was the primary source of American principles, Tocqueville thought. The Puri-